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THE MEDIUM
OF POETRY

JAMES SUTHERLAND



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THE MEDIUM OF POETRY

INTRODUCTION

THE purpose of this essay is to examine how far the medium of poetry influences the mind of the poet, and so, indirectly, his poem. Such an inquiry inevitably raises the question of poetic inspiration; and though I should be the last to disturb the traditional homage paid by the poet to his Muse, I have attempted to indicate in the chapters that follow some of the not very remote sources from which the poet's inspiration is drawn. To think of the poet as invariably descending from his private Mount Sinai with the tablets already perfect in his hand is to show very little curiosity as to what he is really doing. "Perhaps the Criticks do make more of Things than is necessary," was the opinion of an eighteenth-century author. "Tho' Poets pretend to Inspiration, and cry out *The god, the god*, they are, in the Main, but meer Men, and have their Tricks and Quirks to keep up the Reputation of that Art." The writer of those words was John Oldmixon, one of the butts of Pope's *Dunciad*, and yet, like several other of Pope's dunces, he was not incapable of saying a true thing once in a while. Here, in fact, he is protesting against making a mystery unnecessarily mysterious.

When the poets themselves have so often failed to explain how their inspiration came to them, it is not to be supposed that a critic, that "meerest" of men, should be able to do it for them. Plato's Socrates was content to state

the mystery, and leave it at that. "The authors of those great poems which we admire," he told Ion, "do not attain to excellence through the rules of any art, but they utter their beautiful melodies of verse in a state of inspiration, and, as it were, *possessed* by a spirit not their own. . . . Tynnicus the Chalcidean is a manifest proof of this, for he never before composed any poem worthy to be remembered; and yet, was the author of that Pæan which everybody sings, and which excels almost every other hymn, and which he himself acknowledges to have been inspired by the Muse." There, indeed, the matter might be left; but Plato's account of inspiration makes no allowance for the fact that poetry has a medium of its own, and that this medium is not merely passive, but has some influence in shaping the poet's thoughts and feelings. It has *some* influence—I do not wish to overstate the case—and it is with that influence that I am concerned in this essay.

The extent to which the development of a poem is affected by the words the poet is using, by rhythm, rhyme, metrical forms and so on, varies with the practice of different poets. With Wordsworth, for instance, such influences are comparatively small; with Keats they are very considerable. I have therefore begun by contrasting the poetic practice of those two poets; but though Wordsworth and poets of his type owe less to the suggestions of their medium than such poets as Keats, they are far from being outside its influence altogether. Nor is the distinction here one between good poets and bad; it is one due to a different conception of poetry and a different mode of composition.

In dealing subsequently with the various elements in the poetic medium, I have avoided the more technical

terms of psychology, partly because the psychology known to me may be already out of date, but more because I believe it is still possible to discuss poetry usefully in the more general terms of common human experience. I hope that in choosing to write thus I have nowhere been guilty of expressing myself without precision or of making my problems appear simpler than they are; I shall at least have avoided the risk of making them appear unnecessarily obscure.

I should like, in conclusion, to make two acknowledgments: one to Professor A. A. Jack of the University of Aberdeen, who started for me several of the hares that I have chased in the following pages and to whose subtle mind I owe a great deal; and the other to the University of London, without whose generosity this book might not have been published.

CHAPTER I

TWO TYPES OF POET

I. WORDSWORTH

THE view of poetry most commonly held today is Wordsworth's, or, at any rate, some modification of it. Wordsworth believed that it was the only possible one, and he has had many adherents; but though his theory of poetry may account for *Frost at Midnight*, and the *Ode to Autumn*, and *Adonais*, it can hardly be held sufficient for *The Ancient Mariner*, and *The Eve of St. Agnes*, and *Alastor*; and while it obviously fits most of Wordsworth's own poems—and more particularly the lyrical ballads—it can hardly be said to fit *Laodamia*. I propose, therefore, to examine Wordsworth's conception of poetry, and to see how far it is confirmed by his own practice, if not by that of all other poets.

Put simply, it amounts to this: the poet has some experience that stirs him deeply, and in time he finds expression for it in words metrically arranged. He differs from other men in degree only, not in kind; and therefore the feelings that are aroused in him by his experiences are such as might come to all normal men. They will be connected with "our moral sentiments and animal sensations, and with the causes which excite these; with the operations of the elements, and the appearances of

the visible universe; with storm and sunshine, with the revolutions of the seasons, with cold and heat, with the loss of friends and kindred, with injuries and resentments, gratitude and hope, with fear and sorrow."¹ They may be aroused, with equal power, therefore, by a mother's love for her idiot son, by the impressive appearance on a stormy day of a thorn growing on a ridge of the Quantock Hills, by the busy murmur of a spring morning in Somerset, by a chance meeting with an old man on the moors, "late in the evening, when the light was just going away."² With Wordsworth there is almost invariably the initial experience, the emotional adventure. With him, at any rate, that is the essential preliminary to a poem, and his business as a poet is to communicate his experience to other men. One of the characteristic features of Wordsworth's poetry, therefore, is its episodic origin; his poetic life was a series of emotional adventures strung together on a thread of everyday occurrence. What happened to him in the rare moments of vision which accompanied those memorable experiences, what he felt and thought in consequence, what he suddenly realized with overwhelming force probably for the first time in his life—those are the matters which Wordsworth, and poets of Wordsworth's type, are concerned to express. As it happens, we are frequently able to trace a poem of Wordsworth's back to its starting-point in some actual incident; for not only have we his own notes to many of the poems, but we have the additional evidence of his sister's journals. The umbilical cord remains, joining the parent episode to its poetic offspring. It may be objected that Wordsworth's poetry differs not at all in this respect from all poetry, and

¹ Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, 1800.

² See below, p. 16.

that if his poems are so obviously episodic in their origin the reason is to be sought in the fact just mentioned—that we happen to know a good deal more about the composition of Wordsworth's poems than those of most other poets. When Burns writes to his Mary Morison,

Yestreen, when to the trembling string
The dance gaed thro' the lighted ha',
To thee my fancy took its wing,
I sat, but neither heard nor saw :
Tho' this was fair, and that was braw,
And yon the toast of a' the town,
I sigh'd, and said among them a',
"Ye are na Mary Morison."

the lines are as surely a record of recollected experience as anything that Wordsworth ever wrote. But all poetry is not of this kind, not even all lyrical poetry. There is a difference, clearly, between being moved to write an elegy because one has lost a dear friend by death, and being moved to write "Full fathom five thy father lies." Nor is that difference merely one between actual and, what might be called, imagined experience. For the poet this distinction can hardly be said to exist, since all experience, if it is to be available for poetry, must have reached a degree of intensity in which the question whether it is actual or not becomes irrelevant. Wordsworth, for instance, had actually met his leech-gatherer, and Simon Lee, and the persistent little girl in *We are Seven*; but the incident of Lucy Gray was related to him by his sister, and that of Alice Fell by his friend, Mr. Graham of Glasgow. One might easily have imagined poor Susan who listened to the thrush at the corner of Wood Street to have been an old servant of the Wordsworth family, if one had not the poet's word for it that she is entirely imaginary.

It is clear that the distinction between Wordsworth's lyrical ballads and such a poem as "Full fathom five" must lie elsewhere. I hope to show that it lies in the definiteness of the experience, actual or imaginary, which the poet is seeking to communicate. Wordsworth's poetic experiences were sacred things to Wordsworth himself; they existed in his consciousness with all the sharpness of actual events, they cast a definite shadow. This, and this, and this had happened to Wordsworth at one time or another, stirring him profoundly; the initial experience was for him all-important. Whether he afterwards converted it to the uses of poetry or left it unrecorded among those things "silently gone out of mind," at any rate it was always there, a separate and distinct experience, available for poetry if the favourable moment should come. Wordsworth, then, was particularly faithful to his experiences, and extraordinarily tenacious of them; and it is his willing and complete surrender to the poetic event—the particular thing that had happened to him, the unique adventure of the spirit—that distinguishes him, when he comes to write, from many other great poets. One is sometimes tempted to believe that outside those particular experiences Wordsworth was not a poet at all: he had his moments of vision when the dewdrops sparkled for him, and for the rest he plodded along like his own Peter Bell.

The journals of Dorothy Wordsworth and the poetry of her brother are alike in this, that they both record experiences which "seemed worth having"¹ to the two people concerned. One thinks invariably of Wordsworth's poetry not as something made, but as something recorded

¹ A phrase of Mr. I. A. Richards. *Principles of Literary Criticism*, p. 33.

because it was too valuable to lose. But here one comes upon another characteristic of Wordsworth's poetry. Dorothy wrote up her journal while the memory of her experience was still warm; her brother was content to wait. His poetry comes from the particular experience, but it is only after a suitable interval that this experience is available for the poet. In defining what poetry is, Wordsworth is careful to lay stress upon this necessary interval between the original experience and its final expression. Poetry, he believes, "takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity: the emotion is contemplated till, by a species of reaction, the tranquillity gradually disappears, and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does actually exist in the mind. In this mood successful composition generally begins, and in a mood similar to this it is carried on."¹ The poet should allow his emotions to settle; he should not attempt to write while they are still in the state of unrest that accompanies the original impression. Nothing valuable will be lost through waiting, much will be gained. All the circumstances in an experience are not equally useful for poetry; some are merely accidental, and it is just those—of no intrinsic worth—that will tend to drop off if the poet is content to wait. The poet, too, is apt to have purely personal associations, which cannot have the same significance to other people as they had to him; those will also tend to disappear as the experience retreats farther into the past.

Such was Wordsworth's theory of the necessary interval. It may be illustrated by a well-known passage from Dorothy Wordsworth's Grasmere journal. Under

¹ Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, 1800.

the date of Friday, October 3rd (1800), we find the following:

When William and I returned from accompanying Jones, we met an old man almost double. He had on a coat, thrown over his shoulders, above his waistcoat and coat. Under this he carried a bundle, and had an apron on and a night-cap. His face was interesting. He had dark eyes and a long nose. John, who afterwards met him at Wytheburn, took him for a Jew. He was of Scotch parents, but had been born in the army. He had had a wife, and "she was a good woman, and it pleased God to bless us with ten children." All these were dead but one, of whom he had not heard for many years, a sailor. His trade was to gather leeches, but now leeches are scarce, and he had not strength for it. He lived by begging, and was making his way to Carlisle, where he should buy a few godly books to sell. He said leeches were very scarce, partly owing to this dry season, but many years they have been scarce. He supposed it owing to their being much sought after, that they did not breed fast, and were of slow growth. Leeches were formerly 2s. 6d. per 100; they are now 30s. He had been hurt in driving a cart, his leg broken, his body driven over, his skull fractured. He felt no pain till he recovered from his first insensibility. It was then late in the evening, when the light was just going away.

We hear nothing more of the old man until Tuesday, May 4th, 1802. On that date Dorothy records:

Though William went to bed nervous, and jaded in the extreme, he rose refreshed. I wrote out *The Leech Gatherer* for him, which he had begun the night before, and of which he wrote several stanzas in bed this morning.

On Friday, May 7th, Wordsworth "fell to work at *The Leech Gatherer*; he wrote hard at it till dinner-time, then he gave over, tired to death—he had finished the poem."

So, indeed, he may have believed; but on Sunday he was at work on it again "almost incessantly from morning till tea-time." This time, however, the poem was finally completed, and Dorothy was able to copy it out for Coleridge. There was thus an interval of rather more than a year and a half between Wordsworth's meeting with the leech-gatherer and the composition of his poem. Similarly, five years elapsed between his meeting with a little girl at Goodrich Castle in 1793 and the writing of *We are Seven*.

Such, indeed, was the poet's almost invariable practice. It was not his habit, as he pointed out in the *Prelude*, to make "a present joy the matter of a song." When he did, as in the pleasant lines,

The Cock is crowing,
The stream is flowing,
The small birds twitter,
The lake doth glitter,
The green field sleeps in the sun—

which were thrown off one morning (April 16th, 1802) "while resting on the bridge at the foot of Brother's Water," the result is a poem that is not characteristically Wordsworthian. "The Cock is crowing" might, indeed, have been written by Southey in one of his gayer moods; it is a light, scampering poem, cheerful and unmeditative—the record, in fact, of a present joy. It has not the grave reflection so characteristic of Wordsworth; the feeling is there, the engaging glitter of the dewdrops, but not the

thought. The moment is caught perfectly, and that is all.

It so happens that Wordsworth and his sister had seen something the day before which was not to be dealt with so easily or so quickly. On Thursday, April 15th (1802), Dorothy Wordsworth had entered in her journal the following record:

It was a threatening, misty morning, but mild. We set off after dinner from Eusmere. Mrs. Clarkson went a short way with us, but turned back. The wind was furious, and we thought we must have returned. We first rested in the large boathouse, then under a furze bush opposite Mr. Clarkson's. Saw the plough going in the field. The wind seized our breath. The lake was rough. There was a boat by itself floating in the middle of the bay below Water Millock. . . . When we were in the woods beyond Gowbarrow Park we saw a few daffodils close to the water-side. We fancied that the lake had floated the seeds ashore, and that the little colony had so sprung up. But as we went along there were more and yet more; and at last, under the boughs of the trees, we saw that there was a long belt of them along the shore, about the breadth of a country turnpike road. I never saw daffodils so beautiful. They grew among the mossy stones about and about them; some rested their heads upon these stones, as on a pillow, for weariness; and the rest tossed and reeled and danced, and seemed as if they verily laughed with the wind, that blew upon them over the lake; they looked so gay, ever glancing, ever changing. This wind blew directly over the lake to them. There was here and there a little knot, and a few stragglers higher up; but they were so few as not to disturb the simplicity, unity, and life of that one busy highway. The bays were stormy, and we heard the waves at different distances, and in the middle of the water, like the sea. . . .

On this occasion, as on so many others, Wordsworth was content to feed his mind "with a wise passiveness." The poem was not written till 1804. During that interval the experience had not been merely hibernating in the poet's mind; it had been accumulating round it "such stores as silent thought can bring." In recollection, the daffodils might be less vividly present to him than they were on the April morning when he and his sister first caught sight of them by the side of the lake; but the *experience* had taken on a different shape which it could not have taken two years before. His feeling about them at that time was altogether different:

Their colours and their forms, were then to me
An appetite : a feeling and a love,
That had no need of a remoter charm,
By thought supplied, nor any interest
Unborrowed from the eye.¹

Looking back now, he can see the significance of his experience; and what it may have lost in vividness—and with Wordsworth that seems to have been very little indeed—it has gained in completeness and meaning. It is now an *episode*, with a definite outline and a significance for the poet which he had scarcely realized at the time.

I gazed—and gazed—but little thought
What wealth the show to me had brought.

Such was the normal process with Wordsworth: he was rarely a mere journalist of the emotions. And with this poet, as we have seen, the interval that elapsed was not a means of separating him from the original experience, but of binding him still closer to it, to what was essential in it.

¹ *Tintern Abbey*. This passage has not, of course, any reference to the daffodils.

In his fidelity to the thing that had happened to him, he was often tempted, even after a long interval, to perpetuate details that had no general significance. No doubt the interval helped him to forget such inessential facts; but sometimes those burrs clung obstinately to his recollection. The matter-of-factness in Wordsworth of which Coleridge complained was often no more than the poet's unwillingness to omit any single particular of a memorable and valuable experience. If the account of the leech-gatherer quoted above from Dorothy's journal is compared with the poem that her brother wrote, it will be evident that he omitted many details which were merely irrelevant to his purpose. Wordsworth says nothing about the old man's coat and waistcoat, his bundle, his apron and night-cap, his long Jewish nose; he has nothing to tell us about the vicissitudes of the leech-gatherer's family, his parentage, his broken leg and fractured skull, or the fluctuating price of leeches. Some, at any rate, of those facts Wordsworth did not give up without a struggle. In a manuscript draft of the leech-gatherer poem which was sent to Coleridge, and by him copied out and forwarded to Sir George Beaumont, there occurs a stanza which Wordsworth dropped from the printed version:

He wore a Cloak the same as women wear
As one whose blood did needful comfort lack ;
His face looked pale as if it had grown fair ;
And, furthermore he had upon his back,
Beneath his cloak, a round and bulky Pack ;
A load of wool or raiment as might seem,
That on his shoulders lay as if it clave to him.

The facts here (with the addition of the old man's pallid face, which may have been the reason for John Wordsworth mistaking him for a Jew) correspond to those noted

in Dorothy's journal; but they are inessential to Wordsworth's purpose. They are *literally* true, and that, of course, is why they appear at all: if Wordsworth had been imagining the whole episode from beginning to end instead of bringing his imagination to work on something that he remembered, there would have been little likelihood of such details creeping into his poem. The fact, then, that he was almost always drawing upon his memory, and, added to that, the very tenacity of his memory, sometimes made it difficult for him to eliminate the inessentials; if his recollection had been less powerful, if he had prized his experiences with a less exultant gratitude, he might have omitted many details that have given offence to his readers.

There was, after all, no need on many occasions for the poet to recall in all its circumstance the actual incident that had occurred. What is valuable in his poems might often have been brought home to the reader without reproducing an actual setting and actual individuals. There are two quite distinct ways, for instance, in which he might have handled the theme of *We are Seven*. He chose, of course, to retell the actual incident, as was his almost invariable custom, leaving the idea to emerge from the narrative. But he might equally well have ignored the particular little girl, her golden hair, her porringer, and everything else about her, and written *An Ode on the Inability of Childhood to Comprehend the Idea of Dissolution*, thus avoiding altogether the particular child who had so startlingly presented him with his experience of this impressive truth. If, on the other hand, he decides to handle the theme as it is actually handled in *We are Seven* a certain amount of detail is necessary if the incident is to have any sharpness of outline at all: the only question will

be how far detail can go without distracting attention from the idea that lies behind the incident, and for which, after all, the incident is being narrated. Wordsworth's friend, James Tobin, warned him before the publication of *We are Seven* that the poem would make him everlastingly ridiculous. Time has proved James Tobin to have been too pessimistic; but *We are Seven* does oscillate dangerously near the over-particular. Poetically, at any rate, the little girl in Wordsworth's poem is not important for her own sake; she is not even little Emma or Alice here, but simply Childhood confronted with an idea quite beyond its experience. At what point this idea becomes blurred by an insistence on irrelevant details of fact must vary with different readers; but with the mention of the little porringer, and, still more, with the account of sister Jane, who lay moaning in bed

Till God released her of her pain ;
And then she went away—

Wordsworth is in danger of overlaying the main idea with an encrustation of inessential details. In the repetition, too, of question and answer, statement and contradiction, there is still further risk of the central idea being lost—as it apparently was to James Tobin. We must not, however, dictate to Wordsworth how he shall write his own poems. Another poet might have chosen to alter the incident out of all recognition, even to the extent of dropping the particular little girl altogether and retaining only the idea of Childhood confronted with Death; but that was not Wordsworth's way. Once more, it was the particular experience that counted for him; and the adequate expression of that experience, seen in its full significance after a sufficient interval, he regarded as being

his business as a poet. It was enough for Wordsworth that the thing which had happened to him had stirred him deeply. If it had done that, it must be worth preserving.

To speak of a poem as already existing in the poet's mind before a single word or phrase has entered his consciousness, is without doubt misleading and uncritical; but there can be no question that with Wordsworth the experience had already a definite shape before he had reached any stage farther than the recollection of it in tranquillity. Before he started that restless pacing in the groves of Alfoxden or the garden at Grasmere that was for him the usual accompaniment of poetic composition, he had something quite definite to express. The thing was there for Wordsworth; it would be available for others when once he had succeeded in giving it expression. True, in the heat of composition some fresh aspect of the experience hitherto unrealized by him might be revealed; but the poem, if it were successful as communication, would convey as nearly as possible the experience of which he had been already conscious before he wrote a word of it.

It would convey that experience; nothing more and nothing less. For to Wordsworth those two dangers were always present. He might, on the one hand, allow something to slip into his poem that was not strictly relevant to his original experience; and he knew quite well how liable he was to fall into such an error. "I am sensible," he admitted in the *Preface* of 1800, "that my associations must have sometimes been particular instead of general, and that, consequently, giving to things a false importance. I may have sometimes written upon unworthy subjects. But there was the other, and graver, risk that he might introduce some capricious elegance or ornament w'

had come to him in the excitement of composition, but which, if allowed to stand, would merely distract attention from the central theme and so interrupt the communication of the experience. Here, however, Wordsworth is singularly free from reproach; the idea of such a sin against his own experience was shocking to his poetic conscience. The man who could resolutely exclude from *Dion* the stanza with which it originally opened—

Fair is the Swan, whose majesty, prevailing
O'er breezeless water, on Locarno's lake—

because it detained the reader too long from the true subject, and precluded, rather than prepared for, the succeeding reference to Plato, was not one to let words gallop him away. "I forbear," he writes in the *Preface* of 1800, "to speak of an incongruity which would shock the intelligent reader, should the poet interweave any foreign splendour of his own with that which the passion naturally suggests."

Such a fault was, indeed, unthinkable to Wordsworth: for it amounted to a betrayal of his own experience. That I am not crediting him with temptations that never assailed him may be seen from the numerous occasions on which he was compelled to reject some fine passage because it was irrelevant to his purpose, or on which a poem was, to use his own expression, an "overflow" from another. In a note to a poem written in later life, *Upon Seeing a Coloured Drawing of the Bird of Paradise in an Album*, he states: "The reader will find two poems on pictures of this bird among my poems. I will here observe that in a far greater number of instances than have been mentioned in these notes one poem has, as in this case, signified out of another, either because I felt the subject had

been inadequately treated, or that the thoughts and images suggested in course of composition have been such as I found interfered with the unity indispensable to every work of art, however humble in character." The promptings of the imagination had to be resisted: they kept tempting him with so many suggestions that there was always the danger they might make the poet say more than he intended. It is not every poet who has this sense of responsibility to his experience. Keats, who will serve as a contrast here, undertakes his task as a poet with as much seriousness as Wordsworth; but that task is altogether different because his attitude to poetry is different.

CHAPTER II

TWO TYPES OF POET

II. KEATS

THE poetry of Keats is rarely the result of emotion recollected in tranquillity, and rarely the record of an experience already completely realized. Where Wordsworth is thinking mainly of the idea to be expressed, Keats is delighting in his powers of expression. The poem with Keats is not the objective shadow cast by an experience already present in the poet's consciousness, but a thing created almost wholly out of the immediate excitement of composition. With him, in fact, poetry is far less *communication*, and far more *making*; and often the thing to be made was only dimly realized by him before he began to write.

For our knowledge of what Keats thought about poetry we must rely chiefly on his letters. These are, on the whole, far less satisfactory evidence as to what a poet really thought about his art than the notes Wordsworth dictated to Miss Fenwick or the prefaces he wrote in his earlier years. For one thing, the views of Keats altered from day to day. There is a real danger of elevating scattered opinions in his letters, dashed off just as the idea came into his head, into settled convictions. More than six times he had to warn his correspondents not to take too

seriously what he had written. Like most lively and impressionable people, he was sometimes only trying ideas on his friends, putting thoughts on paper to see how they would look. "I may have read these things before," he wrote to Reynolds after setting down some of his theories about life and poetry, "but I never had even a thus dim perception of them; and moreover I like to say my lesson to one who will endure my tediousness for my own sake."¹ In the process of writing his thoughts down he was making them clear to himself, and what was true of his letter-writing was equally true of much of his poetry. One can never be certain, then, that a statement in his letters represents a fixed opinion. "It is a wretched thing to confess," he writes to one of his friends, "but is a very fact that not one word I ever utter can be taken for granted as an opinion growing out of my identical nature—how can it, when I have no nature?"² Between 1817 and 1820, too, the period in which he wrote almost all the letters that have been preserved, Keats was developing very rapidly as a man and as a poet; and therefore it becomes still more difficult to say that we have anywhere his final and mature conception of poetry. Here, however, I am less concerned with doing justice to Keats than with stating a view of poetry which he certainly held at some time in his life, and which lies behind much of what he actually wrote. That he may have reached before his death a different and, perhaps, even a finer conception of the poet's business I am not disposed either to admit or to deny; but it is his earlier attitude to his art, when he was least like Wordsworth, that it will be most profitable

¹ May 3rd, 1818, *Letters of John Keats*, ed. M. B. Forman, vol. i, p. 157.

² *Ibid.*, vol. i, p. 245.

to define, because Keats is useful to us here just in so far as he differs from, not resembles, Wordsworth.

What is characteristic of the young Keats is a capacity for intense, sustained, and *general* excitement. Keats passes—inexplicably, as it must often have seemed even to himself—into a state of heightened sensibility, in which thoughts and feelings press upon him, and his imagination becomes unusually active. "I went to the Isle of Wight," he wrote to Leigh Hunt, "thought so much about Poetry so long together that I could not get to sleep at night. . . . Another thing I was too much in Solitude, and consequently was obliged to be in continual burning of thought as an only resource."¹ Referring to this statement, Charles Dilke wrote: "An exact picture of the man's mind and character. . . . He could at any time have 'thought himself out' mind and body. Thought was intense with him, and seemed at times to assume a reality that influenced his conduct—and I have no doubt helped to wear him out."² From *Severn* we get a picture of the poet suddenly falling into a mood of intense reverie. "Even when in a mood of joyous observance, with flow of happy spirits, he would suddenly become taciturn, not because he was tired, not even because his mind was suddenly wrought to some bewitching vision, but from a profound disquiet which he could not or would not explain."³ It is—or it is something akin to—the melancholy fit which he describes as falling

Sudden from heaven like a weeping cloud.

This aptness for intense excitement is, of course, one of the penalties the artist has to pay for his sensitive

¹ May 10th, 1817, *Letters*, vol. i, p. 25-6.

² *Ibid.*, vol. i, p. 26.

³ *Life of John Keats*, Sir Sidney Colvin, p. 80.

organization; and unless he can control the excitement and discipline it to the purposes of poetry he will end by being the helpless dreamer of *Hyperion*, tortured by his own sensitiveness, that Keats seems in a mood of despair to have felt himself to be. "Thou art a dreaming thing," the Shade in *Hyperion* tells the poet, "a fever of thyself." The wrong sort of poet lives on his own emotions; poetry consumes him as a fever consumes the body—indeed, it *is* his fever. It would be unwise, however, to take this famous passage in *Hyperion* as being a final statement on the part of Keats. In a letter to Reynolds, for instance, while admitting that he cannot always support physically the excitement that precedes and accompanies composition, he adds reassuringly: "If you should have any reason to regret this state of excitement in me, I will turn the tide of your feelings in the right Channel, by mentioning that it is the only state for the best sort of Poetry—that is all I care for, all I live for."¹ In *Hyperion* it does appear as if he were recanting the whole poetic theory and practice of his earlier years; but the mood in which Keats revised *Hyperion* may have been no more permanent than many another one.

In the letters of 1817-18, however, we meet with little of this despairing self-analysis. It is true that Keats was aware quite early in his poetic life of a poetry very different from his own; but for some time he was content to leave it alone. He took to poetry—his own kind of poetry—as to a drug; he wanted to be writing it always, more and more of it, to "glean his teeming brain." He sat down on one occasion to compete with Leigh Hunt in writing a sonnet on the Grasshopper and the Cricket. The incident would be hardly worth recording here if Keats had

¹ August 25th, 1819, *Letters*, vol. ii, p. 406.

produced a worthless poem; but his sonnet is actually a favourable example of his second-best work. There can have been no question here of the young poet finding expression for something that had for long been imprisoned in the sub-conscious mind; the Grasshopper and the Cricket had probably never occurred to him as themes for poetry until they were suddenly thrust upon him on that particular evening by Hunt. If Hunt had invited him to write on Cleopatra, or Skiddaw, or Twilight, or the Squirrel, Keats would have accepted the challenge and produced a good sonnet. He was, in the most literal sense, full of poetry; it only required a favourable opportunity to release the pent-up energy that was in him. On another occasion he picked up a volume of Chaucer over which his friend Cowden Clarke had fallen asleep, and wrote a sonnet on *The Flower and the Leaf*, which Clarke was reading. When he was walking in Scotland with Brown, he wrote one sonnet in Burns' cottage "for the mere sake of writing some lines under the roof," and another on the summit of Ben Nevis while a cloud which was enveloping him "slowly wafted away, showing a tremendous precipice into the valley below."¹ One may dismiss such poems contemptuously as verse exercises, but in that case one must be prepared to include *Isabella* and *The Eve of St. Agnes* in the same category. The difference is one of excellence rather than of kind. One will never understand the poet Keats if one thinks of him waiting patiently for some rare and remarkable experience to come to him; one must think of him rather as a man who has learnt to control an elaborate instrument, and who is eager for every chance to play upon it.

¹ *The Poetical Works of John Keats*, ed. H. B. Forman, vol. ii, p. 312.

Those who are familiar with his letters must have been struck with the number of occasions on which Keats tells his friends that he wants to write poetry. Not a poem about this or that, but simply poetry. This is, of course, a common enough state of affairs, and Keats differs here from many other young men only in the fact that he succeeded in fulfilling his ambition. In 1817 he writes to Reynolds:

I find I cannot exist without Poetry—without eternal Poetry—half the day will not do—the whole of it—I began with a little, but habit has made me a Leviathan. I had become all in a Tremble from not having written any thing of late—the Sonnet over leaf did me some good. I slept the better last night for it—this Morning, however, I am nearly as bad again.¹

“I began with a little”; it might almost be Coleridge writing about his opium. Keats is always running to poetry for relief; he sleeps the better for having written something—no matter what, so long as it is poetry. “I feel I must again begin with my poetry,” he writes after the death of his brother Tom. “. . . I live under an everlasting restraint—never relieved except when I am composing—so I will write away.”²

Keats, then, wants to write poetry. But what is he to write? What if individual episodes and adventures of the soul do not, as with Wordsworth, disentangle themselves accommodatingly from the sum total of his experience? Sometimes, of course, they did, even for Keats. When he sat up half the night with Cowden Clarke reading Chapman's *Homer* for the first time, Keats was

¹ *Letters*, vol. i, p. 21.

² *Ibid.*, December 1818, vol. i, p. 274.

having an isolated experience which he valued with a Wordsworthian gratitude: the sonnet he wrote is the record of it. But adventures of such magnitude are rare, and Keats wanted to be making poetry continually. If his own personal experience—the episodes of his own life—failed to provide him with enough material for the poetry he longed to write, where was he to find it?

Keats had best answer that question in his own words. In a letter to Reynolds (February 19th, 1818), he writes:

Now it appears to me that almost any Man may like the spider spin from his own inwards his own airy Citadel—the points of leaves and twigs on which the spider begins her work are few, and she fills the air with a beautiful circuiting. Man should be content with as few points to tip with the fine Web of his Soul, and weave a tapestry empyrean full of symbols for his spiritual eye, of softness for his spiritual touch, of space for his wandering, of distinctness for his luxury.¹

There is nothing in this passage, it may be objected, to justify one in reading it as an allegory of the poet and his poetry; but I believe that it was so intended by Keats, and that when he was writing to Reynolds about the spider he had in mind the fable of the spider and the bee in Swift's *Battle of the Books*. Swift's spider, it will be remembered, represents the type of poet who relies wholly upon his own genius, who "spins and spits wholly from himself, and scorns to own any obligation or assistance from without." It is, I think, significant that in his letter to Reynolds Keats has no sooner mentioned the spider than he proceeds to think of the bee. The two are not actually contrasted as Swift contrasts them in *The*

¹ *Letters*, vol. i, p. 111.

Battle of the Books, but their appearance together in the same letter—a letter to a brother poet in which poetry has already been mentioned—seems to indicate a reminiscence on the part of Keats. The phrase, too, with which he describes the spider's web—"airy citadel"—may have been suggested by Swift's reference to "the outward walls of the spider's citadel." Had Keats ever read Swift? In a letter dated only two days later than that to Reynolds, he tells his brothers that he is attending Hazlitt's lectures regularly. "His last was on Gray, Collins, Young, etc., and he gave a very fine piece of discriminating criticism on Swift, Voltaire, and Rabelais."¹ If one turns to the printed version of this lecture, one will not find any reference to *The Battle of the Books*; but it is possible that Keats had heard Hazlitt discussing what was, in any case, a fairly well-known, almost a famous, passage, and one that he was quite likely to have come across in his own reading. All this, of course, is speculation; but we do know that Keats took Hazlitt's lectures seriously; and it is not, therefore, an improbable suggestion that in his reading he was keeping pace with the lecturer, and that when he wrote his own passage about the spider he had in mind Swift's fable in which the spider is taken to represent the poet.

If, then, one is justified in putting this interpretation on the words Keats wrote to Reynolds, the passage takes on a new significance. The poet's activity is seen to be like that of the spider. He is to spin out of himself, to "weave a tapestry empyrean"; he is to make something, to cover a space that was previously empty with a web of beautiful thought and imagery. He has, of course, his theme, his framework, the points of the leaves and twigs

¹ *Letters*, vol. i, p. 115.

on which he is about to spin; but his main business consists of filling the void between those points with a delicate web spun out of his own imagining.

It must be admitted that the view of poetry I am here attributing to Keats is best illustrated by his early, rather than his later and more mature, work. It is most obvious, of course, in *Endymion*. Writing of this poem, while he was in the thick of it, he remarks: "It will be a test, a trial of my Powers of Imagination and chiefly of my invention which is a rare thing indeed—by which I must make 4,000 lines of one bare circumstance and fill them with Poetry."¹ The one bare circumstance afforded the naked twigs on which he was to spin his romance; the rest must come from his own inwards. It was characteristic, too, of Keats' attitude to his task that he should talk of filling his lines with poetry. It was poetry that had to be written rather than the poem of *Endymion*. "Why endeavour after a long Poem?" he imagines someone asking. "To which I should answer—Do not the Lovers of Poetry like to have a little Region to wander in where they may pick and choose, and in which the images are so numerous that many are forgotten and found new on a second Reading: which may be food for a Week's stroll in the Summer?"² It would be difficult to improve on the phrase that Keats applies to his own poem: *Endymion* is just that—"a little region to wander in." It is that to the readers of the poem, and it is not perhaps unjust to Keats to suggest that it was that to the poet also. In the preface which he suppressed, he states that he began the poem with no inward feeling that he would finish it, and that as he proceeded his steps were all uncertain. In another

¹ October 8th, 1817. *Letters*, vol. i, p. 55.

² *Ibid.*

of his own memorable phrases, he is "young, writing at random—straining at particles of light in the midst of a great darkness."¹ *Endymion*, in fact, is the most complete example in the poetry of Keats of a "beautiful circuiting."

Endymion, however, was a work of immaturity; the young poet was only feeling his way. I turn, therefore, to a letter of much later date in which Keats is outlining his plans to his publisher. "The little dramatic skill I may as yet have however badly it might show in a Drama would I think be sufficient for a Poem. I wish to diffuse the colouring of St. Agnes' Eve throughout a Poem in which Character and Sentiment would be the figures to such drapery."² Here again Keats shows an entire understanding of his own poetical aptitudes. To realize the significance of Keats' statement one has only to imagine Wordsworth proposing to himself such a task. Wordsworth would never have looked upon character and sentiment as being merely the figures for some poetic drapery; he would scarcely have understood what Keats meant. But Keats was thinking again of the "tapestry empyrean," the sort of tapestry he had woven in *The Eve of St. Agnes*. That poem was written not to trace the workings of the human heart, not even to tell a story, but primarily to give the young poet an entry into that region of rich and luxurious imagery in which his senses might be brought into full play. *The Eve of St. Agnes* is a smaller and more orderly territory than *Endymion*, but it is still "a little region to wander in." I have suggested that with Keats we have to deal with a young poet who is often moved by an intense longing, not to communicate some definite and clearly realized experience, but simply

¹ Friday, March 19th, 1819. *Letters*, vol. ii, p. 341.

² November 19th, 1819, *Ibid.*, p. 481.

to write poetry. If only he can make a start, the thoughts and the words will come almost unbidden. His problem is, therefore, to find a theme—the story of Endymion, or Isabella, or Madeleine and Porphyro, or Lamia—which will enable him to divert some of his surplus imaginative energy into a definite channel. If he is prevented from doing this his feelings will press upon him and become an intolerable burden. He must write or remain wretched—“never relieved except when I am composing.” When he finds a theme, his imagination can do its proper work; the wind that has gone roaring unprofitably over waste land is being made to turn the sails of the mill. The outlines of his theme, his fable, are in his own words “the points of leaves and twigs on which the spider begins her work.” These are necessary, but the web is the thing.

Sometimes, indeed, Keats has not even a theme. He has something which at first sight looks like one, but which proves on a more critical examination to have been no more than a starting-point. With Wordsworth the theme is almost always the reason for the poem; with Keats it is often no more than the pretext for it. The desire to write has sent him in search of something to write about. When he finds it, it is characteristic of Keats that he takes it up with none of Wordsworth's overwhelming sense of responsibility to a theme as such. To Keats it is simply a way into poetry, a point of departure. The point from which he started *was* often no more to him than a starting-point; it was the first step in an imaginative journey in which to travel beautifully was often more important than to arrive.

Here again Keats' letters help us to understand his attitude of mind to poetry. In the letter to Reynolds just quoted, he imagines how pleasant it would be to sit and

read a passage of poetry or distilled prose, and then allow his thoughts to take their own way.

When Man has arrived at a certain ripeness in intellect any one grand and spiritual passage serves him as a starting-post towards all "the two-and-thirty Palaces." How happy is such a voyage of conception, what delicious diligent Indolence! A doze upon a sofa does not hinder it, and a nap upon Clover engenders ethereal finger-pointings—the prattle of a child gives it wings, and the converse of middle-age a strength to beat them—a strain of music conducts to "an odd angle of the Isle," and when the leaves whisper it puts a girdle round the earth.¹

It is true that Keats is thinking here not so much of the act of writing poetry as of luxuriating in a kind of day-dream; but as it happens, he is describing a state of mind that was with him peculiarly favourable to composition, and in his letter to Reynolds he encloses fourteen lines of poetry that he had, in fact, written that very morning. It was the lovely morning that had set his mind wandering half inconsequently, and the lovely morning that had brought him to the point of writing his poem. A thrush singing in the warm air of early spring had done the rest. "I was led into these thoughts, my dear Reynolds, by the beauty of the morning operating on a sense of Idleness—I have not read any Books—the Morning said I was right—I had no idea but of the morning, and the thrush said I was right—seeming to say,

O thou whose face hath felt the winter's wind,
Whose eye hath seen the snow-clouds hung in mist,
And the black elm-tops 'mong the freezing stars,
To thee the spring will be a harvest-time.

¹ *Letters*, vol. i, p. 111.

O thou, whose only book has been the light
 Of supreme darkness which thou feddest on
 Night after night when Phœbus was away,
 To thee the spring shall be a triple morn.
 O fret not after knowledge—I have none,
 And yet my song comes native with the warmth.
 O fret not after knowledge—I have none,
 And yet the Evening listens. He who saddens
 At thought of idleness cannot be idle,
 And he's awake who thinks himself asleep.¹

The thrush is of importance to this poem only because it gives the poet a start; when it has done that it has done its work. One of Keats' editors suggests that he was writing here "in a kind of spiritual parallelism with the thrush's song," and that he "consciously translated the wild melody of the thrush into an unrhymed sonnet-structure."² But this is only a fanciful and elaborate way of saying almost nothing. What is much more important to note is the fact that in those fourteen lines Keats manages to say two things that were very much on his mind at the time, and succeeds in doing so by attaching his two thoughts to the thrush. The first, it should be admitted, is connected more or less immediately with the fine morning and the song of the thrush: it is simply that the long cold nights are going, and the warm sunny days are coming again. But in the lines—

O fret not after knowledge—I have none,
 And yet my song comes native with the warmth—

Keats is getting down an idea that appears fairly frequently in his letters of this period. It is the same idea as he

¹ *Letters*, vol. i, p. 113.

² *The Poetical Works of John Keats*, ed. H. B. Forman, vol. ii, pp. 255-6.

touches upon to his brothers less than two months before when he writes of an "irritable reaching after fact and reason"¹ and the incapacity of some people to remain content with what he calls half-knowledge; and it is the same idea as he expressed in his well-known outburst to Bailey a month before that—"O for a Life of Sensations rather than of Thoughts!"²—sensations being here understood by Keats as direct intuitions, which—like Wordsworth—he opposes to the "meddling intellect." The thrush may have suggested this thought to Keats when he was writing his unrhymed sonnet; but it is perhaps truer to say that the thrush gave him the chance of stating again one of his favourite ideas.

It was rather more than a year later that Keats was listening night after night in a Hampstead garden to the singing of a nightingale. In course of time there came another warm, indolent morning; and the poet, in a luxurious sadness born of his own delight, "took his chair from the breakfast-table to the grass plot under a plum tree,"³ and apparently wrote there and then on a few scraps of paper his ode to a nightingale. I believe that there is no essential difference between the kind of poetic activity that produced the lines about the thrush and the ode to a nightingale. The greater poem comes from a mood of intenser and more sustained excitement; the nightingale has been continually present in the poet's experience for a longer time than the thrush, and when he wrote he was not actually listening to the bird's song. But such discrepancies are incidental to the main issue. The thrush and the nightingale are both relevant to what Keats

¹ December 28th, 1817, *Letters*, vol. i, p. 77.

² *Ibid.*, vol. i, p. 73.

³ *The Poetical Works of John Keats*, ed. H. B. Forman, vol. ii, p. 109.

wrote in precisely the same way: they start a train of imaginative thought. The nightingale ode is hardly a poem about nightingales, nor even about a particular nightingale; it is a train of passionate and intensely sincere thought set on fire by a chance spark that happens to come in contact with it. Thanks to the nightingale and its song Keats is able to organize a mass of thought and feeling that was previously undirected, and, it is probable, only half realized by the poet himself.

It is therefore futile to complain that there might be more about the nightingale in the great ode, that Keats mentions it only intermittently. As with the thrush in the earlier poem, he is for the most part simply using it to express certain thoughts and feelings that were at the back of his mind. It is true that some of the thoughts and feelings in this ode, and much of its general direction, were dictated to the poet by the nightingale; but it is equally true that a good deal of the ode expressed for Keats ideas and emotions which at that time were troubling his peace of mind, and which he might have attached equally well to some other theme. How much of the second and third stanzas, for instance, would have been inappropriate if Keats, instead of listening to a nightingale, had heard the voice of some girl singing at night in a Hampstead garden, and had written an *Ode to an Unseen Singer*? When I speak of Keats attaching his thoughts and feelings to some other experience, I am far from wishing to imply any conscious intention on his part. I am suggesting only that such thought and feeling as appear in those two stanzas might have been aroused equally appropriately by some different experience; if they appear in his *Ode to a Nightingale*, it is because at the time he wrote it the poet's mind was still full of a recent sorrow. There is almost as

much of Tom Keats in this great ode as of the nightingale. The poet's longing to fade away into the forest dim, to forget the fever and the fret of the world

“Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies”;

his half willingness that death should take him, the reference in the last stanza to his “sole self,” all seem to have a bearing on the death of his brother a few months before. “The death of his brother,” Haydon wrote, “wounded him deeply, and it appeared to me from that hour he began to droop. He wrote his exquisite ‘Ode to the Nightingale’ at this time, and as we were one evening walking in the Kilburn meadows he repeated it to me, before he put it to paper, in a low, tremulous undertone which affected me extremely.”¹

Keats nowhere, so far as I am aware, uses the word “effusion” in connection with his poetry; but that, indeed, is often the best word to describe it. If the reader is dissatisfied with the sequence of Keats' thoughts, it must either be because he is imposing his own type of thinking on the poet, or because Keats has failed to impose his. The reader who worries about the argument of the *Ode to a Nightingale* is not merely forgetting that a poem has not the logical construction of prose, but is not taking into account the fact that a poem to Keats is habitually what passes through his mind in the intense excitement of composition. At all events, if this great ode is to leave the reader, as Keats would have him, in “the luxury of twilight,”² he must yield himself up to the poet and accept his train of thought, wherever it may lead, and

¹ *The Poetical Works of John Keats*, ed. H. B. Forman, vol. ii, p. 109.

² Letter to John Taylor, February 27th, 1818, *Letters*, vol. i, p. 116.

whether it turn back upon itself, or contradict itself, or leap ahead with seeming inconsequence.

It has been noted by more than one critic of Keats how natural is the transition from his poetry to his prose. With some poets (e.g. Shelley) to write prose is to assume a different voice, a different idiom, almost a distinct personality; but Keats carries the same spontaneous utterance into both. His letters are fragments flung off from the same whirling mass of energy that produced his poetry; they have the same earnestness and sincerity. In writing to his friends, Keats is continually pouring out what is passing through his mind. The thought rarely flows for very long in one direction, splitting up into subsidiary streams or completely altering its course as every fresh idea enters his brain. In a mood of lesser intensity, or, at any rate, in a mood less purely emotional than that which generates his poetry, he is setting out on a journey of thought. Images, amplifications, illustrations, and, it would seem, ideas of which he was quite unconscious when he began his letter, crowd upon him as he writes. He must be left to take his own course and make his own pace; there can be no telling where his imagination will finally lead him. This spontaneous generation of ideas from ideas which is so characteristic of Keats may be well seen in a letter (September 5th, 1819) which he wrote to his publisher, John Taylor. Taylor has been unwell, and is now proposing to recuperate at Retford. Keats, who shows some concern at his illness, offers him good advice about the sort of soil to look for in a health resort. It should be dry and gravelly, and well above sea level so that the air may be at its purest; the thing to avoid is a rich valley or plain where the soil is heavy and fertile, and the air hardly stirs from one day to another. Shanklin was

like that—shut in by hills except to the south-east, from which came the damps from the sea, and hung about the town for days on end. Winchester is a much healthier town; the air is purer because the town is not so confined, and the soil is dry and chalky. If Taylor is thinking of going to Retford, he ought to find out what the soil is like in the district, especially as autumn is coming on, and the autumn fog over rich land “is like the steam from cabbage water.” . . . So far, Keats has written with his mind fixed steadily on the point which is most likely to interest his ailing correspondent. But by this time his wits have grown warm from their exercise, and he begins to forget about Taylor and his complaints, and to set off on a speculative journey on his own account. . . . What makes the great difference between the men who live in valleys and plains and those who dwell among the mountains? Mainly the cultivation of the earth. Differences of health and temperament depend to a large extent upon the air we breathe, though Cain and Abel seem to be exceptions to this rule. But look at the wide gulf between a peasant and a butcher; the one breathes air mingled with the fumes of slaughter, and the other breathes the dank exhalation of the glebe. The peasant lacks spirit, not so much because he is depressed by hard work, as because he is always breathing in the damp that comes from the plough-furrow. If he were cutting furze on a mountain, he would have a very different disposition. Agriculture tames men; it enervates their nature. That is why the Chinese are such imbeciles. And (coming back to Taylor) if this sort of thing is bad for a strong man, it must be much worse for an invalid, or someone who has nothing to work at or think about. How is it (leaving Taylor again) that so many men manage to keep well in cities? It is because

they have something to occupy their minds. A man who is idle in a city will soon get ill. Why? Well, imagine yourself walking in a leisurely manner through an unwholesome path in the Fens: you would be almost sure to catch an ague. But suppose it is Macbeth who is crossing the same path with the dagger in the air leading him on: he would never have an ague. Taylor ought to give those things consideration. Notts is a flat county. . . .¹

Here we can see Keats obviously anxious to help his friend, and yet unable to resist running after Cain and Abel, and Macbeth, and the Chinese, chasing his thoughts along the valleys, and hunting after fine phrases such as "the dank exhalment of the glebe." Taylor gradually fades into the background, and the poet is in full cry after the various hares his own brain has started. "If I scribble long letters," he once wrote to another friend, "I must play my vagaries—I must be too heavy, or too light, for whole pages—I must be quaint and free of Tropes and figures—I must play my draughts as I please, and for my advantage and your erudition, crown a white with a black, or a black with a white, and move into black or white, far and near as I please."² Most of us, indeed, claim the same liberties in our letter-writing, though we use them with infinitely less imagination and intellectual energy. But in his poetry, no less than in his letters, Keats must be allowed to "play his draughts as he pleases"; for his poetry, as I have suggested, came to him usually in the same immediate way as the thoughts scattered about his letters, and is, in fact, a part of the same spontaneous activity.

¹ *Letters*, vol. ii, pp. 412-14.

² *Ibid.*, vol. i, p. 155.

In this I have contrasted him with Wordsworth. He does, indeed, differ from Wordsworth at almost every point; and yet he frequently obscures the contrast for us by aspiring to be like him. Keats was certainly conscious of his own great powers, but it is reasonable to argue that he was continually mistaking what those were. Nor can there be much doubt that Wordsworth was the magnet—or, at any rate, the most powerful of the attractions—which drew Keats out of his proper course and set him at war with himself. The attitude of Keats to the older poet is most instructive. He seems to have been reluctantly fascinated, impressed in spite of himself. When the two first met, Keats was just twenty-two, Wordsworth more than twice that age, a mature man of forty-seven, who had thought “long and deeply about many things.” Wordsworth’s mind was made up about poetry by this time; Keats, old as he was in many respects, was still grappling uncertainly with all his problems. The powerful character and intellect of Wordsworth, quite apart from his actual achievement, could not fail to influence the young poet, and, as I have suggested, drive him out of his course. Keats struggled to maintain his own identity; he was not an unqualified admirer of Wordsworth. “For the sake of a few fine imaginative or domestic passages,” he once asked, “are we to be bullied into a certain Philosophy engendered in the whims of an Egotist?”¹ And yet this apparent egotist probably cast a deeper shadow across the mind of Keats than any other of his contemporaries.

That Keats was ultimately dissatisfied with his own poetic achievement—most notably, of course, with *Hyperion*—should not lead us to assume too hurriedly that

¹ February 3rd, 1818, *Letters*, vol. i, p. 103.

there was something else that he would have done better. For good or for ill, however, and largely through the influence of Wordsworth, Keats was gradually being attracted to another kind of poetic activity altogether than that which had produced most of his earlier work. "I have come to this resolution," he wrote on March 8th, 1819, "never to write for the sake of writing or making a poem, but from running over with any little knowledge or experience which many years of reflection may perhaps give me; otherwise I will be dumb."¹ It is as much as if he had said: "I have resolved to be Wordsworth, not Keats." Wordsworth, as we have seen, is precisely that type of poet who is continually running over with some experience, and who does not, in fact, write until the experience has accumulated. Keats, as I have tried to show, was frequently—and, I believe, habitually—a different type of poet altogether.

It would be misleading, however, to assert that he never had experiences similar in kind to those of Wordsworth, or that some of his poetry does not come directly out of such experiences. In the autumn of 1818, for instance, Keats met a beautiful young woman from the East Indies whom he afterwards described in one of his letters. "She is not a Cleopatra, but she is at least a Charmian. She has a rich eastern look; she has fine eyes and fine manners. When she comes into a room she makes an impression the same as the Beauty of a Leopardess. . . . She kept me awake one Night as a tune of Mozart's might do. I speak of the thing as a passtime and an amuzement than which I can feel none deeper than a conversation with an imperial woman the very 'yes' and 'no' of whose Lips is to me a Banquet. I don't cry to take the moon home with me in

¹ *Letters*, vol. ii, p. 307.

my Pocket nor do I fret to leave her behind me."¹ Keats does not appear to have written any poem in consequence of this experience, and yet this lovely young woman was to Keats something akin to what the Highland Girl had been to Wordsworth. He captured her as a piece of pure, unselfish experience—"an imperial woman, the very 'yes' and 'no' of whose Lips is to me a Banquet." But there for Keats the matter probably rested. The young East Indian beauty passed into the sum of his experience, and if she ever emerged again it was in some transmuted form.

On the other hand, there are clearly occasions when Keats *is* doing the same sort of work as Wordsworth, and communicating directly and circumstantially some experience that has moved him. The *Ode to Autumn* may be taken as an example. The mood here seems to have grown out of a particular experience; the *Ode* is definitely autumnal. The mind of the poet had been filling quietly for some time with the sights and sounds of autumn, and by and by it overflowed. "How beautiful the season is now," he wrote to Reynolds from Winchester, three days after composing his ode. "How fine the air. A temperate sharpness about it. Really, without joking, chaste weather—Dian skies—I never lik'd stubble-fields so much as now—Aye better than the chilly green of the Spring. Somehow a stubble-plain looks warm, in the same way that some pictures look warm. This struck me so much in my Sunday's walk that I composed upon it."² Even here, it will be noticed, the poet's reaction is more immediate than Wordsworth would have approved; but the poem is much more the statement of a particular

¹ October 1818, *Letters*, vol. i, pp. 252-3.

² September 21st, 1819, *Ibid.*, vol. ii, p. 418.

experience, reflected upon and grasped in its entirety, than is usual with Keats. The *Ode to Autumn* is among the most perfect of Keats' achievements, but not, perhaps, one of the very greatest. The trouble is not that he has not laid hold on "a sound subject-matter," but that he is not here writing out of a mood of such passionate intensity as that which lies behind the *Ode to a Nightingale*. At the same time, largely, perhaps, because it remains on this lower level of intensity, the *Ode to Autumn* is artistically one of the most satisfying of the poems. Keats is more faithful to his experience than usual because he is less excited than usual; for with him, as we shall see, excitement has a disintegrating as well as creative influence. It fills his mind with those images and memories and associations so necessary to the poet, but it tends at the same time to loosen his control. In the *Ode to Autumn* the reader has just that impression of control on the part of the poet, of a definite and foreseen direction given to his poetic material, that is not frequently to be found in the work of Keats. It has about it the calm of settled weather; it is the poetry of a man whose nerves were quiet when he wrote.

There is, indeed, some reason to believe that during this particular autumn at Winchester Keats enjoyed for a few weeks a period of blessed and unaccustomed tranquillity. Winchester, he told his sister Fanny, "is the pleasantest Town I ever was in";¹ and to Reynolds he wrote, on September 21st: "I hope you are better employed than in gaping after weather. I have been at different times so happy as not to know what weather it was."² It is, therefore, significant to find him writing, only one day

¹ *Letters*, vol. ii, p. 407.

² August 28th, *Ibid.*, vol. ii, p. 418, 1819.

before his letter to Reynolds, to say that he hopes to compose in the future without his accustomed fever.

Some think I have lost that poetic ardour and fire 'tis said I once had—the fact is perhaps I have: but instead of that I hope I shall substitute a more thoughtful and quiet power, I am more frequently, now, contented to read and think—but now and then, haunted with ambitious thoughts. Quieter in my pulse, improved in my digestion; exerting myself against vexing speculations—scarcely content to write the best verses for the fever they leave behind. I want to compose without this fever. I hope I one day shall.¹

But that day never really came to Keats. By the time that the fever of youth was beginning to pass away, another and more fatal disease had taken its place.

¹ *Letters*, vol. ii, p. 461.

CHAPTER III

SECOND THOUGHTS

THE difference of a poet like Wordsworth from a poet like Keats comes—partly, at any rate—from his having something already definite to express before he begins to write. His attitude to poetry and the poetry he writes will be determined by that circumstance. Keats is in a sense freer to improvise than Wordsworth, because he is less held by a clearly defined purpose. This is bound to leave him much more open to the various impressions that come to him from his medium—from such elements as the actual words with which he is working, the rhyme and rhythm to which he is setting them. But before proceeding to examine the effects of the poet's medium in detail, it will be convenient to take into account some further evidence illustrating the divergent attitudes of Wordsworth and Keats to the poet's business. This evidence is to be found in the different considerations which determined the changes they made in the text of their poems, the methods of trial and error by which they finally arrived at the perfect reading.

The Wordsworth who defined so confidently the nature and origin of poetry had also decided, naturally enough, what kind of language was most fitted to clothe the poet's thoughts. Less than justice has been done to Wordsworth's theory of the language proper to poetry, because

that theory has too often been considered apart from his conception of the poem and its genesis in the mind of the poet. That he was too sweeping in demanding that poetry should employ a language as near as possible to that daily spoken by men has been generally admitted; but it has not always been noticed how apt such a language is to the greater part of his own poetry. If his self-imposed task as a poet consisted in passing on experiences, already almost completely formed in his own consciousness, and only waiting for metrical expression to make them objective, then it is clear that the language best suited to his poetry was that which would disclose most accurately and powerfully what he was seeking to communicate. And since those experiences were, on Wordsworth's own showing, such as are within the range of normal men, and poetry "sheds no tears such as Angels weep, but natural and human tears," he believed that the language best suited to poetry must be one that is natural to ordinary human feelings. The poet's business of finding those appropriate words was already hard enough without his going out of his way to complicate it. Words were necessarily inaccurate and misleading; there was always the danger that they would arouse the wrong kind of feelings in a reader owing to irrelevant associations, and that the poem would suffer from "those arbitrary connexions of feelings and ideas with particular words and phrases, from which no man can altogether protect himself." The poet's language, too, must often "in liveliness and truth fall short of that which is uttered by men in real life, under the actual pressure of those passions, certain shadows of which the Poet thus produces, or feels to be produced, in himself." But he need not make his task more difficult by irrelevant decoration and ornament. The bare experience: that is

what he must strive with all his energy to communicate. Such was Wordsworth's conception of the poet's task, and he clung manfully to it in practice. He knew that many of his readers would look round for poetry and would be induced to inquire "by what species of courtesy those attempts can be permitted to assume that title." Those are not wanting to-day who miss the verbal riches to which they feel entitled, and find the poet bare where he was only trying his best to be clear. Wordsworth would have told such readers that the poetry was there apart from the words—those often feeble and sometimes misleading symbols by which we make known our thoughts and feelings. The idea that the poetry should reside in the words themselves, in phrases and metaphors, however striking and original, he would have considered the basic error of criticism.

It is, however, a serious mistake to believe that Wordsworth did not pay the strictest attention to the diction of his poetry. "I have bestowed great pains on my *style*," he once said, "full as much as any of my contemporaries have done on theirs. I yield to none in *love for my art*. I, therefore, labour at it with reverence, affection, and industry. My main endeavour, as to style, has been that my poems should be written in pure intelligible English."¹ Pure intelligible English: no more than that, for nothing more was needed. The words were simply there to let the thought shine through, and yet, as Wordsworth knew, they were often hard enough to come by. That simple, transparent expression which looks so easy was often the hardest of all to attain.

There are, indeed, some grounds for suggesting that Wordsworth—in his lyrical ballads, at any rate—was

¹ *Wordsworth's Literary Criticism*, ed. Nowell C. Smith, p. 259.

afraid of words. But if he disciplined his expression with an almost Puritan horror of excess, he did so with the noblest of motives; if he was severe with words, it was not because he was insensitive to their power of suggestion, but because he was so intensely aware of it. What he feared was that the simple experience he was endeavouring to communicate should be lost in a splendid glow of imagery, or that he should be tempted to overlay it with amplifications and embellishments suggested to him in the exciting hour of composition.

How carefully Wordsworth weighed every word—and not for its power of suggesting *anything* that was beautiful, but for its aptness to convey exactly what had been in his mind—may be seen from his outburst against Scott for misquoting a line from *Yarrow Unvisited*. “Walter Scott is not a careful composer. He allows himself many liberties, which betray a want of respect for his reader. . . . W. Scott quoted, as from me,

The swan on *sweet* St. Mary’s lake
Floats double, swan and shadow,

instead of *still*; thus obscuring my idea, and betraying his own uncritical principles of composition.”¹ Quite apart from his natural irritation at being credited with so vague and sentimental a description of St. Mary’s Loch, Wordsworth was angry that the imaginative vision which he had expressed so accurately and particularly should be travestied in this commonplace epithet. Not only did “sweet” fail to convey what he would have called “the spirit of the Loch,” but it introduced an alien element into the experience he had sought to communicate. Scott, in fact, was doing far more than tampering with the words of the

¹ *Wordsworth’s Literary Criticism*, p. 258.

poem: he was falsifying Wordsworth's experience. To Wordsworth, on some other occasion, the Loch might very well have been "blue," or "grey," or "pensive," or "level," or a hundred other things—perhaps even "sweet"; but on this particular occasion he had felt it to be "still," and anyone who failed to see that it must be "still" was incapable of understanding him at all. Poor Scott ought to have known far better than Wordsworth what St. Mary's Loch looked like, for when Wordsworth wrote his poem he had never, of course, seen the Loch at all; but whereas Wordsworth had "a vision of his own," clear and precise, Scott, he believed, had never really looked at the Loch with his eye "steadily fixed upon his object." He had never really experienced the Loch, and therefore "sweet" was good enough for him.

To those who still think of Wordsworth as "a sweet, simple poet, and *so* natural that little master Charles and his younger sister are *so* charmed with them that they play at 'Goody Blake,' or at 'Johnny and Betty Foy,'" ¹ it must come as something of a shock to find how anxiously he paused over the word and the phrase. In one of his letters there is an instructive comment on a single word in *The Leech Gatherer* that shows how eagerly Wordsworth strove to find the exact terms to fit his experience. He is explaining, in prose, the feelings he had in writing the poem. "What is brought forward?" he asks. "A lonely place, 'a pond, by which an old man was, far from all house or home': not *stood*, nor *sat*, but *was*—the figure presented in the most naked simplicity possible."² Readers who turn to the poem will not find this passage,

¹ *Biographia Literaria*, chap. xxii.

² *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. W. Knight, 1896, vol. ii, p. 322.

nor any trace of it; it was apparently cancelled, and the whole stanza rewritten. It is odd, indeed, that the poet should have given up a delicacy of expression which he went out of his way to particularize in his letters: but, from the account we have in his sister's journal, the whole poem appears to have cost him an unusual amount of trouble. Indeed, few of Wordsworth's poems were written without this sort of trouble. In a letter dated November 22nd, 1831, he warns a young man of the common misapprehension about poetry: it is not, as people persist in thinking, a matter of spontaneous utterance.

“Again and again I must repeat, that the composition of verse is infinitely more of an *art* than men are prepared to believe; and absolute success in it depends upon innumerable minutiae, which it grieves me you should stoop to acquire a knowledge of. Milton talks of ‘pouring easy his unpremeditated verse.’ It would be harsh, untrue, and odious, to say there is anything like cant in this; but it is not *true* to the letter, and tends to mislead. I could point out to you five hundred passages in Milton upon which labour has been bestowed, and twice five hundred more to which additional labour would have been serviceable.”¹

If there were any doubt as to the pains Wordsworth was prepared to take to satisfy his literary conscience, it would be dispelled by a consideration of the numerous corrections in the successive editions of his poems. In the lines *To the Cuckoo*, for instance, first published in 1807, the second stanza is altered in the edition of 1815, and altered again in those of 1820, 1827, and 1845. Were those successive alterations governed by any principle?

¹ *Wordsworth's Literary Criticism*, p. 243.

Were they entirely arbitrary, or were they the natural outcome of Wordsworth's conception of poetry? I do not wish to suggest that with Wordsworth there were two poems—the poem unwritten (i.e. the experience already complete and only waiting to be expressed) and the poem actually written. Though he probably felt on many occasions that the poet's true business when he came to write was merely to find words that would convey adequately what was already fully formed in his mind, yet the poet's business can rarely have been so simple as that, even with Wordsworth. The poetic experience is complete only when the last word is set down, the final correction made; and in the act of achieving verbal expression for an experience which the poet himself may believe to be already quite complete, he will probably find himself assailed on all sides by suggestions that may modify very considerably the final form which his poem is to take. Those suggestions, coming to him from such poetic circumstances as his metrical scheme, his rhymes, and the various memories and associations that his own words evoke as he goes along, will be considered in their proper place. How far the poem that he finds he has ultimately written will have been modified by such suggestions depends partly on the poet's determination—in Wordsworth strong—to embody his original experience in terms as accurate as possible, and partly on the power over his mind of the original impression. Undoubtedly too, the poet's innate sensitiveness to such suggestions must play an important part in determining the course that his poem will take.

When we turn to Wordsworth's corrections, we find very much what we should expect: he generally knew from the very beginning what he wanted to say, and such

corrections as he permits himself are intended to make his meaning more clear, or to remove some awkwardness of phrase. He rarely introduces new meaning; his corrections are designed to express the original meaning better. Sometimes he gives way to his critics, as when the washing-tub of the blind Highland Boy becomes a turtle-shell. But when he is correcting to satisfy his own standards of composition, the changes are almost always faithful to the original impression, and are, in fact, intended to bring that out more accurately.

The second stanza of the *Cuckoo* poem, mentioned above, is an interesting example of how Wordsworth sometimes succeeded after many attempts in bringing into complete focus an impression which had probably been latent in his mind from the very beginning. In its final form in the volume of 1845 the stanza reads:

While I am lying on the grass
Thy twofold shout I hear,
From hill to hill it seems to pass,
At once far off, and near.

There are three quite distinct observations on the cuckoo's song here: the double note, the way in which it keeps coming unexpectedly from one direction and then another, and the odd and sudden fluctuations in the volume of the sound. In the form in which it was originally printed, in 1807, the stanza runs:

While I am lying on the grass,
I hear thy restless shout :
From hill to hill it seems to pass,
About, and all about !

Here the second of the two ideas—the restless, wandering voice, now here, now over there—is more fully empha-

sized: but the double note is not expressed at all, and the fluctuating strength of the cuckoo's "shout" is only suggested, and would scarcely occur to the average reader unless he had the final version in his mind. In 1815, Wordsworth tried again:

Thy loud note smites my ear!—
From hill to hill it seems to pass,
At once far off and near!

He has now got two of the three ideas included, and is, in fact, very near the final form. In 1820 he weakens the second point by writing,

Thy loud note smites my ear!
It seems to fill the whole air's space,
At once far off and near!

If the second of those three lines means that the cuckoo's notes come in rapid succession from every conceivable direction as it moves about from one tree to another Wordsworth is still expressing, though not, surely, so vividly, his second point; but more probably the line is to be read with reference to the one before, and is merely an expansion of the loud note of the bird. In 1827, the "twofold shout" appears for the first time—

Thy twofold shout I hear,
That seems to fill the whole air's space,
As loud far off as near.

Here, on his own admission, Wordsworth had made a complete change in the meaning, an unusual proceeding with him, and done "to record a fact observed by himself." It must be remembered that the *Cuckoo* poem is

abnormal in so far as the experience which lay behind it was, in a sense, continuous. With every spring the cuckoo returned, and once again the poet was lying on the grass listening to it. Whether the alteration of 1827 embodies an important truth about the cuckoo may be left for ornithologists to decide; but it is most unusual for Wordsworth to break so completely with his original experience, and it is significant that he was persuaded to return finally to the earlier version.

In the sonnet addressed to his friend, Robert Jones, in 1802, Wordsworth's changes are determined by the fact that his feelings had changed. In 1807 the road southward from Calais was

like the May
With festivals of new-born Liberty.

By 1837 there has come a long disillusionment, and now he can write

Streamed with the pomp of a too-credulous day,
When faith was pledged to new-born Liberty.

In the version of 1807 he is happy

as a Bird :
Fair seasons yet will come, and hopes more fair.

In 1837 he is

pensive as a bird
Whose vernal coverts winter hath laid bare.

But again, this sort of change is abnormal with Wordsworth. Where he is writing his own characteristic poetry, the poetry of definite experience, he remains faithful to that experience, and any alterations he may make

in later editions are intended to give it more adequate expression.

In poetry, then, there are two elements to be taken into consideration. There is, first, the poet's original experience waiting to be expressed, those thoughts and feelings which are in the poet's mind when he commences to write. Those, if not actually definable in so many words, are often something of which the poet is quite conscious, and which he may, in fact, believe himself to understand completely. In that case, his business will be to find words that will express his meaning, and they will be successful in so far as they do so clearly and accurately. The other element in poetry is incalculable. It consists of the simultaneous whirl of memories and associations and impulses which are aroused in the poet's mind during the actual process of composition. It is incalculable because it must differ with each individual, depending as it does upon his entire mental history, upon all that he has ever read, felt, heard, thought, experienced. In a poet whose original impressions are very strong, this incalculable element will be held in check by the steadiness of his purpose. He will select from the instantaneous whirl of suggestion only such particles as he may convert to his present needs. He will not allow himself to be distracted very far from his main purpose. I have not attempted to claim for Wordsworth that his poems were not modified by all that was hurrying through his mind in the excitement of composition; I do, however, suggest that with Wordsworth those modifications are far less extensive than with many other poets of a different type. The tenacity with which he held to his original experience, the value he put upon it, and the determination with which he set about recording it in as pure a form as

possible, all helped to close his mind against suggestions that might have happily amplified that experience, or, less happily, distracted him from his original purpose. In a poet who is not so powerfully controlled by the original impression, and whose suggestibility is abnormally keen, the incalculable element—the element that comes from the intense excitement of composition—will be unusually powerful.

To see such a poet at work we must return to Keats. When Keats gave Shelley his famous piece of advice to be more of an artist, and load every rift of his subject with ore, he was, of course, stating by implication what he as a poet was always trying to do himself. To Keats a poem should be as rich as possible; its touches of beauty, in his own words, should never be half-way. It should surprise by a fine excess. The reader must never be left breathless and half satisfied; he ought to be delighted with plenty, and leave off at last in a state of luxurious content.¹ If we add to this the fact that in his letters he more than once defines the ideal after which he is striving as Beauty, we shall begin to understand what kind of force habitually governed Keats when he was writing if not all at any rate much of his poetry. It would be dangerous to maintain that his passion for beauty was the sole force that guided him when he was writing *The Eve of St. Agnes*; but when it comes to a choice in that poem between one word, or phrase, or image, and another, he tends to make his decision not so much with reference to its powers to express something which he had all along intended to express, as to the inherent beauty of the word or phrase or image *considered by itself*, or as an integral part of the stanza.

¹ *Letters*, vol. i, p. 116.

This is not, however, to say that a poem of Keats is a mere patchwork of unconnected loveliness, or (as Matthew Arnold preferred to put it) "a shower of isolated thoughts and images."¹ In his more lyrical poetry, at any rate, the shower comes from a dominating mood; it falls from a cloud of melancholy, or indolence, or grief, or passionate reverie. Nor against his longer poems can Matthew Arnold's charge be allowed to stand. *Endymion*, indeed, may have all the faults that its detractors have urged against it; but in *Isabella*, and *The Eve of St. Agnes*, and *Lamia*, Keats is controlled, first of all by the fact that he has a definite story to tell, one that he is not just making up as he goes along, and, in the second place—far more than in *Endymion*—by his artistic conscience. By that I mean that to the author of *Isabella* a word or phrase or image had, at least, to be in keeping with its immediate environment, and with the general effect at which he was aiming. But even with those restrictions, Keats had a large liberty of choice. The fewer the twigs on which the poet-spider begins to spin, the greater is his freedom to spin as the inspiration of the moment may suggest to him. With a poet of Keats' type—a poet not normally in the grip of any dominating experience, but intensely alive to every suggestion—the possible directions a poem may take are infinitely numerous. When Wordsworth hesitates between two words, it is to decide which will convey his meaning most efficiently; but Keats pausing in his choice is considering, as often as not, which word will give the more desirable meaning. "More desirable" with Keats may mean richer, or more luxurious, or more romantic, or more melodious; but which word is ultimately chosen will probably always depend to a considerable extent upon

¹ Preface to *Poems*, 1853-4.

its value as a detail in the complex work of art that he is constructing.

The proof of this is to be found in the variants and cancelled passages scattered among Keats' manuscripts. Sometimes, indeed, his changes are due to nothing more than the fact that he is following out the advice he gave to Shelley, and loading the rifts with additional ore. In *Isabella*, for instance, the fourth line of stanza xxxiv ran originally:

Which saves the sick some moments from the pall.

Keats may have been dissatisfied with "some moments," as being an exaggerated expression; but more probably he felt that the line as it stood was too bare. At all events, he cancelled the earlier reading and substituted:

Which saves a sick man from the feather'd pall.

thereby introducing by means of the word "feather'd" an appeal to the senses, and adding to the poetical content of his line. Occasionally his changes imply no more than an intenser perception of something that he had already managed to express, though less powerfully. Thus the fine line in *Endymion*,

Or blind Orion hungry for the morn,

stood in an earlier version

Or blind Orion waiting for the dawn.

The substitution of "morn" for "dawn" got rid of a Cockney rhyme; but the change from "waiting" to

“hungry” was the work of a quickened imagination. So, too, the alteration in *Endymion* of

a wild rose tree
Bends lightly o'er him

to

a wild rose tree
Pavillions him in bloom

may be set down to a later and more intense realization of the same impression.

Often, however, Keats' changes indicate a complete break with the original idea. A word or a phrase is cancelled, and something entirely different is put in its place. When, for instance, in the *Nightingale* ode we find Keats—apparently in the original draft, and so in the heat of first composition—substituting “magic casements” for “the wide casements,” and “perilous seas” for “keelless seas,” we begin to see that his original impression, if not actually a matter of indifference to him, was not one to be adhered to if a subsequent suggestion could yield a richer meaning. In the *Ode to Autumn* there are various rejected readings which show the same willingness to abandon one idea for another that is often entirely different: e.g. for “sweet kernel” of the printed text he had tried “white kernel”; “twined flowers” appears in one manuscript as “honied flowers,” and “barred clouds” in another manuscript as “a gold cloud,” with “gilds” for “blooms.”

Those alterations may, of course, have been made at a date considerably later than that of the original composition; but even so they would still throw light on Keats' method of composition and the attitude he adopted to his poetical material. Keats is continually stepping back from his work, as an artist from his easel, and trying some fresh

colour from his palette. In *Endymion*, "pretty cheek" gives way to "pallid cheek" (Book i, l. 368); "mad-brain'd Adon'" to "new-born Adon'" (Book ii, l. 554); "jessied falcons" to "tamed leopards" (Book iv, l. 794). When *Endymion* has to make a journey earthward in Book II, Keats sets him between the wings of an eagle:

To cloudborne Jove he bowed, and there crost
Towards him a large eagle, 'twixt whose wings,
Without one impious word, himself he flings,
Committed to the darkness and the gloom.

But the eagle was apparently a second thought, for *Endymion's* journey is accomplished very differently in an earlier version:

To cloudborne Jove he bent : and there was tost
Into his grasping hands a silken cord
At which without a single impious word
He swung upon it off into the gloom.

This is just the sort of change that Keats made without hesitation, and that Wordsworth, altering so reluctantly the Highland Boy's tub to a shell, would have made only with the utmost unwillingness. Once more, in *Endymion* (Book iii, ll. 30-3) Keats had originally written:

A thousand Powers keep religious state,
In the several vastnesses of air and fire ;
And silent, as a corpse upon a pyre,
Hold sphery sessions for a season due.

In the printed *Endymion*, however, those lines became:

A thousand Powers keep religious state,
In water, fiery realm, and airy bourne ;
And, silent as a consecrated urn,
Hold sphery sessions for a season due.

We have no means of telling whether it was the second line that Keats wished to alter or the third, whether the urn came into his mind in consequence of the word "bourne," or—what is perhaps more likely—"bourne" was supplied by Keats to rhyme with the urn which he now preferred to the corpse. The point to be noted is that Keats was quite prepared to cancel one idea and try a different one. "Corpse upon a pyre" arouses one set of associations; "consecrated urn," another. It would be a superficial criticism which claimed that the two phrases are here equivalent; for though each is a simile intended to emphasize the silence, each brings a totally different colour to the context.

Such changes, then, are characteristic of Keats. From the numerous possibilities suggested to him by an inordinately sensitive imagination, he chooses that word or that phrase which appeals to him most at the moment. There is no question of right or wrong on such occasions: two quite different words, or three, or four, may all be equally right in the same context, if "right" means beautiful. Beauty is attainable by many different roads; it may, for instance, be reached by any one of the various senses. In *The Eve of St. Agnes* (III, 8), the old Beadsman sits "among rough ashes" for his soul's reprieve; in a rejected version, those ashes were "black." Keats, intensely alive to sensations of touch, had simply altered the visual to a tactile impression—prompted, perhaps, by the three identical vowel sounds in "Black ashes sat. . . ." In the stanza which followed, he apparently wavered between the "level" chambers of the printed text and "high-lamped," a variant which appears in the transcript of the poem made by George Keats. The two epithets are equally applicable, but quite distinct; they represent two

different ways of visualizing the scene. Keats probably preferred "level" because, though in some ways vaguer than "high-lamped," it suggested more. By means of "level" he managed to convey the length and breadth of empty rooms, and, in conjunction with "glowing" of the next line, to suggest the light reflected on the smooth, polished floors. "High-lamped," too, was only emphasizing an idea that he could at least suggest in the word "glowing": and so, perhaps, Keats decided to look along the level floors rather than up at the high-lamped roof. I dwell on this small point to show that Keats was careful of his meaning, though not in the same sort of way as Wordsworth.

I have hitherto refrained from using the word "decoration" in referring to the poetry of Keats, because the idea of a great poet "merely decorating" is repugnant to many minds. Yet that is just what Keats is frequently doing, and sometimes when he is poetically at his best. When, however, a poet decorates with the mastery of Keats, there is small excuse for talking about "mere decoration." Keats, like other great artists, has his peculiar aptitudes; he understood what he could do, and, until other ambitions crossed his mind, he was continually looking for a chance to do it. That he was decorating with words, and frequently, too, with ideas, may sometimes conceal from us the true nature of his poetic activity; but often, indeed, Keats is simply ornamenting a theme with rich imagery and superb expression.

In a letter to Benjamin Bailey (September 1818) he encloses his sonnet, *The Human Seasons*, with the following comment: "As Tradesmen say every thing is worth what it will fetch, so probably every mental pursuit takes its reality and worth from the ardour of the pursuer—

being in itself a nothing—Ethereal things may at least be thus real, divided under three heads—Things real—things semireal—and nothings . . . which are made Great and dignified by an ardent pursuit—which by the by stamp the burgundy mark on the bottles of our Minds, insomuch as they are able to ‘consecrate whate’er they look upon.’ I have written a Sonnet here of a somewhat collateral nature—so don’t imagine it an *à propos des bottles*.”¹ The sonnet follows. Keats sends it to Bailey as a poem which comes under his third head of “nothings,” a poem which is consecrated by the ardent pursuit of perfect expression, but which without that would be entirely negligible. When we turn to the sonnet in question, we find that Keats is not indeed saying very much, and that little is neither new nor unusual. . . . Spring, summer, autumn, winter: the mind of man has seasons corresponding to each of them. From his letter to Bailey one may infer that Keats thought little of the ideas in his sonnet; it was the use to which he had put them, the beauty of their expression, that gave to those nothings any importance they might have. He was decorating superbly, and doing so none the less because he was working with ideas. True, they are the poet’s own ideas; he must have experienced them before he can give them expression. But it is unlikely that the thoughts which came to him on this occasion came clamouring for expression; they seem rather to have been thoughts that he had luckily stumbled upon, and that gave him a chance of working at his craft. The distinction of this sonnet comes not from the ideas themselves, nor from their effect on the mind of the poet as ideas; it comes from the intensity with which he has concentrated upon them from the pure love of expression.

¹ *Letters*, vol. i, p. 121.

If I have interpreted correctly his letter to Bailey, it will be seen that his business in this sonnet was to clothe conventional ideas in all the pomp and splendour of noble language. "I look upon fine phrases like a lover," he once wrote to a friend;¹ and he pursued them ardently all his life. In *The Human Seasons* he has justified his fierce concentration on what is very nearly a "nothing," except, perhaps, in the closing couplet, which has little interest in itself, and consequently hardly deserves the prominence given to it. The poet has left himself only two lines with which to deal with winter, and the second of those, which ought to be the finest of the fourteen, adds almost ludicrously little to the poem. Winter must be mentioned in its turn if this decorating with ideas is to be symmetrical; but the poet has no room left to do justice to his fourth season, nor has he managed to supply a couplet that would be striking enough to atone for his brevity. None the less, *The Human Seasons* is a fine piece of decorative writing, and, with the exception noted, a complete success.

The development of this sonnet is so rigidly laid down by its framework of spring, summer, autumn, winter, that Keats has little chance here to stray after fine phrases or chance promptings of his imagination; its excellence lies in the extent to which he has succeeded in concentrating into fourteen lines of fine writing the idea which he has chosen to express. His task is not to tease out a thought and expatiate upon it, but to give it a beautiful unhurried expression. But in a poem like *The Eve of St. Agnes*, where the canvas to be covered is much ampler, Keats can decorate more freely. The pursuit is no less ardent, but there are far more openings for intricate decoration. If he had omitted the whole stanza in which he describes

¹ To Benjamin Bailey, August 15th, 1819. 4

the table of delicacies heaped up by Porphyro, he would scarcely have affected the narrative, but he would have impoverished the poem. Keats had seen an opening for that luxurious exercise of the senses in which no English poet has surpassed him, and he had taken his opportunity. The stanza is an important contribution to the effect of rich decoration at which he is aiming. Now that we have it, we can see how much its absence would injure the total effect made by the poem; we should have lost one of the richest colours from the poetical spectrum of *The Eve of St. Agnes*—nothing more, but, with equal truth, nothing less.

The student of Keats will be able to multiply such instances of spontaneous decoration, of a poet delighting in the free play of his senses and the exercise of his gift for beautiful expression. He will find in Keats a poet who is continually taking fire from his own intense perception of beauty, and from the momentary suggestions coming into his mind in the pauses of composition. He will find, I believe, a poet whose choice of words and phrases is governed much less by a desire to express predetermined ideas than by a willingness to accept, from the whirl of suggestions passing through his brain, those which seem to his exquisite sense the most beautiful. When Keats wrote of "the innumerable compositions and decompositions which take place between the intellect and its thousand materials before it arrives at that trembling delicate and snail-horn perception of beauty,"¹ he was thinking of that long process of trial and error which was frequently necessary before a word or a phrase ultimately leapt into his mind in all its perfect finality. That Wordsworth went through a similar process is equally certain;

¹ *Letters*, vol. i, p. 139.

but when the word or phrase came at length to him it was the one he had been looking for all along. It was not, except incidentally, the most beautiful, or the most suggestive, or the one that had the noblest ring; it was the word or phrase that expressed most accurately what he had meant to say. But to Keats, for whom beautiful language was far more a delight in itself, it was, out of all the possible words and phrases he might have used, the one that brought most beauty—of sound, meaning, and suggestion—into his poem. The very medium in which the poet works may influence the process of composition.

CHAPTER IV

THE TUNE

OF the various influences that play upon the mind of the poet in the moment of composition—controlling his impulses, and suggesting to him many of his thoughts and images—one of the most important is the metrical form to which he has committed himself. How, it may be asked, does the poet decide upon the metrical form of his poem? Is it a matter of deliberate choice at all? Sometimes it undoubtedly is. Milton, for instance, setting out to write *Paradise Lost*, had already decided that it was to be written in blank verse, and was ready to justify his choice. Pope, contemplating the translation of Homer, probably never even considered any other form than the heroic couplet. Before the idea of *Don Juan* was clearly formed in his mind, Byron had probably decided that his long satirical poem should be in *ottava rima*. *The Castle of Indolence* was planned as an imitation of Spenser, and *The Ancient Mariner* as a ballad. Certainly a man does not drift negligently into an epic; he knows that he is setting out upon a protracted journey, and he takes some trouble to make his plans. But it is equally obvious that one cannot speak of Coleridge deliberately choosing the metrical form of *Kubla Khan*, nor of Shelley settling beforehand the mould into which he would pour *The Cold Earth Slept Below*, or *One Word is too oft Profaned*. In such purely

lyrical writing the poet has passed beyond deliberate choice; he is still choosing, perhaps, but not deliberately.

He has, in fact, as one poet puts it, a song in his mind.

Every true poet has a song in his mind, the notes of which, little as they precede his thoughts—so little as to seem simultaneous with them—do precede, suggest, and inspire many of these, modify and beautify them. The poet who has none of this dumb music going on within him, will neither produce any by his versification, nor prove an imaginative or impassioned writer: he will want the harmonizer which attunes heart, and mind, and soul, the main-spring that sets them in movement together. . . . A good system of rhythm becomes, therefore, momentous both for its own sake to the reader, and because it is the poet's latent inspirer.¹

Sometimes, indeed, this dumb music running in the poet's head is not difficult to trace to its source. The numerous eighteenth-century imitators of Spenser had the rhythms of the *Faerie Queene* in their ears before they began to write, and all the time they were writing. Burns, as is well known, was frequently indebted to the lilt of some old Scots song for the rhythms of his own. There seems little reason to doubt that the music of *In a drear-nighted December* was borrowed by Keats from a song of Dryden's in *The Spanish Friar*. Dryden's lovely tune was "the latent inspirer" of one even lovelier.

Frequently, indeed, the poet gets his music from a source outside himself, and yet from no particular poem. It is no accident, for instance, that almost every poet of the early eighteenth century wrote the greater part of his work in the heroic couplet; for, not only was the use of

¹ George Darley. Introduction to *The Works of Beaumont and Fletcher*.

the couplet made almost obligatory by the critics, but it was the poetical tune that was most in the air at that time. The poet could not escape from its influence even if he would; it needed almost an effort on his part to hear any other "dumb music." When he had anything to express in verse, the words must almost inevitably have started ordering themselves in the rhythm of the heroic couplet. There have, indeed, been times in the poetical history of most countries when certain rhythms so dominated the minds of poets and their readers that it has been difficult to think poetically in any other. On such occasions two unfortunate results may from time to time be noticed: unless the poet is consistently tactful he will find himself writing in a manner that is unsuited to his theme, and, if he does try to find another tune, he is apt, from having been so long dominated by the popular tune of the day, to write badly in this other. Both types of failure are common enough in the eighteenth century. On the one hand, a poet of such exquisite tact as Pope is led in *Eloisa to Abelard* to set passionate feelings marching to a tune that makes such feelings seem almost studied; and, on the other hand, much blank verse of the period is conceived by the poet in the epigrammatic manner of the couplet, and consequently loses its natural flow, and even leaves the reader with a sense of having been cheated of rhyme. Ideally, perhaps, every poem ought to come into the world with its own unique tune, and, in a limited sense, that is what may be said to happen. *The Wife of Usher's Well* has not the same tune as *The Ancient Mariner*, though both may be described as being written in ballad measure. Yet, though Coleridge drew a new and individual music from the old ballad, he was still writing in the ballad measure; it was the rhythm which had been running in his head when he began to

write, and it was the rhythm to which his thoughts kept time. It was the rhythm, too, in which he wrote *The Three Graves*, though here again he evolved from it an entirely different music. The poem, in fact, will have its individual tune, but that tune may be derived from a rhythmical structure which it shares with many other poems. Not only do certain rhythms predominate at one period or another, but in practice it will be found that individual poets often restrict themselves to one or two systems of rhythm, and, in extreme cases, are unable to think poetically in any other. Pope, for instance, became so familiar with the various tunes that could be played inside the heroic couplet that he grew peculiarly sensitive to one sort of music, and comparatively deaf to most others.

But in whatever way the poet arrives at his dumb music, and whether one thinks of it as the metrical structure common to many poems, or, more properly perhaps, as the individual tune hammered out in the poet's head within the larger rhythms of that structure, it is certain, as Darley points out, that a good system of rhythm is of the utmost importance to the poet. It has two indispensable functions to perform. In the first place, the poem could never begin without it. The poet has, no doubt, a mass of thought and feeling pressing upon him, and capable of expression; but, until he finds the rhythm—until, at any rate, he has hit upon the first few phrases of it—he has not discovered the means of making it articulate. The song in the poet's mind is the means by which he may release what would otherwise remain as an amalgam of unexpressed thought and feeling; it cuts the channel through which the waters may flow. Normally, the rhythm will come naturally and unsought; and on such occasions, as Darley suggests, it will seem to the poet to be simultaneous with his thoughts.

But most poets must have experienced that mood of inarticulate despair when the mind is full of thoughts which are pressing for utterance, but which, for want of that initial perception of the rhythm to which they should order themselves, remain pent up and unexpressed. Until the rhythmical pattern has been perceived by the poet he must remain dumb, or else struggle against wind and tide.

At this initial stage of the poem's composition, it is not perhaps necessary that he should always perceive the rhythmical pattern in all its completeness. It is enough often if he can catch the first clear hints of what it is going to be. Wordsworth, for instance, has left it on record that two lines in the last stanza of *The Idiot Boy*,

The cocks did crow to-whoo, to-whoo,
And the moon did shine so cold!—

were the foundation of the whole. What, I think, Wordsworth meant here was that those words were the starting-point of the whole poem—not his reason for writing it; they enabled him to release a mass of experience that had long been forming in his mind. In a letter to his friend John Wilson (1800) he explains how he had always admired the way in which idiots were treated in the families of the poor, and how he had always looked upon “the conduct of fathers and mothers of the lower classes of society towards idiots as the great triumph of the human heart,” and how finally idiots themselves, whose “life is hidden with God,” had always had a fascination for him. But all this mass of powerful feeling and repeated reflection might have remained inarticulate, or might have been expressed by the poet in quite another form (as, for instance, in this letter to Wilson) if it had not been for that lucky fragment that started him off on his way. The words came

to him accidentally. They were "reported to me by my dear friend, Thomas Poole; but I have since heard the same repeated of other Idiots."¹ The phrase, at any rate, was sufficient to indicate to Wordsworth the path he might take; and so perfectly did the metrical scheme which it suggested coincide with his thoughts and feelings that the whole poem was composed in the groves of Alfoxden "almost extempore; not a word, I believe, being corrected, though one stanza was omitted." In a similar fashion, the poem of *We are Seven* took definite shape in the poet's mind from his recollection of the actual words used by the little girl. "My friends will not deem it too trifling to relate that while walking to and fro I composed the last stanza first, having begun with the last line." Again, it is perhaps justifiable to see in a phrase of Simon Lee's the germ of another metrical scheme; for, as Wordsworth noted, "the expression when the hounds were out, 'I dearly love their voice,' was word for word from his own lips." It is probable that the phrase had worked itself into the poet's head, and that its rhythm blended naturally with his thoughts and feelings when he came to recollect Simon Lee.

Sometimes, indeed, as in another of Wordsworth's poems, *Stepping Westward*, the solitary phrase "What, you are stepping westward?" was at once the immediate origin of the poet's experience and also the suggestion for its appropriate rhythm. Or, to take a more famous example:

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan
A stately pleasure dome decree.

When Coleridge fell into his celebrated sleep over Purchas' *Pilgrimages*, he had reached the following passage: "In

¹ Wordsworth's note to Miss Fenwick.

Xanadu did Cublai Can build a stately palace, encompassing sixteen miles of plain ground with a wall. . . ." Such experiences are not uncommon among poets. Tennyson, as F. T. Palgrave records, said that "his poems sprang often from a 'nucleus'; some one word, may be, or brief melodious phrase which had floated through the brain, as it were unbidden. And perhaps at once whilst walking they were presently wrought into a little song."¹ No doubt the nucleus of many poems has been the phrase that suddenly entered the poet's head apparently from nowhere; but probably more often this phrase has been simply the means of releasing some body of experience which, unknown to the poet, had only been waiting for the chance to enter his consciousness. "But if," Palgrave adds, "he did not write it down on the spot, the lyric fled from him irrecoverably." The poet's thoughts can hardly be said to have any existence apart from the rhythm in which he first began to express them, and, by expressing them, to be fully conscious of them: if he forgets *that* he has forgotten everything. Most poets have probably been haunted by moods and experiences to which they have lost the clue, and which they cannot recapture by merely thinking back. They have lost the clue because they have forgotten the first spontaneous words and phrases in which the experience was taking shape, and which, in fact, gave it definition; and having lost word and phrase they have forgotten the rhythm which was an integral part of them and, indeed, of the whole experience. Rhythm, in fact, is not a glue that sticks the poet's thoughts together; it is a kind of electricity that makes them vibrate and hum, and without which they must remain huddled in obscurity and disorder.

¹ *Alfred Lord Tennyson. A Memoir.* By his Son, vol. ii, p. 496.

But, in addition to giving the poet that initial push without which he could never start at all, his dumb music has another important task to perform. It is, in Darley's phrase, his "latent inspirer"; it will "precede, suggest, and inspire" many of his thoughts, it will "modify and beautify them." The tune in the poet's mind hovers like a ghost over the maturing poem, continually influencing its growth and development. To return for a moment to *The Idiot Boy*, it is obvious that

The cocks did crow to-whoo, to-whoo,
And the moon did shine so cold!

suggested the whole *tempo* of the poem, and it may even have determined the poet's gleeful¹ attitude to his theme. The almost jaunty opening line of the poem:

'Tis eight o'clock—a clear March night—

bears a very marked rhythmical resemblance to

The Cocks did crow to-whoo, to-whoo

—a resemblance which may become more apparent if the line is contrasted with another, almost stealthy in its subdued pounce upon the reader's attention—

It was an ancient Mariner.

The different way in which we read those lines is due not merely to the meaning of the words, but also to the fact that we are listening to two different tunes. To say that Wordsworth and Coleridge have both opened with a four-foot iambic line is to leave almost everything still unsaid; the rough-and-ready measuring of lines by foot and stress

¹ "I never wrote anything with so much glee." Wordsworth's note to Miss Fenwick.

is not fine enough to register the subtle differences in a poet's tunes. Even though the stanza of *The Idiot Boy* did not immediately proceed to develop quite differently from that of *The Ancient Mariner*, the first lines alone would be enough to separate the two. Wordsworth, in fact, began with a particular sort of tune in his head, and that tune directed his attitude throughout. Let him once have begun with

'Tis eight o'clock—a clear October night,
The moon is up, the wind-swept sky is blue—

and it is certain he would have written his poem very differently. He wanted, of course, to write it as he did, and its rather queer success is largely due to his having found the rhythm that suited his mood; but once that rhythm had become established in his mind, it took a hand in the shaping of a poem, sustaining and fortifying the mood in which he had started, modifying and at times dictating the poet's attitude to his materials, suggesting certain developments and gently precluding certain others.

The longer a poem is, the more obvious is the importance to the poet of a good system of rhythm. The effect of the Spenserian stanza upon the reader of the *Faerie Queene* has often been remarked, and by no one better than M. Emile Legouis. "We hear a slow music," he writes, "whose perpetual return rocks the mind and soon sways it from out the real world into a world of harmony and order, of which it seems to be the natural rhythm. . . . Never hurried, but eternally recurrent, it holds the ear like one of the elemental sounds, the sound of the wind or of the sea. No isolated stanza can give an idea of the considerable part played by the stanza-form in the poem, since each new one takes its effect from the gathered power of

all that came before, from the sense we have of its fitness in the whole sequence, so that our minds, first acknowledging its conformity, then pass on to the feeling that it is necessary to the general harmony of the poem."¹ Equally important, however, is the effect that this stanza had upon the mind of the poet himself. The composition of the *Faerie Queene* was spread out over many years; it was subject to frequent interruptions, some of the kind least endurable to a poet. Yet the whole poem is of a piece. The sensitive reader will, no doubt, detect differences of tone (e.g. between Book v and Book vi), but the astonishing thing is that the tone should be so uniform throughout. It was the stanza he had chosen, more than anything else, that sustained Spenser in his long and troubled composition. The *Faerie Queene* may be opened at any page, and the very first stanza one lights upon is a kind of wicket-gate into Spenser's fairyland. With the first reminder of his characteristic music, no matter how long a period may have elapsed since one's previous reading of the poem, the whole magic world of the *Faerie Queene* returns. But what the Spenserian stanza does for the reader it must have done for Spenser himself, bringing his imaginative world back to him before he had written another line. This dumb music was clearly "the harmonizer which attunes heart, and mind, and soul, the main-spring that sets them in movement together." The long work in prose may by different means attain a complete and regular harmony; but the poet with his music has an aid to reaching this end that is not available to the prose writer except in a limited sense. A system of rhythm, by forcing the poet to concentrate on his task, and by maintaining his feelings at a constant pitch of excite-

¹ *Spenser*, Emile Legouis, 1926, p. 133.

ment, helps him to think poetically, and, conversely, prevents him from thinking in prose. But it does more than keep the poet in a state of vague and undefined emotion, in *any* kind of excitement; it maintains that mode of feeling with which he set out, and has thus a powerful unifying effect on the poem. The poet's rhythm is valuable to him in proportion as it first of all expresses, and then dominates, his mood, and so shuts out irrelevant feelings and unrelated thoughts.

Some rhythms, either because they have a more strongly marked individuality, or because they bring with them inalienable associations, appear to have a more precise effect on the emotions than others. One thinks of the dirge-like effect obtained by Tennyson for *In Memoriam*, or the feeling of lingering regret that Keats communicates to *La Belle Dame sans Merci* by the recurring flow and pause of his stanza, or the effect secured by Fitzgerald with the quatrains of his *Rubaiyât*. So exclusively, indeed, does one associate the tune of the *Rubaiyât* with the sad fatalism of Omar Khayyâm that one would have difficulty in using it again without awaking disconcerting echoes or giving the effect of an unconscious parody. The *Rubaiyât*, of course, is an exceptional case, for to English ears it is a tune which has been played only once with absolute mastery, and therefore the English reader can hardly dissociate it from a particular mood. Another stanza with a marked individuality is that used by Burns for such poems as *To the Daisy* and *To a Mouse*; but here the range of possible effects seems wider because the stanza is not peculiar to Burns. It had been used by some of his predecessors, and it was to be used again by Wordsworth and others after he was dead. In the hands of Burns it has a pawky effect typical of the Scots character, most noticeably

when the fourth and sixth lines end with feminine rhymes; but when Wordsworth uses it that effect has almost disappeared—a fact which leads one to suspect that the pawkiness came from the poet and his words rather than from the actual rhythm.

It is, indeed, very dangerous to assume that any rhythm is capable of one effect only. What often happens is that the genius of a nation gradually appropriates a rhythm for one particular mood, and in time it comes to be felt that this particular rhythm is unsuited for any other. The poets (and, of course, their readers) are influenced by everything that has gone before; it is impossible for any sensitive poet familiar with the work of his predecessors to be insensible to their rhythms and to the individual music they have extracted from a metrical structure. A rhythmical tradition is as relentless as any other sort of tradition. But there is always the chance of a new poet appearing who will discover a new music in the old metrical structure. When Wordsworth employed the ballad measure he used it to carry a load of thought that must have surprised the readers of 1798; e.g.

Sweet is the lore which Nature brings;
Our meddling intellect
Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things:—
We murder to dissect.

A critic of the mid-eighteenth century wishing to state the uses to which ballad measure could be put might have been excused if he had not anticipated this one.

Critics, however, have been far too ready in the past to restrict the possible effects of which any one metre is capable. The same intellectual stiffness that led them to compress all poetry into a single definition has tempted

them to limit the variousness of individual metres. Coventry Patmore, for instance, once tried to lay down some general laws about English verse measures.

The six-syllable "iambic" is the most solemn of all our English measures. It is scarcely fit for anything but a dirge; the reason being that the final pause in this measure is greater, when compared with the length of the line, than in any other verse. Here is an example, which we select on account of the peculiar illustration of its nature as a "dimeter-brachy-catalectic," which is supplied by the *filling up* of the measure in the seventh line:

" How strange it is to wake
 And watch while others sleep,
 Till sight and hearing ache
 For objects that may keep
 The awful inner sense
 Unroused, lest it should mark
 The life that haunts the emptiness
 And horror of the dark."

We have only to *fill up* the measure in every line as well as in the seventh, in order to change this verse from the slowest and most mournful, to the most rapid and high spirited of all English metres, the common eight-syllable quatrain; a measure particularly recommended by the early critics, and continually chosen by poets of all times for erotic poetry, on account of its joyous air.¹

Coventry Patmore's article came to the notice of Tennyson; he read it, and was apparently not convinced. In a letter to Patmore he enclosed two stanzas: a joyous one in the metre which Patmore had said was the most solemn

¹ *The North British Review*, vol. xxvii, 1857, p. 144.

of all our measures, and a solemn one in "the most rapid and high-spirited of all English metres."

How glad am I to walk
 With Susan on the shore !
 How glad am I to talk !
 I kiss her o'er and o'er.
 I clasp her slender waist,
 We kiss, we are so fond,
 When she and I are thus embraced,
 There's not a joy beyond.

And the other:

How strange it is, O God, to wake,
 To watch and wake while others sleep,
 Till heart and sight and hearing ache
 For common objects that would keep
 Our awful inner ghostly sense
 Unroused, lest it by chance should mark
 The life that haunts the emptiness
 And horrors of the formless dark.¹

The truth seems to be that most measures are capable of a variety of effects within a certain range. As "dumb music" they have an abstract existence which, when meeting with different moods and feelings, is often surprisingly adaptable. The failure of many critics to accept a fact which is constantly being demonstrated by the poetry they criticize, has led to some error and injustice. A writer on Byron, for instance, anxious to make his point that the *ottava rima* was perfectly adapted to the satiric purposes of *Don Juan*, finds it necessary to add: "That the *ottava rima* is out of place in consistently pathetic poetry, may be seen from its obvious misuse in Keats' *Pot of Basil*."²

¹ Alfred Lord Tennyson. *A Memoir*, vol. i, pp. 469-70.

² Byron, John Nichol, p. 173.

I do not find it so. This critic seems to be arguing from Byron's success to a necessary failure in Keats: Byron used the measure with consummate skill for the worldly satire of *Don Juan*—therefore Keats must have failed when he used it for the unworldly romance of *Isabella*. But Keats did not fail, he gave the abstract rhythm a different tune. He had another sort of song in his mind, and it coalesced perfectly, in another sort of way, with his thoughts and feelings.

Even the heroic couplet, of whose "tyranny" one hears so much from the admirers of romantic poetry, left the individual poet considerable liberty to feel for his own tune. It is true that Dr. Johnson writes of the couplet as if it had been brought to an almost scientific exactitude. Dryden had tuned the numbers of English poetry, and Pope had made them perfect. "New sentiments and new images others may produce, but to attempt any further improvement of versification will be dangerous. Art and diligence have now done their best, and what shall be added will be the effort of tedious toil and needless curiosity."¹ The rhythm being thus prescribed for the eighteenth-century poet, he had either to think in the same way as his more successful predecessors, the Drydens, the Garths, the Addisons, the Popes, or, alternatively, adapt his own thoughts to the rhythm. This, of course, had the effect of restricting very seriously the potential range of eighteenth-century verse; but the restriction should not be exaggerated. The heroic couplet proved itself to be suitable for a remarkable variety of effects, and quite apt to take on an individual tone from a genuinely original poet. Pope used it successfully for the artificial pastoral of *Windsor Forest*, the dainty mock-heroics of

¹ *Lives of the Poets*, ed. G. B. Hill, vol. iii, p. 251.

The Rape of the Lock, the prose argument of *An Essay on Criticism*, the personal feelings and confessions of the *Epistles*, and the bitter satire of *The Dunciad*. It is true that the couplet in his hands changed very little in texture from one poem to another. "By perpetual practice," as Dr. Johnson noted, "language had in his mind a systematical arrangement; having always the same use for words, he had words so selected and combined as to be ready at his call."¹ But it is no less true that Pope managed to suit very different thoughts and feelings to that established rhythm. Other poets have given it so individual a turn that it is sometimes hardly recognizable as the same rhythmical structure. If one is to speak at all precisely it is impossible to maintain that

Sweet was the sound, when oft at evening's close
Up yonder hill the village murmur rose. . . .

goes to the tune of

True wit is Nature to advantage dress'd,
What oft was thought, but ne'er so well express'd.

or,

The hungry Judges soon the sentence sign,
And wretches hang that jury-men may dine.

Inside the apparently rigid structure of the couplet there is room for more variety than has generally been admitted. Nevertheless, it will not accommodate itself to every thought or every feeling, and it is continually suggesting to the poet a balance or antithesis of thought and phrase that may interrupt the communication of his experience. The heroic couplet is undoubtedly one of the most head-strong of English poetical tunes, very apt to bolt with its

¹ *Lives of the Poets*, ed. G. B. Hill vol. iii, p. 219.

rider, very liable to do too much of his thinking for him. The metre of a poem is far from being (as Wordsworth believed, or, at any rate, as he allowed himself to say) something "superadded" by the poet. It is a force from which he cannot escape even if he would, and which takes a part in shaping the experience that his poem embodies. But this is not yet the whole of the story. In referring to the Spenserian stanza, the heroic couplet, and other structures of verse, I have been considering them as tunes, or, at any rate, as the foundation of those tunes which the poet has in his head. This has served to indicate some part of their importance to the poet, but not all; they must be reconsidered not merely as tunes enabling the poet to become articulate and helping to stabilize the mood in which he started, but as thought-forms which exercise a continuous influence on the rise and progress of his ideas.

CHAPTER V

THE THOUGHT FORM

To the English reader, the clearest example of thought form is probably the sonnet. It will be difficult to account for the popularity of the sonnet if one thinks of it simply as a rigid verse form of fourteen iambic lines rhyming at set intervals. Whatever it may be to the metrist, the sonnet structure is more than that to the poet; it is not merely a metrical form, it is also a thought form. "The sonnet," Professor Ker pointed out, "has thriven as a pattern of poetic argument combining the beauty of external regularity with all possibilities of varied living thought within strict formal limits. Why has the sonnet thriven? Why is it used by so many of the greatest poets? . . . It is because the sonnet is a form of thought; the abstract sonnet has the power of captivating the mind like the abstract epic. . . . The sonnet is not a mere stanza; it is at least a double thing, with position in it and contradiction. It is a true argument. In the Italian sonnet there is obviously a form provided for a position in the first eight lines, and a contradiction or variation or conclusion in the last six. And that is a very common form of the argument—protasis and apodosis."¹ The sonnet, in fact, suggests to the poet a certain mode of thinking in verse. It is perfectly possible for the poet to impose his

¹ *Form and Style in Poetry*, W. P. Ker, pp. 172-3.

own mode of thinking on the sonnet, but in that case he is only writing fourteen lines in verse: he is using a form of argument without making use of it. The double argument of the sonnet is not merely a convention to which four or five centuries of poets have made us accustomed (though custom has much to do with such matters); it is a natural division, suggesting itself inevitably to the poet and to his readers. The justification of the sonnet form is to be sought in the natural limitations of the human mind when called upon to deal with masses of thought. There is a limit beyond which the rhythms of thought become too elaborate to be readily grasped. The mind starting out upon its flight in the opening line of the sonnet begins to flutter rather heavily about the seventh line, and drops gratefully to rest about the eighth. There for a moment it pauses, until with strength restored it is able to rise again and complete the journey. If it is compelled to wander too far over the face of the waters, with no prospect of return until the fourteenth line, it will come to rest in the end exhausted, if, indeed, it has not perished on the way. The fourteenth chapter of St. Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians will illustrate the kind of periods which the mind is capable of dealing with easily and naturally. If one were compelled to read the three opening verses as one piece of sustained argument, e.g.:

Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith so that I could remove mountains, and though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and give my body to be burned, I am nothing, and it profiteth me nothing, if I have not charity. . . .

the effect of the passage would, of course, be destroyed in more ways than one, but most of all, perhaps, by putting too severe a strain upon the reader's attention, and so compelling him to carry a bulky and steadily increasing load of thought too far before he is allowed to set it down.

It is, then, no accident that the sonnet tends to split in two about the end of the eighth line, and the poet's thinking will be conditioned by this fact. The sonnet is not, however, a rigid affair of two stanzas concealed in one, and the pause when it comes need not invariably occur at the end of the eighth line, though that is certainly the most natural place for it. In the following sonnet, for instance, the break comes in the middle of the ninth line, and with the break a change in the direction :

The crackling embers on the hearth are dead;
 The indoor note of industry is still ;
 The latch is fast ; upon the window sill
 The small birds wait not for their daily bread ;
 The voiceless flowers—how quietly they shed
 Their nightly odours—and the household rill
 Murmurs continuous dulcet sounds that fill
 The vacant expectation, and the dread
 Of listening night. And haply now she sleeps ;
 For all the garrulous noises of the air
 Are hush'd in peace ; the soft dew silent weeps,
 Like hopeless lovers for a maid so fair :
 Oh ! that I were the happy dream that creeps
 To her soft heart, and find my image there.¹

In Wordsworth's *Mutability* (" From low to high doth dissolution climb . . ."), the position has been made by the end of the sixth line, and what follows is a new development of the opening statement.

¹ This sonnet and the one quoted on p. 93 are by Hartley Coleridge.

The two parts of the sonnet will, of course, be very closely connected—so closely that the whole fourteen lines will be grasped as a continuous argument. When the pause comes, it will be followed by something that is either logically or emotionally related to what has gone before; and the sonnet writer has many ways of making this connection. It will be convenient to illustrate some of those ways from the practice of Wordsworth, since his sonnets are well enough known to make full quotation unnecessary. In the sonnet, *Composed upon Westminster Bridge*, the first eight lines deal with the city—its ships, towers, domes, theatres, temples—as the poet saw them in the first sunlight of the morning; the transition is made by a quiet shifting of the point of view to other sunrises in other places (“Never did sun more beautifully steep. . .”), but the poet returns in the last three lines (“The river glideth at his own sweet will. . .”) to the immediate object of his contemplation, and so emphasizes the value for him of this particular experience. The point of view shifts again in *It is a beauteous evening, calm and free*, where Wordsworth turns from contemplating the scene to considering the child beside him. (“Dear Child! dear Girl! that walkest with me here. . .”). In the sonnet, *On the Extinction of the Venetian Republic*, the essential link is a contrast (“And what if she had seen those glories fade. . .”) between the proud city of old and the decaying city of to-day. In *Sleep* (“A flock of sheep that leisurely pass by. . .”), and in *With ships the sea was sprinkled far and nigh*, the transition is effected by the poet’s mind recoiling on itself (“Even this last night, and two nights more I lay. . .”) and (“This ship was nought to me. . .”). Finally, the first eight and a half lines of

The World is too much with us are the poet's complaint:

For this, for everything, we are out of tune;
It moves us not.

Then comes the memorable outburst:

—Great God! I'd rather be
A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn. . . .

The transition here, in fact, is emotional rather than logical, though it is far from being illogical.

Sometimes, indeed, it becomes difficult to define with any precision the nature of the change that has come over the latter part of a sonnet. It is often no more than a change of mood or of tone, a lifting of the voice, or a deepening of the emotion:

The mellow year is hasting to its close;
The little birds have almost sung their last,
Their small notes twitter in the dreary blast—
That shrill-piped harbinger of early snows;
The patient beauty of the scentless rose,
Oft with the Morn's hoar crystal quaintly glass'd,
Hangs, a pale mourner for the summer past,
And makes a little summer where it grows:
In the chill sunbeam of the faint brief day
The dusky waters shudder as they shine,
The russet leaves obstruct the straggling way
Of oozy brooks, which no deep banks define,
And the gaunt woods, in ragged, scant array,
Wrap their old limbs with sombre ivy twine.

As one reads this sonnet, one feels, and is intended to feel, the gloom and chill of winter setting in more inexorably with the last six lines. With the pause at the close of the eighth line one has come to the end of all hope. Up till now there has been still a twitter of bird song, and still a rose blowing in the cold air; but with the lines that

follow the sadness is deepened, the relentless winter has come indeed. The pause marks this change.

It would be a useful exercise to analyse the sonnet form in greater detail, and distinguish the effect upon a poet's thinking of one type of sonnet and another; the Shakespearean form, for example, with its invitation to epigram in the final couplet, controls the poet's mind in a different sort of way from the Petrarchan. It tends to suggest to him a mode of thought in which twelve lines lead up to a climax, or to a general reflection, or to a contradiction in the thirteenth and fourteenth. It tends, too, to divide his argument into three separate sections, or possibly four, instead of two, and to prompt him to sacrifice for rhetorical point that slow and gradual concatenation of ideas which is so delightful a result of the Petrarchan form. Such distinctions, of course, are too general to be of much critical value; but there is a real danger in being more particular. The sonnet form *suggests* to the poet certain lines of development—he need not listen if he does not wish to—but it nowhere compels him to think in one particular fashion. Its control over him, however, though too general (and too various) to be easily defined, is none the less an actual control, and plays a considerable part in shaping his thoughts.

The sonnet, it may be objected, is a rigid form, like the rondeau or the ballade; the poet who has elected to use the sonnet form has already given up his liberty. You say that the sonnet imposes a particular development on the poet's thought, but that is only to say what most people would admit. Yet outside such a rigid framework as that of the sonnet—a form which is obviously artificial, and not the spontaneous discovery of the individual writer—

is it not true that the poet, and the lyric poet in particular, pours out his thoughts spontaneously? Do they not bubble up naturally? Granted, in fact, that there are certain artificial forms of verse to which the poet must deliver himself up bound, is that to say that the true lyric is ever a planned and premeditated thing, an affair of logical structure?

I turn for an answer to the songs of the seventeenth-century Cavalier poets. I must assume here that the best of those lyrics will be accepted as genuine poetry; they are not, at any rate, generally objected to for any lack of spontaneity. Yet many of those songs do possess the most rigid logical structure. Unless one is prepared for it, one will be surprised to find how often their apparently spontaneous rhythms are inextricably bound up with a simple thought form. Their form is, in fact, "a pattern of poetic argument." The thought in those seventeenth-century lyrics has not been evolved by a merely intellectual process; and yet—however erratic, or fantastic, or however charged with emotion that thought may be—it has arranged itself in the mind of the poet as a logical pattern, generally of the simplest type.

When, for instance, one reads Lovelace's *To Althea from Prison*, one has an impression of statement following upon statement with complete spontaneity, and yet the whole lyric is a formal poetic argument.

STANZA I.

When love with unconfined wings . . .
and
 When I lie tangled in her hair . . .
then
 The Gods that wanton in the air
 Know no such liberty. .

STANZA II.

When flowing cups run swiftly round . . .
and
 When thirsty grief in wine we steep . . .
then
 Fishes that tipple in the deep
 Know no such liberty.

STANZA III.

When, like committed linnets, I . . .
and
 When I shall voice aloud how good . . .
then
 Enlarged winds that curl the flood
 Know no such liberty.

Three particular instances of freedom within constraint, each stanza rounded off with a refrain, and then the general conclusion following in the last stanza:

Stone walls do not a prison make,
 Nor iron bars a cage,
 Minds, innocent and quiet, take
 That for an hermitage ;
 If I have freedom in my love,
 And in my soul am free,
 Angels alone, that soar above,
 Enjoy such liberty.

One is aware of a slight difference of tone in the last stanza, a fuller and more continuous movement of thought, but Lovelace is careful to emphasize the unbroken sequence of his ideas by echoing the refrain in the two final lines. The whole poem is, in fact, a continuous argument; it proceeds by means of a carefully developed logical structure. One may call Lovelace's reasoning "poetic logic," but the term "poetic" has no special significance here, and is apt to conceal the fact that many poems do possess a

solid basis of logic. Lovelace's imagination plays across the surface of his thoughts, and his perfectly sincere emotion gives them a value that the intellect alone could not obtain for them; but neither imagination nor emotion here checks the steady advance of the poet's argument towards its logical conclusion. The poetic statement has been grasped as a piece of reasoning; the reasoning, one may be sure, was not entirely deliberate, but, however dimly it was realized by the poet in its initial stages, it was all along foreseen.

In another of his lyrics, *To Lucasta, on Going to the Wars*, Lovelace puts forward a different, but equally firm, line of argument. Here the progression of thought is: (a) *It is not* because I don't love you that I am leaving you ("Tell me not, sweet, I am unkind . . ."); (b) *It is true*, of course, if you care to put it in that way, that I am courting in war another mistress ("True, a new mistress now I chase . . ."); (c) *Yet*, if you look at this matter in its proper light, you must love me for this seeming inconstancy, because, etc. ("Yet this inconstancy is such . . ."). Or, more simply still: "*It is not . . . True, . . . Yet. . .*" The companion piece, *To Lucasta, On Going beyond the Seas* ("If to be absent were to be | Away from thee . . .") develops along different lines again, but the argument is still a simple thought structure. . . . (a) *If*, in absence, I were altogether separated from you, then I might try to escape from this journey. *But* (b) so far is this from being so, that though our bodies may be apart our souls are still in communion. *And so, in fact*, (c) we are able to anticipate that day when we shall be all soul, and so, too, we can speak to each other now like spirits unconfined, i.e. *If those things were so. . . . But they're not so. . . . Therefore. . . .*

Sedley shows some preference for the form *It is not . . . It is . . .* or, more generally, for the denial followed by the assertion. In this he is followed by many other song writers, (cf. Sedley's *Not, Celia, that I juster am*, and *Chloris, I cannot say your eyes*, Rochester's *While on those lovely looks I gaze*, Brome's *'Tis not her birth, her friends, nor yet her treasure*, and the anonymous *'Tis not, dear love, that amber twist*). In *Shall I wasting in despair*, Wither's argument advances by a series of rhetorical questions which he immediately proceeds to answer, and he rounds off his poem in the fifth stanza with a considered statement of his future attitude to the lady whose unkindness has caused this self-examination. A very similar train of thought in Suckling's *Why so pale and wan, young lover?* and Brome's *Why's my friend so melancholy?* finds expression in an almost identical form. In Rochester's *My dear mistress has a heart*, the form is the simple one of a statement followed by a qualifying "but," the pattern being repeated in the second stanza. In Bishop King's *Tell me no more*:

Tell me no more how fair she is ;
 I have no mind to hear
 The story of that distant bliss
 I never shall come near ;
 By sad experience I have found
 That her perfection is my wound.

the form lies in an alternation between two contrasted points of view, between *What you say* and *What I say*. It is the form implicit in Carew's

Ask me why I send you here
 This firstling of the infant year. . . .

and, with considerable modification, in his *Ask me no more where Jove bestows*. It reappears in Brome's *Tell*

me not of a face that's fair, and, of course, in Lovelace's poem already quoted, *Tell me not, sweet, I am unkind*. More simply still, the thought form may consist of a direct contrast, as in Carew's *He that loves a rosy cheek*, where the poet is comparing physical beauty with beauty of soul.

In such poems as those the experience emerges into the poet's consciousness as a form of argument. The argument evolves a rhythm of its own which may be called a thought-rhythm, and this should, ideally, coalesce with the song in the poet's head, if indeed it does not actually suggest it. When the thought-rhythm and the metrical pattern do coincide perfectly, the poem will have achieved that inevitability which is rarely attained by the writer of prose. When, on the other hand, the two are at war, a reader is harassed by thoughts which overflow the stanza, or which have to be stuffed in at the last moment and hurriedly bolted down with a final couplet.

Coventry Patmore, who in his later life went over to much freer metrical forms than he had employed in his early work, was very much alive to the danger of the poet's having to force his thoughts into a rigid metrical structure. "Poets of very high character have made the mistake of adopting an over-elaborate rhythmical form as a recurrent stanza, merely because its movement was inspired by, and suited to, the opening thought; Donne's Epithalamion on the Count Palatine and the Lady Elizabeth being married on St. Valentine's day is an example."¹ It is dangerous to oppose one's ear to Patmore's, for on such matters he writes with great judgment; but I cannot agree that in this particular instance Donne is at variance with his metrical structure. On the other hand, one of

¹ *The North British Review*, August 1857, p. 147, footnote.

Donne's modern critics has taken up the attack with perhaps more success. "In many, if not most of the *Songs and Sonets*," he writes, "an initial outburst of feeling soon subsides into dialectics, a change which I ascribe to the difficulty of reproducing deliberately the complex arrangement of a spontaneous first stanza."¹ Elsewhere he notes how "thought and feeling are at great pains to fit themselves into the now hardened mould. In other words, the extreme of freedom becomes the extreme of slavery."² For an example of Donne at sixes and sevens with his metrical structure this writer cites *Love's Alchymie*, and here it is more easy to agree that the poet was in some difficulty.

It is perhaps less useful to give examples of failure or partial success than to show the poet reconciling his two rhythms completely. I quote a poem that is not likely to be widely known, and that—for many readers, at any rate—will not have the distracting familiarity of a previous acquaintance. I quote it because its peculiar rhythms appear to have been dictated by the thought in the first stanza, and then perfectly sustained throughout.

NULLA FIDES

For God's sake mark that fly :
 See what a poor, weak, little thing it is.
 When thou has mark'd and scorn'd it, know that this,
 This little, poor, weak fly
 Has killed a pope ; can make an emp'ror die.

Behold yon spark of fire ;
 How little hot ! how near to nothing 'tis !
 When thou hast done despising, know that this,
 This contemn'd spark of fire,
 Has burnt whole towns ; can burn a world entire.

¹ *Donne the Craftsman*, P. Legouis, p. 33.

² *Ibid.*, p. 30.

That crawling worm there see :
 Ponder how ugly, filthy, vile it is.
 When thou hast seen and loath'd it, know that this,
 This base worm thou dost see,
 Has quite devour'd thy parents ; shall eat thee.

Honour, the world, and man,
 What trifles are they ; since most true it is
 That this poor fly, this little spark, this
 So much abhorr'd worm, can
 Honour destroy ; burn worlds ; devour up man.¹

Here—in the three first stanzas, at any rate—the poet is not accommodating one rhythm to another; the natural rhythm of his thought has simply determined the metrical form. In the fourth stanza, the poet's task is rather different, and perhaps a little more difficult; he has to sum up within the same rhythms all that has been said in the three preceding stanzas. This, I believe, he has done with complete success, and without sacrificing either of his two rhythms to the other.²

No poet has achieved the interpenetration of his two rhythms more consistently than Spenser. That he does so frequently at the cost of considerable diffuseness only proves how anxiously he tried to accommodate his metrical basis to the natural flow of thought, and vice versa. Spenser, of course, was temperamentally diffuse, but often the diffuseness in his poetry is due to his determination not to break the metrical idiom of his stanza by cramming too much thought into it, nor yet to cramp an idea by giving it too little room. Thought may, in fact, be

¹ The author is a seventeenth-century minor poet, Patrick Carey. *Minor Poets of the Caroline Period*, ed. G. Saintsbury, vol. ii, p. 477.

² The apparent need for another syllable in the third line of the last stanza presents no difficulties if a pause is supplied by the reader after the word "spark."

elaborated considerably without breaking its natural rhythms; it cannot be compressed beyond a certain point without danger to those rhythms. Spenser refused to be hurried.

The joyous birdes shrouded in cheareful shade,
 Their notes unto the voyce attempted sweet;
 Th' Angelicall soft trembling voyces made
 To th' instruments divine responce meet:
 The silver sounding instruments did meet
 With the base murmur of the waters fall:
 The waters fall with difference discreet,
 Now soft, now loud, unto the wind did call:
 The gentle warbling wind low answered to all.

Here there is no diffuseness that is not an integral part of the whole experience; the stanza contains one idea, grasped by the poet in its entirety, and advanced by well-proportioned stages. The half-concealed repetition in the third, fifth, and seventh lines (voyce . . . soft trembling voyces: th' instruments. . . . The silver sounding instruments: the waters fall. . . . The waters fall) is a necessary element in the experience as it was felt by Spenser: for the sounds of a drowsy summer day do seem to be linked together in one continuous concert, do seem to be answering one another with "responce meet." Spenser, wishing to express this sense of a universal harmony in the air and on the branches uses his characteristic repetition to connect one lovely sound with another, and presents in the continuous medium of words an expression of simultaneous sound. What the poet has to say here, delicately drawn out from line to line, settles down easily inside the stanza, and fills it exactly. Spenser never leaves bits hanging over; he never forces into his stanza more than its natural rhythms will allow. Indeed,

if it comes to a choice between putting too much in and leaving something over to another stanza, he invariably chooses the second course. He will not allow the naturally slow and gradual rhythm of his thoughts to be jerked rudely forward. Each stanza must advance the poem a little farther, but each stanza must be complete and sufficient in itself, a separate argument developing naturally and easily and coming in good time to its unhurried close. The result is, of course, that the thought in the *Faerie Queene* must frequently be allowed to expand in ever-widening ripples :

Amongst those knights there were three brethren bold,
 Three bolder brethren never were yborne,
 Borne of one mother in one happie mold,
 Borne at one burden in one happie morne,
 Thrise happie mother, and thrise happie morne,
 That bore three such, three such not to be found ;
 Her name was Agape whose children werne
 All three as one, the first hight Priamond,
 The second Dyamond, the youngest Triamond.

Agape, in fact, was brought to bed of three fine boys, Priamond, Dyamond, and Triamond, who grew up to be bold warriors and were a delight to their fortunate mother. But that is not how Spenser says it. How Spenser says it is determined for him partly, at least, by the necessity of filling nine lines before he ventures to introduce a new idea, and he shapes his thoughts about the three sons and their mother in accordance with this metrical circumstance. The fact is introduced and then paused over, carried forward a little and then lingered over again, amplified by two lines of characteristic repetition, and finally brought to a conclusion with the disclosure of the names. Spenser has visualized the whole statement as a

separate piece of shapely thought, with a balance of parts, a gradual development, and a natural conclusion. He has at once accommodated his thinking to the metrical idiom of his stanza, and persuaded the metrical fabric to take the peculiar impress of his thought.

But whatever stanza he may be writing in, Spenser is almost incapable of making any poetical statement without transforming it into a pattern of thought :

I hate the day, because it lendeth light
 To see all things, and not my love to see ;
 I hate the darknesse and the drery night,
 Because they breed sad balefulness in mee :
 I hate all times, because all times doo flye
 So fast away, and may not stayed bee,
 But as a speedie post that passeth by.

I hate all men, and shun all womankinde ;
 The one, because as I they wretched are,
 The other, for because I doo not finde
 My love with them, that wont to be their Starre :
 And life I hate, because it will not last,
 And death I hate, because it life doth marre,
 And all I hate, that is to come or past.

To a poet of Spenser's type, for ever weaving patterns like this, *day* must almost of necessity suggest *night*, *man—woman*, *life—death*, *the past—the future*, *love—hate*. The simple idea gets caught up in this mode of thinking with its similitudes and contrasts, its assertions and denials, its parallels and illustrations, its instinctive progression towards climax and completeness and a balance of thought with thought, phrase with phrase, and line with line, until what might have been for another poet a bare and simple statement becomes a complex poetical argument. Agape and her three sons become quadruple pillars to support a thought

structure that has grown out of the mere fact of their existence: "I am miserable because my lady is dead" becomes in *Daphnida* the sufficient theme for many stanzas of melodious lament.

Of all his measures the one that Spenser handles most naturally, perhaps, is the long stanza of the *Faerie Queene*—the Spenserian stanza, in fact. Long practice must have enabled his thoughts to arrange themselves almost spontaneously within its rhythms; they never seem to be accommodating themselves unwillingly to an exacting tune. But the early experiments of *The Shepheardes Calender*, the seven-line stanzas of *Daphnida* and of the four *Hymnes*, and, still more, the complicated rhythms of *Epithalamion* are all remarkable for the unhurrying grace with which the thoughts are elaborated. The explanation—or the best part of it—lies in Spenser's ability not merely to write a correct stanza, but also to *think* in it. His stanzas are all thought forms, patterns of poetic argument, favourable, of course, to a varied order of thinking, and yet always giving a clear direction to his thoughts, controlling his experience.

The *Advertisement* to the *Lyrical Ballads* of 1798, and the *Preface* of 1800, have had the effect of concealing the full extent of the changes which Wordsworth was bringing about in English poetry. He thought of himself first and foremost as opposed to the language—"the gaudy and inane phraseology"—of his eighteenth-century predecessors; he concentrated most of his attention on the language proper to poetry, because it was here that he was most conscious of the need for reform. Almost equally important, however—though on this point he was oddly silent—was his abandonment of the stock measures of the eighteenth century, and his supplying

poetry with a new set of tunes. One must not imagine, however, that Wordsworth was merely reacting from the monotony of the heroic couplet; his innovation goes much deeper than that. He was finding new forms because he was thinking in a new way, and could no longer move with freedom inside the old metrical limits. In his *Descriptive Sketches* and *Evening Walk* he was still reasoning more or less in the manner of the eighteenth century, though not always thinking its thoughts :

Once, Man entirely free, alone and wild,
Was blest as free—for he was Nature's child.
He, all superior but his God disdained,
Walked none restraining, and by none restrained :
Confessed no law but what his reason taught,
Did all he wished, and wished but what he ought.

The thought here develops naturally within the rhythms of the heroic couplet; it has still the rhetorical balance and antithesis of the typical eighteenth-century poet writing with a mild pomp in his favourite verse form. The couplet does no violence to Wordsworth's thought in those two early poems because he can still suit his rather conventional thinking to it. By 1798, however, the traditional measures have become a restraint to this poet; he has gone off on his own, and part of his intellectual and emotional escape consists in finding new forms more natural to his thought. When he has found them, it is a long time before he returns to anything even resembling the heroic couplet. The new metrical patterns of the *Lyrical Ballads* are not the outcome of a perverse desire for innovation; they are the natural vehicle for new and unfamiliar rhythms of thought. The thought, in fact, has demanded new metrical forms, and these metrical forms

have in their turn played their part in developing the thought.

At the present day there is a tendency to look with suspicion upon any formal metrical arrangement. The poet, it is thought, should be left to find his own rhythms, not merely for an opening stanza, which then becomes a pattern to the whole poem, but from beginning to end. If the first stanza was the result of letting the thought find its own form, why should the second and third stanzas not be allowed to shape themselves in a similar fashion? May the verse not ebb and flow with the thoughts and feelings of the poet? "The whole trend of modern poetry," it has been suggested, "is towards treating poetry like a very sensitive substance which succeeds better when allowed to crystallize by itself than when put into prepared moulds. . . . Modern poetry, that is, is groping for some principle of self-determination to be applied to the meaning of the poem—not lack of government, but government from within. Free verse was one of the largest movements towards this end."¹

There is, of course, nothing particularly modern about free verse. Milton's *Lycidas* and Wordsworth's *Immortality* ode are both examples of great poetry which has overflowed any strict metrical scheme. Many of the so-called Pindaric odes of the eighteenth century were a form of rhymed free verse. In the *Advertisement to Rosalind and Helen* (1818) Shelley comments on the metrical scheme of his poem in words which are almost an apology for free verse. "I resigned myself, as I wrote, to the impulse of the feelings which moulded the conception of the story; and this impulse determined the pauses of a

¹ *A Survey of Modernist Poetry*, Laura Riding and Robert Graves, pp. 46-7.

measure, which only pretends to be regular, inasmuch as it corresponds with, and expresses, the irregularity of the imaginations which inspire it." Patmore would have justified his irregular odes upon the same principles.

It would be wrong to suggest that poetry written in such freer measures must necessarily suffer in comparison with the more regular forms: *Lycidas* alone would be sufficient to disprove such an idea. But there are comparatively few good poems in English written with even such freedom as Milton allows himself in *Lycidas*. The successes have been, on the whole, in the more regular forms, the failures of the irregular kind are numerous. The reason seems to be that of all forms of verse "free verse" is the least free. Apparently, it leaves the poet the utmost liberty; actually, it demands from him the nicest adjustment of verbal rhythm to thought and feelings. He must be all the time creating his own rhythms; he can count on none of those aids to the shaping of his thoughts that a regular metrical structure offers to the poet.

Patmore explained the difficulty of writing blank verse really well by pointing out that it had little or no rhythm of its own, "and therefore the poet has to create the rhythm as he writes."¹ He has not cut himself off entirely from the suggestions which are constantly being developed by metrical structures, but those suggestions are far less definite with blank verse than with other forms which have more pronounced rhythmic peculiarities. It would almost seem as if many of the poets who have chosen to write in blank verse have chafed at the degree of liberty offered to them, and longed for a metrical regularity that this form does not invite; for nothing is commoner than

¹ *The North British Review*, August 1857, vol. xxvii, p. 160.

to find a poet writing, not in blank verse, but in some particular form of blank verse (e.g. the Miltonic). On such occasions the poet is clearly shirking his obligation to "create the rhythm as he writes," and seeking refuge in a rhythm within a rhythm, already more or less definitely worked out for him. Complete metrical freedom, then, carries with it the obligation to be at every point the originator of one's own rhythm, and that rhythm must respond appropriately to the thoughts and feelings. It is clear that a rhythm arrived at in this way cannot by its very nature have much influence on those thoughts and feelings, since it is—or is intended to be—the direct outcome of them. If this is so, then it will also follow that the poet's experience must be sufficiently powerful to impart an inevitable movement to those natural rhythms, for otherwise the reader will be left without sufficient direction, and the poem will want that finality of utterance without which it must lose most of its authority over his mind. This danger was foreseen by Patmore, who had given much thought to the problem of irregular verse. If such verse was to be written at all, it demanded "a strong though severe initiative of passion the wind of which is sufficient to raise in this metre the appropriate billows of harmony, each growing out of the other with manifest inevitableness, from the beginning to the end. . . . Varied law implies varied motive, and unless the motive be manifest, the metre becomes *nonsense*."¹ Few, perhaps, of those who have abandoned the conventional structures of rhythm, with their regular discipline and uniformity of suggestion, have had that "strong though severe passion" which would enable them to move significantly in freer measures. Complete freedom, in fact, is almost too

¹ *Courage in Politics* ("Francis Thompson, A New Poet"), p. 162.

oppressive. In poetical practice it has usually tended to dissipate the energies, and scatter the thoughts and feelings that should be intensely concentrated.

This danger appears to increase with the length of the poem. In general it may be said that free verse has proved most successful in short poems, where the poet has been giving expression to a single mood, or thought, or emotion—feeling his way delicately, and allowing the rhythms to settle lightly as he proceeds.

Passenger
Am I
In that machine of days
Which runs
Between the city and the stars;
No citizen
Of one delight
Or any stopping-place:
I journey
On and on,
Until
I shall become
A freight of dust
At last. . . .¹

Here the rhythms, though apparently free, have clearly been grasped by the poet in their entirety. The poem, in fact, has taken a certain shape in the mind; the thought is not just like a drop of oil falling upon water and spreading independently to a shape of its own. The longer a poem is, however, the more difficult it becomes for the poet to organize his thoughts in free verse, to give them a form and shape that are not just fortuitous. Indeed, a long poem in free verse is generally either a set of separate

¹ Helen Dircks, *Passenger*, p. v.

movements, or else a disorganized statement of thoughts and feelings in which meaning struggles fitfully to appear.

If poetry is an art, then it is the art of making poems; and a poem is not merely the poetic experience, but that experience organized in certain rhythms of thought and feeling. I am purposely emphasizing the distinction between *poetry* and *poems*: poetry which may appear sporadically where there is no poem, and poems which are the final and satisfactory organization of experiences enjoyed by the poet. His rhythms may vary greatly in definiteness and emphasis, and they may be arrived at in different ways; but they must be felt by the poet, and they must be expressed by corresponding rhythms in his own medium of words. The advantage of working towards expression within one or other of the regular metrical structures is that they do greatly help the poet to give shape to what, as raw experience, is not likely to be entirely shapely. They do for him much of that work of ordering and clarifying experience, which, if he is writing in an irregular form, he will have to achieve without their help.¹

The modern plea that the poet should treat poetry "like a very sensitive substance which succeeds better when allowed to crystallize by itself than when put into prepared moulds" is typical of much contemporary practice. As for the "prepared moulds," I have already

¹ They have at times their disadvantages. Writing of some of Swinburne's metres, which are "whirlwinds and blasts of passion in themselves," Patmore notes: "Such metres have, moreover, the disadvantage of fixing in too peremptory a manner the key in which the poems written in them must be sustained. They allow none of the endless modulations which are open to the poet who writes in almost any of our native and less emphatic measures."—*Principle in Art* ("Mr. Swinburne's Selections"), p. 116.

done my best to show that the metrical structure is not a passive receptacle of the poet's thought, and I will not return to the point here. But I find in the foregoing statement a return to Wordsworth's attitude of distrust in the medium, and a desire to cut down its influence on the poem to a minimum. With this attitude goes a tendency to think of the poem as being simply the original experience of it that came to the poet, and not the written record of it. The next step follows almost inevitably: it is to imply that in the communication of the poet's experience there must always be a loss. It was the belief of Shelley that "the most glorious poetry that has ever been communicated to the world is probably a feeble shadow of the original conceptions of the poet."¹ True, Shelley believed—I think wrongly—that the medium of poetry was more transparent than those of other arts; but even so, words let the poet down, they came between him and his vision. Yet if there is loss, there is also gain. The "original conceptions" of which Shelley writes, however dazzling they may have been—and perhaps because of their very brightness—were probably confused and confusing. Byron, who to some extent is in agreement with Shelley here, provides in one of his letters some consolation for the loss, and incidentally justifies the written poem. "My first impressions," he writes, "are always strong and confused; and my memory selects and reduces them to order, like distance in the landscape, and blends them better, although they may be less distinct."² The credit of selecting and reducing his impressions to order is here given by Byron to his memory; it would

¹ *Defence of Poetry*.

² *Letters and Journals*, vol. iv, p. 119. By "less distinct" here I understand "less vivid," not "less sharply defined."

perhaps be truer to say that this selective process was not fully at work until the act of composition began. With neither Byron nor Shelley—and still less with Keats—can the substance of the poem be said to have crystallized by itself; the shaping of it was partly at least a conscious process, an effort towards the reduction of powerful feelings to order and harmony, and in that effort the metrical structure with its regular discipline played a considerable part. I doubt if free verse can ever play that part so effectively.

CHAPTER VI

RHYME

THE common determination to regard poetry as something quite beyond ordinary standards of human judgment is nowhere better seen than in the scanty and infrequent observations of critics upon rhyme. Among non-critical readers rhyme is rarely mentioned unless it is obviously faulty, or unless the poet has clearly been at some pains to hit upon it. That rhyme should suggest to the poet any of his thoughts is felt by many readers to be an infallible sign of poetical inferiority: an attitude of mind that may perhaps be traced to their own struggles with poetic composition in the years of adolescence. I hope to show, however, that rhyme is—and for hundreds of years has been—a perfectly legitimate source of suggestion to the poet. If very far from being the most important, it is certainly one of the most interesting for this inquiry into poetic inspiration, since it illustrates clearly how a poem which finally reaches what must seem to every reader an inevitable perfection may do so by the most fortuitous and irrational means.

Rhyme has frequently been condemned as a hindrance to poets. It was rejected by Milton (who had often used it with complete success) because, as he claimed in the famous foreword to *Paradise Lost*, it interrupted the flow of the poet's thoughts, and forced him to express many

things otherwise, and for the most part worse, than he would have done without rhyme. One might have expected Wordsworth to condemn rhyme for the same reasons, but in the period when he was most a poet he employed it oftener than he rejected it. To Wordsworth, doing what he was doing, rhyme may sometimes have been a trouble and vexation, a distracting necessity tugging his mind off the straight path on which he had so deliberately set it, and tending to disintegrate the experience which he was trying to communicate. But Wordsworth nowhere speaks harshly of rhyme, and it is clear that its influence upon his poetry was as often as not beneficial. There is, he has told us, a pleasure in poetic pains. To this poet rhyme was certainly one of those pains; but it repaid the trouble it caused by forcing him to labour all the harder to bring his thoughts to the sharpest possible focus. Nor can there be much doubt that it must sometimes—unless he was an even more unusual poet than he is often held to be—have amplified his experience, and made it richer to the poet himself by presenting him with suggestions that he could honestly accept. I say “honestly,” because if I have understood Wordsworth’s attitude to his art, he was utterly scrupulous on the question of what was “fair suggestion,” and always ready to throw out of his poems anything irrelevant that had crept into them in the course of composition. On the question of what is and what is not relevant to a poem the whole division between poets of Wordsworth’s and of Keats’ type may be said to rest. To Wordsworth, I believe, “irrelevant” meant anything that was not a natural development of the original idea or experience. By writing habitually in blank verse, Wordsworth would certainly have eliminated one of the most insistent temptations to

irrelevancy; but in his best work he can meet this temptation, and like other great poets, turn it to advantage.

At the opposite extreme are those poets who, like Dryden, confess gladly that rhyme has often "helped them to a thought." What this phrase means will differ with different poets. It may simply mean that a rhyme has suddenly made clear to the poet the idea towards which he was groping his way; or it may mean that an idea has come into his mind unawares, an idea that would never have got there at all but for the rhyme and the resulting suggestion which it provoked. I have said how I think Wordsworth would have dealt with the latter sort of suggestion; but other poets have not hesitated to avail themselves of it. Why should they hesitate? If a poet is concerned with pouring out the riches of his mind rather than with communicating a definite experience, he can afford to catch at any suggestion that comes to him in the course of composition. A poet of Keats' type may—and frequently will—reject the accidental suggestions afforded him by rhyme, but not because they were accidental, and not because they have no logical connection with a dominating idea. He will reject them because they make an inadequate contribution to his imaginative tapestry; they are too commonplace, or too bizarre, or simply unsuitable in the context.

Those who object to ideas coming into the poet's mind by way of rhyme must explain why this is an objection. Are such ideas more fortuitous than those coming to him from many other sources? In *The Road to Xanadu* Professor Lowes has traced many of the ideas in *The Ancient Mariner* and *Kubla Khan* to their source in Coleridge's reading, yet even Professor Lowes can rarely show why those ideas entered the poet's head at the

moment they did. The actual sources from which suggestions came to the poet are of enormous interest to the critic, and he will naturally wish to discriminate between them; but for the poem itself this is a matter of indifference. There are no tainted sources; it lies with the individual poet to reject such suggestions as are unsuitable, and to improve upon those he accepts. Poetry, in fact, is an irrational and surprising flower, though frequently it will be found growing upon a logical stock. If, as Keats suggests, it is not the poet's business to govern his petty state like an Elector of Hanover, and know "how many straws are swept daily from the Causeways in all his dominions,"¹ neither is it his concern to know what wind blew the straws into his territory. The succession of ideas in such a poet as Shelley is rarely directed for long by logical processes, but by the chance associations that come to him in a particular state of excitement. The suggestions coming to him from rhyme are undoubtedly quite accidental and irrational, but so is almost every other sort of suggestion at work on the poet's mind. What is not, however, accidental is the poet's decision to admit or to refuse such suggestions. He need not even come to a conscious decision; it is enough that acceptance or rejection was not a matter of complete indifference. If it was, then Matthew Arnold's complaint is likely to be justified, and the poem will gratify only "with occasional bursts of fine writing, and with a shower of isolated thoughts and images."² Yet it will not be rhyme that is to blame, nor the haphazard suggestions that it has aroused; the fault must lie with the poet who, wanting a steady purpose, a dominant mood or feeling, a

¹ *Letters*, vol. i, p. 103.

² Preface to *Poems* (1853-4).

“ great action ” to keep him moving forward, has been at the mercy of those very suggestions he might have used to answer his poetic purposes.

Nevertheless, most readers (and those, too, who do not normally take exception to rhyme) have felt at one time or another that a particular rhyme was objectionable. On such occasions the objection felt is probably not due to the rhyme having suggested the thought, unless some very bizarre idea is involved. Shelley, for instance, frequently rhymes *mountains* with *fountains*, and it is hard to see what else *mountains* could suggest to him, or to anyone else, if he is to find a rhyme for it. But the normal reader of poetry does not strain at this accidental sequence of ideas. Logically, *mountains* and *fountains* have got very little to do with each other, but they have a natural association in English poetry owing to their similarity in sound. Here, as elsewhere, what one has grown accustomed to becomes natural and awakens no critical objection. The old lady, gazing up at the aeroplane in the sky, decided that she preferred to travel by the railway—“as Nature intended us to.” An unfamiliar rhyme, on the other hand, may annoy. Thus we willingly accept *pinion-dominion* as a rhyming sequence, having echoes of Gray’s *Progress of Poesy* and of other poems in our ears; but when Shelley adds a third rhyme, *minion*, there is perhaps some hint of the poet escaping from his difficulties through the only possible door. On the first suspicion that a poet is being ingenious, his poetry shrivels up and dies. The poet is not to be ingenious, he is to be inevitable. Feminine rhymes in particular, because they look clever and give too strong an impression of difficulties overcome, are apt to be dangerous outside comic verse, and the danger increases with the ingenuity.

The charge most commonly brought against rhyme, however, is that it often forces the poet to express his thoughts (as Milton complained) in an unnatural or partial manner. "This is that which makes them say, rhyme is not natural," Dryden noted; "it being only so, when the poet either makes a vicious choice of words, or places them for rhyme sake, so unnaturally as no man would in ordinary speaking."¹ What happens when rhyme becomes a dictator may be seen in the metrical versions of the psalms :

But thou shalt, like unto the horn
of th' unicorn, exalt
My horn on high : thou with fresh oil
anoint me also shalt.

That is a rendering in metre and rhyme of the prose of the Authorized Version:

But my horn shalt thou exalt like the horn of an unicorn :
I shall be anointed with fresh oil.

Similarly,

But yet the Lord, that is on high,
is more of might by far
Than noise of many waters is,
or great sea-billows are.

is the metrical rendering of

The Lord on high is mightier than the noise of many
waters, yea, than the mighty waves of the sea.

The prominence given to the last word of this second stanza by thrusting upon it the burden of rhyme is further increased by the gratuitous contrast between *is* and *are*.

¹ *Essays of John Dryden*, ed. W. P. Ker ("Epistle Dedicatory of *The Rival Ladies*"), p. 7.

In the other stanza the violent inversions would be quite unaccountable if we did not know that the writer was trying to put into rhyme and metre, with as few verbal changes as possible, something already put in prose. The compilers of the metrical psalms, in fact, were finding rhymes for something that was already there. What they had to say was completely present in their minds before they wrote; their task was only to express it as clearly and smoothly as possible.

But this, as I have suggested, was the very kind of problem that habitually confronted Wordsworth as a poet. With all due allowance for the fact that in the one instance we have to deal with a great poet and in the other with versifiers often less than adequate, the resemblance is there—not, indeed, in the results, but in the appointed task. Wordsworth is in a sense a great translator; he translated his own experiences into English verse, showing everywhere a proper respect for his original. He wrote much in rhyme, and rhyme, it is clear, frequently suggests all sorts of unexpected ideas to a poet. Wordsworth resisted such suggestions as conscientiously as Francis Rous, Sternhold and Hopkins, or Tate and Brady resisted them in their metrical versions of the psalms; but did he, like them, pay the price for remaining true to the text in an occasional forcing of language to answer the demands of rhyme? I find—though I am conscious that others may not so find—fairly frequent examples of rhyming awkwardness in Wordsworth's sonnets, e.g.

By doubts and thousand petty fancies crost
I stood, of simple shame the blushing *thrall*;

which recalls another passage:

Old time, though he, gentlest among the *Thralls*
Of Destiny—

In both sonnets, I feel, the need for a rhyme has pushed Wordsworth on to a less natural expression than he would otherwise have chosen. The thing had to be said:

By doubts and thousand petty fancies crosst
I stood ashamed—

but it was said as Wordsworth said it because of the hard necessity of rhyming. In another sonnet:

A goodly Vessel did I then espy
 Come like a giant from a haven broad;
 And lustily along the bay she *strode*—

the same necessity accounts for the word *strode*; but most readers will probably agree that here the suggestion was a fortunate one. I cannot feel the same confidence about the Fly that appears in the first of the three sonnets to Sleep:

O Sleep! thou art to me
 A Fly, that up and down himself doth shove
 Upon a fretful rivulet, now above,
 Now on the water vexed with mockery.

About the word "shove" I am in a state of mind described by Coleridge: I know, not feel, how beautiful it is. Wordsworth himself was apparently satisfied with the expression; he must have considered the less daring possibilities of *move* and *rove*, and if he rejected those adequate if not very remarkable words he cannot have adopted *shove* in a fit of despair. Again, the expression "a sordid boon" in the famous sonnet, *The World is too much with us*, has always seemed to me unhappy—not violently displeasing, but a flaw, an innocent makeshift. The same word strikes the one poor note for me in an

otherwise wholly delightful poem, *Strange Fits of Passion have I known*. The fifth stanza runs:

In one of those sweet dreams I slept,
Kind Nature's gentlest boon!
And all the while my eyes I kept
On the descending moon.

The *moon* in the last line here seems to be responsible for the whole of the second line; it is rarely indeed that Wordsworth gives way so easily to a suggestion of this sort.

The miseries that a single word will sometimes cause the poet have been recorded by Wordsworth in one of his sonnets:

When happiest Fancy has inspired the strains,
How oft the malice of one luckless word
Pursues the Enthusiast to the social board,
Haunts him belated on the silent plains!

The luckless word was often, no doubt, a stubborn rhyme. To a poet like Wordsworth rhyme is bound at times to present serious difficulties, because, as I have said, he will not allow rhyming circumstances to alter his appointed course. The torrent of his inspiration seems rarely to have flowed round an obstacle; it poured against it until the obstacle was dislodged. The channel was marked out and cut for the waters, and along that path they must flow. It is clear, for instance, that the *Fly* in his sonnet to *Sleep* was part of the idea that he had resolved to express; to give it up because of any difficulties he might encounter on the way would be an act of betrayal.

Keats, I believe, would have had no such scruples. His poetic conscience was equally exacting, but it worked in a different way. It is quite possible, too, that if Keats,

instead of Wordsworth, had been writing this sonnet to Sleep the idea of the Fly might have leapt into his mind precisely because the word happened to rhyme with one in the previous line. He was continually catching happily at the various suggestions of rhyme; as this, for example, from *Endymion*.

I'll swim to the syrens, and one moment listen
Their melodies, and see their long hair glisten. . . .

In the various early drafts of his poems one sometimes finds ideas which had been suggested to him by a rhyme, and which he afterwards abandoned, along with the rhyme, in favour of other ideas. There is an interesting rough draft of his own sonnet to Sleep, ending at the beginning of the twelfth line with the words,

And let it rest until the snow has stole,
Bright—

In the final form of this sonnet there is no mention of the snow. Any explanation as to how it got into the rough draft may be objected to as mere guess-work, and, what is worse, unnecessary guess-work. Nevertheless, I will suggest that Keats thought of *snow* because he was contemplating a rhyme for *close* ("O soothest Sleep, if so it please thee, close | My willing eyes in midst of this thy hymn"); and afterwards, when he had written

Or wait the amen ere thy poppy throws
Its sweet dark dews o'er every pulse and limb,

continued to think of *snow* and *snows* when, so far as rhyming was concerned, he could have done without them.

I have again set Keats in contrast to Wordsworth, in the hope that these two poets will illustrate the distinction I am anxious to make. There is a danger, however, in pressing the contrast too far, and I may have been too absolute in distinguishing their poetic practice.¹ If so, I can only repeat that I am more concerned with defining what I believe to be a real difference in practice than with doing justice to the *whole* practice of either poet. It is true, however, that Keats sometimes puts the same sort of compulsion upon words as Wordsworth did, and for the same reason: he has an idea already present in his mind, and words must be bent and twisted so as to make way for it:

. . . her loveliness
Is wan on Neptune's blue: yet there's a *stress*
Of love-spangles, just off yon cape of trees,
Dancing upon the waves—

and

A butterfly, with golden wings broad-parted,
Nestling a rose, concealed as though it *smarted*
With over-pleasure.

In both those passages Keats was anxious to press on to his next idea; it was already there groping for expression, and the poet hurriedly made room for it. *Stress* is not an example of that happy vagueness which Keats had learnt from Shakespeare²: nor is *smarted* just the word for the

¹ I find, for example, in some of the strangely neglected odes (e.g. *Vernal Ode*, 1817) which Wordsworth wrote in his middle age a mode of composition much nearer to that which I have been ascribing to Keats. In those odes Wordsworth seems to be resigning himself more willingly to the suggestions coming to him from his medium in the moment of composition.

² A happier example is the line in *Endymion*: "I loved her to the very *white* of truth."

butterfly. Both words are used in perfunctory acknowledgment of the rhyme. Sometimes, indeed, in his eagerness to press on, Keats hits upon the wrong word altogether :

. . . Nor had they waited
For many moments, ere their ears were sated
With a faint breath of music.

I cannot believe that *sated* is good enough for Keats; one might as well speak of being tickled with a surfeit as of being sated under such circumstances.

An examination of the Trinity College manuscript of Milton's early poems will show the poet sometimes welcoming the new suggestions offered to him by rhyme, and at other times resolutely sticking to his original idea, even when he is forced to employ a different rhyme. In his sonnet *On the Religious Memory of Mrs. Catherine Thomson*, the original draft reads:

Thy Works, & Almes, and all thy good Endeavor
Strait follow'd thee the path that Saints have trod
Still as they journey'd from this dark abode
Up to y^e Realm of peace and Joy for ever.

This failing to satisfy the poet, he scored out the three last lines, and wrote in the margin:

staid not behinde nor in y^e grave were trod But as Truth
pointed with her golden rod follow'd thee up to joy & bliss
for ever.

Here he has introduced an entirely new image in Truth with her golden rod, and, to make way for it, has dropped the original idea of the saints journeying from this dark

abode up to the realms above. It seems clear that the new suggestion came from the rhyme to *trod*. In the sonnet *To Mr. H. Lawes on his Airs* Milton again discards one of his first thoughts for a second that was undoubtedly modified, if not actually suggested, by the rhyme. The manuscript shows that the lines

Thy worth & skill exempts thee from y^e throng,
with praise enough for Envy to Look wan;
To after-age thou shalt be writt the man
That with smooth aire cou'dst humor best our tongue.

stood originally

Thy worth & skill exempts thee from the throng
and gives thee praise above the pipe of Pan;
to after age thou shalt be writt a man
that didst reform thy art, the cheif among—

The pipe of Pan is a natural enough association if Milton had already thought of his third line; but on second thoughts he may have considered it too easy, or he may have felt that its paganism was unsuited to Henry Lawes. The change here, however, is rather in the manner of drawing out his thought than in the thought itself: what Milton was really concerned to say got said with only a minor variation. The song in *Comus*, *Sabrina faire*, shows a very interesting process of trial and error. In their final form the opening lines run:

Sabrina faire
Listen where thou art sitting
under the glassie coole translucent wave
in twisted braids of lillies knitting
the loose traine of thy amber-dropping haire.

But the manuscript shows that the second line went originally:

Listen virgin where thou sit'st.

I find it hard to believe that Milton had ever contemplated a rhyme *knit'st* to the *sit'st* of this second line: the word can scarcely be pronounced. If he had no such intention, then the change to *sitting* was probably made before the fourth line had begun to shape itself in his mind, in which case the idea introduced by *knitting* was apparently suggested by that change. But, of course, it is just as reasonable to argue that the possibility of *sitting* and *knitting* came to him as a simultaneous perception. The oddest example of Milton listening to the suggestion of rhyme occurs in two lines cancelled from the earlier drafts of *At a Solemn Music*, where he had written:

While all the starrie rounds & arches blue
resound and eccho Hallelu.

Yet even here it is open to the reader to suggest that Milton originally intended a "Hallelujah," and only abandoned it, owing to difficulties, for "Hallelu." It is true, of course, that nearly all such cancelled readings as one may find in a manuscript poem are capable of very different interpretations. If I have sometimes been rash in my assumptions, it is not because I have not realized this danger, but because one must be prepared to make false steps on such uncertain ground if one is to proceed at all.

In general I think it may be said of Milton's changes that though he is willing to amplify or modify his expression—and to that extent his thought—in accordance with the suggestions thrown out by rhyme, he tends to remain

faithful to his original purpose. The following passage from *Lycidas*, though it shows a considerable number of minor changes, retains in its final form the substance of the poet's first thoughts:

nor yet where Deva spreds her wisard streame
 ay mee I fondly dreame
 had yee bin there, for what could that have don ?
 what could the golden hayrd Calliope
 for her inchaunting son
 when shee beheld (the gods farre sighted bee)
 his goarie scalpe rowle downe the Thracian lee.

Milton's first change is the marginal addition after the fifth line of

whome universal nature might lament
 and heaven and hel deplore
 when his divine head downe the streame was sent
 downe the swift Hebrus to the Lesbian shore.

The sixth and seventh lines are not actually cancelled in the manuscript, but were presumably intended to go. This, however, did not satisfy the poet, and he finally wrote:

. . . for what could that have don ?
 What could the Muse her self that *Orpheus* bore,
 The Muse her self, for her inchanting son
 Whom Universall nature did lament,
 When by the rout that made the hideous roar,
 His goary visage down the streame was sent,
 Down the swift Hebrus to the Lesbian shore.

The changes here are less extensive than might at first sight appear. The Muse "that Orpheus bore" is, of course, Calliope: the Lesbian shore and the Thracian ee are the same place. To that extent Milton has per-

sisted with his original idea, in spite of the fact that he has departed from his rhyming basis. The most important amplification of the original idea comes in the line—not, I think, one of Milton's best:

When by the rout that made the hideous roar

and that particular line might never have been there at all, but for the new rhyme introduced by *bore* and *shore*.

Milton, in fact, is neither a tyrant with rhyme nor a slave to it; he listens wisely to its suggestions, and, where those can be of service to him, uses them. Some poets have been stiffer than he in their attitude to rhyme, others more flexible; but there can be few who have ever simply imposed a brutal will upon it, without expecting or receiving something in return.

CHAPTER VII

WORDS

RHYME, however, offers only one instance of the way in which a poet constantly catches at suggestions from the very words he is using. In everything he writes, the texture of the medium in which he is working must influence the development and expression of his thoughts. Nor do words need to rhyme to exert an influence on his mind as pure sounds. If we possessed an original draft of Shakespeare's "Full fathom five thy father lies," we should not expect to find that he had toyed with the varying possibilities of

Full fathom six

or

Full fathom twelve

before arriving at the satisfactory *five* of the text. *Five* comes in here for the same reason as the "fifty fathom deep" in the ballad of *Sir Patrick Spens*; it is so naturally allied in sound to the two words immediately preceding it that to substitute *six* or *twelve* would be, in words which Dr. Johnson used of another occasion, "the effort of tedious toil and needless curiosity." It is the sound which gives to *five* its inevitability; *six* or *twelve*, lacking such finality, would strike the reader as too particular, in the same way as the measurements of little Emma's grave

in Wordsworth's poem appear unnecessarily precise. If the sound "must seem an echo to the sense," it will seem so often for the best of reasons—that it has suggested the sense. The poet is hardly likely to be less sensitive than his readers on such occasions.

What a poet like Spenser will say—and what he will think—depends very much on the sound of the words he is using. Professor de Sélincourt has given some characteristic examples: "Many of his favourite phrases, 'loving lord,' 'girlonds gay,' 'silver sleeps,' 'lovely layes,' 'wilde wilderness,' are born of his love of alliteration, and so natural an element of his music does it become that at times it influences, almost unconsciously, his choice of words:

I knockt, but no man aunswred me by name ;
I cald, but no man answerd to my clame."¹

Or, to take a more extended example from the November eclogue of the *Shepherd's Calendar*:

Shepherds, that by your flocks on Kentish downes abyde,
Waile ye this wofull waste of natures warke :
Waile we the wight, whose presence was our pryde :
Waile we the wight, whose absence is our carke.
The sonne of all the world is dimme and darke :
 The earth now lacks her wonted light,
 And all we dwell in deadly night,
 O heauie herse.
Breake we our pypes, that shrild as lowde as Larke,
 O carefull verse.

Spenser's poetry, in fact, draws much of its nourishment from the same soil as produced the old alliterative

¹ In the introduction to his edition of *Spenser* (Oxford Poets). With Spenser, too, the appearance of the word when written probably counted a good deal in his final selection.

verse of his predecessors in English poetry. The suggestions that came to him from sound are continually present in his poetry, giving it a persuasiveness and a finality not to be gained from the merely logical values of words. With Spenser—and still more with Swinburne—the sense is often no more than a faint but pleasing echo of the sound. With the truly lyrical poet, indeed, one may expect to find the clearest proofs of the interdependence of sound and sense. Such a poet may be seen in William Collins; who had, as Swinburne insists, “a note of pure lyric song,”¹ at its purest, perhaps, in the *Ode to Evening*. This ode is, of course, unrhymed, but from beginning to end it is a notable proof of the way in which a poet’s words and ideas may be determined for him by such matters as assonance and alliteration. The absence of rhyme only makes Collins more susceptible than ever to the association of similar sounds, e.g.:

Then lead, calm votaress, where some sheety lake
Cheers the lone heath, or some time-hallowed pile,
Or upland fallows grey
Reflect its last cool gleam.

The association of “time-hallowed pile” with “upland fallows grey” is noticeable enough; but the sound-association is emphasized a few lines later by the further echo of

While *sallow* autumn fills thy *lap* with leaves.

Similarly, in four successive stanzas playing upon a different vowel, Collins has the following: “*chill* blustering winds,” “my *willing* feet,” “*dim* discovered spires,” “*simple* bell,” “*spring*,” “*lingering* light,” “*fills* thy lap,”

¹ *The English Poets*, ed. T. H. Ward, p. 280.

"*winter*," "*Shrinking train*." Of those words some, no doubt, came to the poet independent of any consideration of their sound-value; but the choice of others was probably determined in the last resort by such a consideration, and some may actually have been suggested to the poet for no other reason. It is possible, too, that the sun's "wavy bed" in the second stanza:

. . . while now the bright-haired sun
Sits in yon western tent, whose cloudy skirts,
With brede ethereal wove,
O'erhang his wavy bed—

came to Collins by association with *wove* in the third line. In the *Ode to Liberty*, again, the lines

Beyond yon braided clouds that lie,
Paving the light-embroidered sky,
Amidst the bright pavilioned plains—

suggest that he arrived at *pavilioned* by way of *paving* in the previous line.

The subdued tone of the *Ode to Evening*, so perfectly sustained throughout the poem, is due not so much to the absence of rhyming words as to the muffled sound of words which do all but rhyme. It is hard to believe that some of those words were not suggested to him by his unconscious search for an assonance which here constantly takes the place of rhyme. There are fifty-two lines in the *Ode to Evening*, and they are linked together by a subtle vowel melody. Twelve of the lines end with monosyllables containing the same vowel sound, viz. "gales," "strain," "vale," "hail," "day," "lake," "grey," "rain," "veil," "air," "train," "name." "Name" is, significantly, the last word of the poem,

and so the last sound left in one's ears. If other words and phrases occurring in the body of the ode are also taken into account, e.g. "*chaste eve*," "*bright-haired sun*," "*wavy bed*," "*save where*," "*maid composed*," "*paly circlet*," "*prepare thy shadowy car*," "*bathe thy breathing tresses*," and read in their context, the assonance becomes still more apparent. Of other vowel sounds, the *ō* of *wove* occurs seven times at the end of a line, and *ē* of *eve*, the *ē* of *bed*, the *ū* of *sun*, the *ī* of *pile* five times each. In the first five stanzas beginning with

Then lead, calm votaress—

Collins has only six different vowel sounds to end his lines, viz.:

lake, grey, rain, veil, air, train.
pile, side, spires, light.
gleam, eve, leaves.
but, floods.
all, draw.
Wont, sport, robes.

If those stanzas are examined in greater detail, the impression that this poet's choice of words was constantly governed by his sensitiveness to sound-values is considerably strengthened, e.g.:

Then *lead*, calm votaress, where some *sheety* lake
Cheers the lone *heath*, or some time-hallowed pile,
Or upland fallows grey
Reflect its last cool *gleam*.

Alliteration is no less important a factor here than assonance (e.g. lead—lake, heath—hallowed, grey—gleam, fallows—reflect); and it must be remembered that alliteration is an aid to the writer (and one small source of his inspiration) before it becomes an aid to the reader.

The poetry of Swinburne will serve to carry this process of analysis one step farther. In all genuine poets the act of poetic composition will increase the state of excitement already existing in the mind; but with Swinburne the excitement seems often to grow out of all proportion to the original stimulus. The feeling grows by feeding on the very words which are giving it expression. It was observed by Coleridge that "the vividness of the descriptions or declamations in Donne or Dryden is as much and as often derived from the force and fervor of the describer, as from the reflections, forms or incidents, which constitute their subject and materials. The wheels take fire from the mere rapidity of their motion."¹ What Coleridge found true of Donne and Dryden is equally true of Swinburne. Words flew to his head like wine. The next image was often directly inspired by the one that had gone before; the words he had just used were so much tinder to feed the flame into a steadily increasing blaze.

The process may be seen at work in a passage from his poem *At Eleusis*:

So burnt my soul in me at heaven and earth.
 Each way a ruin and a hungry plague,
 Visible evil; nor could any night
 Put cool between my eyelids, nor the sun
 With competence of gold fill out my want.
 Yea so my flame burnt up the grass and stones,
 Shone to the salt-white edges of thin sea,
 Distempered all the gracious work, and made
 Sick change, unseasonable increase of days
 And scant avail of seasons; for by this
 The fair gods faint in hollow heaven: there comes
 No taste of burnings of the twofold fat
 To leave their palates smooth, nor in their lips
 Soft rings of smoke and weak scent wandering;

¹ *Biographia Literaria*, ed. J. Shawcross. vol. ii, p. 56.

All cattle waste and rot, and their ill smell
 Grows always from the lank unsavoury flesh
 That no man slays for offering; the sea
 And waters moved beneath the heath and corn
 Preserve the people of fin-twinkling fish
 And river-flies feed thick upon the smooth;
 But all earth over is no man or bird
 (Except the sweet race of the kingfisher)
 That lacks not and is wearied with much loss.

The whole of this passage, it will be noted, is built up on a series of negatives and images of negation: "ruin"; "hungry" (without food); "evil" (not good); "*nor* could any night"; "*nor* could the sun"; "want"; "distempered"; "sick" (not well); "unseasonable"; "scant avail"; "the fair gods *faint*"; "no taste"; "*nor* in their lips"; "weak" (not strong); "waste"; "rot"; "lank" (not sleek); "*unsavoury*"; "no man"; "no man or bird"; "that lacks not"; "wearied"; "loss." The feeling increases here with every line; Swinburne is being carried forward on the crest of his own excitement, and that excitement is nourished by the very words with which he is giving expression to it.

But nowhere is the poet's necessary and willing dependence on his medium better seen than in Shakespeare. He is sometimes impatient with words, sometimes entirely autocratic in the demands he makes upon them; it would often seem, in fact, as if words were no more than his servants to fetch and carry for him, as if they had to be mutilated or broken and heaped with heavier loads than they could possibly bear. But the remarkable thing is rather the readiness of this apparent autocrat to listen to the suggestions which his own words make to him. Nothing is more characteristic of the working of Shakespeare's

mind than his habit of kindling at the associations of some word or phrase which he has just used. What is actually happening in the mind of Shakespeare must often remain obscure, and sometimes his associations may have been so entirely personal as to be beyond all discovery; but frequently the transition from one idea to another is quite apparent. With a more deliberate and studied writer, trying first one word and then another, those links become much less apparent; but with Shakespeare, hurrying impetuously from image to image, and thought to thought, they are often remarkably evident.

As a poet and a dramatist, Shakespeare seems to have trusted largely to the actual excitement of composition to spirit up the necessary ideas. He knew in a general way what was to be said, or how a scene was to develop, and in his mature work he rarely allowed himself to be tempted very far from his self-appointed path; but though the general direction is thus laid down, and he knows where he is going, how he actually gets there is determined by the accidental obstacles thrown across his path in the process of composition. He is always, in fact, ready to take a hint from the very words he has last written. This fact, of course, does much to give the dialogue of his plays their abundant spontaneity. A writer like Ben Jonson, far more deliberate, and writing much more in accordance with a plan, tends to give one the impression in his dialogue that he is always thinking two moves ahead. Questions are asked so that answers already foreseen by the reader may be given; the dialogue moves forward according to Jonson's plan, and what is to come may often be watched coming long before it arrives. But with Shakespeare the almost logical process of Jonson never continues for long at a time; and even when there is something that he fully

intends to say, the actual saying of it is often modified by what was most recently in his mind.

The attraction of a pun for Shakespeare has often been noted, and almost as frequently deplored. "A quibble," Dr. Johnson wrote, "is the golden apple for which he will always turn aside from his career, or stoop from his elevation."¹ It had, Johnson thought, some malignant power over Shakespeare's mind; it was sure to lead him out of his way. But if the playing upon words distresses the modern reader, he must accept the fact that it was often the stepping-stone to Shakespeare's next thought. In *The Winter's Tale*, for instance, when Leontes has told his wife that only once has she spoken to better purpose, and Hermione has asked very naturally, When was that? Leontes replies:

Why, that was when
Three crabbed months had sour'd themselves to death,
Ere I could make thee open thy white hand
And clap thyself my love. . . .

(I, ii, 101.)

Here the word *sour'd* comes into Shakespeare's mind because he has just used the adjective *crabbed*, with its suggestion of the sour crab-apple. This is only a small instance; but a few lines farther on in the same scene there occurs a more elaborate example of successive ideas being suggested in the same way. Leontes is again the speaker, and he is addressing his little son:

I' fecks!
Why, that's my bawcock. What, hast smutch'd thy nose?
They say it is a copy out of mine. Come, captain,
We must be neat, not neat, but cleanly, captain:

¹ Preface to Johnson's edition of *Shakespeare*.

And yet the steer, the heifer and the calf
 Are all call'd neat.—Still virginalling
 Upon his palm!—How now, you wanton calf!
 Art thou my calf?

(I, ii, 120.)

It may be argued that the succession of ideas here is rightly and dramatically appropriate for Leontes: it is natural for Leontes, in his agony of mind, to babble in this half-connected way, to snatch at the words he has just used, and to pass abruptly from *neat* to *cattle*, with the ghastly implication as to who is the steer in this case, and who is the heifer. Similarly, *virginalling* may come to him by way of *virgin* and *virginity*. But though the disturbed thinking here is entirely in keeping with the tortured state of the King's mind, it is also a reflection of the way in which Shakespeare so often thinks himself, his mind leaping from rock to rock like a chamois.

The extent to which Shakespeare is indebted to his own words for his next idea has been clearly stated by Mr. E. E. Kellert in an essay published some years ago.¹ He demonstrates by one example after another, drawn from different plays, how common a practice it was with Shakespeare to take a hint from some word or phrase he had just committed to paper, and before the ink was dry to move from the hint to a fresh invention. No doubt his fondness for the quibble sharpened his sensitiveness to the suggestions latent in the mere sound of words, but some of the transitions come from a play upon words which is almost quite concealed. In such passages, indeed, Shakespeare is no longer consciously quibbling, but a habit of mind formed by his very fondness for playing upon words persists

¹ *Suggestions. Literary Essays* ("A Feature of Shakespeare's Style"), E. E. Kellert.

when his intentions are of the most serious kind, e.g.:

Lamentings heard i' the air ; strange screams of death,
 And prophesying with accents terrible
 Of dire combustion and confused events
 New hatch'd to the woeful time : the obscure bird
 Clamour'd the livelong night. . . .

(*Macbeth*, II, iii, 52.)

On this Mr. Kellett remarks: "What is that which we naturally think of as being hatched? The next word gives the answer: 'The obscure bird clamour'd the livelong night': a mental process parallel to that of Claudius in *Hamlet*

There's something in his soul,
 O'er which his melancholy sits on brood ;
 And I do doubt the hatch and the disclose
 Will be some danger."

Or to take another example:

The hearts
 That spaniel'd me at heels, to whom I gave
 Their wishes, do discandy, melt their sweets
 On blossomng Cæsar ; and this pine is bark'd
 That overtopp'd them all.

(*Antony and Cleopatra*, IV, xii, 21.)

Mr. Kellett is again ready to explain: "We can see how *discandy* combines both conceptions, that of *sweet*, and that of *melting*; we can discern how *spaniel'd* suggested *bark'd*, and how that led to *pine* and *blossoming*; but the speed of transitions is beyond us, and the intermediate stages are often for ever lost." To this Mr. G. W. H. Rylands has added an interesting note. Pointing out that Mr. Kellett has not dealt with the most violent transition, that from *discandy* to *spaniel'd*, he draws attention to two further occasions in the plays when *candy* or *candied*

apparently lead Shakespeare to think next of dogs, viz.:

Why, what a candy deal of courtesy
This fawning greyhound then did proffer me!
(*Henry IV*, Part I, I, i, 3.)

and

No, let the candied tongue lick absurd pomp,
And crook the pregnant hinges of the knee
Where thrift may follow fawning.
(*Hamlet*, III, ii, 65.)

"These two quotations," Mr. Rylands suggests, "show how 'the hearts that spaniel'd me at heels' in *Antony and Cleopatra* suggested 'discandy, melt their sweets.' Dogs were always present at the Elizabethan table and licked the hands of the guests, fawning and begging for the candied sweetmeats."¹

To take a final example from Shakespeare—less certain, perhaps, than most of Mr. Kellett's, but not, I believe, improbable:

Come, seeling night,
Scarf up the tender eye of pitiful day;
And with thy bloody and invisible hand
Cancel and tear to pieces that great bond
Which keeps me pale.

(*Macbeth*, III, ii, 46.)

The word *seeling*, of course, comes from the sport of hawking: a hawk's eyes were seeled when they were stitched with thread to keep the hawk from seeing. It was surely the word *seeling*, suggesting the red seal on a document, that turned Shakespeare's mind to *bond*; the *bloody* of the third line is perhaps an additional link in this chain of association. I am far from wishing to suggest that one word in this passage determined the whole course of the

¹ *Words and Poetry*, G. W. H. Rylands, pp. 177-8.

dramatist's thoughts; even without the hint from *seeling* he would probably have gone on to complete the idea with some other metaphor. But I suggest that it was *seeling* which decided the metaphor of the *band*, and prevented him from concluding the passage in one of the innumerable other ways open to him.

It would be dangerous to insist too much on the power of single words to originate new ideas in Shakespeare's mind. In nine cases out of ten where the link between one idea and another may be traced to a word he has just used, it is at least possible that the idea was already forming in his mind, and would have emerged in any event. But though the particular word may not have been responsible for the idea, it dammed up the flow of association for a moment and thus determined the form that the new idea would take. For the most part when Shakespeare caught at a passing suggestion he did so because he had realized in a flash how it could help him to express what he had already intended to say. The suggestion is rarely—in his mature work, at any rate—a lure that changes his whole direction, or slows him down, or even distracts his attention, but something that he grasps in full career, and that enables him to reach his goal even more rapidly. He is picking up stones as he runs and hurling them at his quarry. Upon such a poet as Keats, on the other hand, the chance suggestions coming to him in a moment of composition have frequently, as I have already suggested, the very opposite effect; and unless the poet's mind is strongly set in one direction such suggestions are very likely to have a disintegrating effect. He will never, like Shakespeare, succeed in making their irrelevancy relevant to what he is doing. Delicate taste, a "snail-horn perception of beauty," a sense of order and proportion—all the

virtues of the artist—may come to such a poet's aid; but unless his mind is dominated by a ruthless purpose his poetry is apt to bear traces of a too conscious and arbitrary arrangement. In the extent to which he responded to the suggestions of the moment, and the way in which he pressed them into his service, Shakespeare seems to stand half-way between the two extremes of Wordsworth and Keats, quicker than Wordsworth to respond, and controlled by a firmer purpose than Keats.

Even where the very thought itself, and the subsequent development of the next few lines, seem to have been presented to Shakespeare by his very sensitiveness to the suggestions latent in a single word, one must be careful not to assume too much. The passage quoted above from *The Winter's Tale*, with its transition from *neat* and *cleanly*, through *steer*, *heifer*, and *calf*, to the boy Mamillius and the "Art thou my calf"?—is apparently an example of the thought springing up spontaneously from the play upon words. But though the ideas that enter a poet's mind may seem (as here) to arrive in the most accidental and irrelevant manner, the thoughts and feelings already dominant in the mind will decide what suggestions he will respond to most easily, and what use he will make of them. The association, in fact, which is at the moment strongest comes soonest to the mind, and tends to shut out all those that are weaker. And so if the word *seeling* did really suggest *bond* to Shakespeare he accepted the suggestion on his own terms: it could be used to express what was in his mind.

Here, as elsewhere, the difference between poet and poet is considerable. There are poets, among whom I would once again place Wordsworth, who seem to be little affected by the words they are using, and who are content if the meaning shines through clearly enough. They are

writing in their own native tongue, the language in which they are accustomed to convey their meaning, and from long familiarity with it they are expressing themselves almost without being aware of the very words they are using. It is in many ways, of course, an advantage never to be "at a loss for words"; but such fluency is apt to carry with it its own penalties. The glib speaker, the politician who never needs to pause, is able to convey his thoughts smoothly and clearly; there is almost no perceptible interval between the thought and its expression. To such a man speaking is almost as natural and effortless as humming a tune. But the very ease with which the phrases flow from his lips implies a certain lack of resistance in the words he is using; and there comes a point where language may be so polished and arrive so easily that its user is no longer fully aware of the values of the very words he is using. They convey his meaning, it is true, but they have nothing to offer him except this obedient service. They respond like a class of dull pupils; they never challenge or contradict, or make their own individuality felt—it is enough that they do not interrupt.

There are other poets, however, who would gladly admit that words have been a great stimulus to them, not merely conveying the desired meaning, but opening up new vistas of thought and awakening fresh modes of feeling. To such poets, the act of composition is not so much a business of finding the best words to express what is in the mind, as of working delicately in the medium of words to the satisfactory organization of their thoughts and feelings. They are playing upon an instrument whose notes are apt to vibrate in the most unexpected fashion, and to arouse unforeseen emotions in the mind of the player.

It is surprising how little importance has been placed by

critics upon the actual language available to the poet. After all, it is with words that he has to work, and words are in every language a constantly changing medium, varying from one generation to another. No doubt the difficulty of giving any precise account of the changes in language as they affect imaginative writing may explain the general neglect of this subject, but it is a subject of real importance to poetry. It is, of course, generally realized that the poetry of the eighteenth century owed some of its distinctive tone to a poetic vocabulary at once limited in scope and very different in its culture from that of Shakespeare and his contemporaries; but the critic's obligation to explore this vocabulary and its possibilities for poetry has generally been lost sight of in a conventional abuse of "poetic diction." Several kinds of language are usually available to the poet: he may write in the spoken language of his own day, or he may employ a literary diction which tends to remove poetry from the contemporary world, or he may write in dialect, which again may be living or semi-literary. His choice will in each case determine the sort of poetry he can write, no less than his desire to write a certain kind of poetry will have determined his choice; for each is a distinct medium, prompting a poet to different kinds of achievement. As culture advances, it would almost seem as if the medium of language lost much of its suggestiveness, and that expression becoming easier became too easy.¹

¹ Cf. George Darley. "I cannot but believe, that the great ease with which nowadays language may be wielded, with which we can express ourselves in any form or tone without any particular effort, without summoning or summing up our total energies, or putting them to their utmost for the production of verse, is one reason why modern poetry, while it never sinks so far beneath the medium height as ancient, never rises so far above it. A cultivated language falls of itself into sweetness. . . ."—*The Works of Beaumont and Fletcher*, Introduction, p. xxxviii.

Finally one must take into account the vast differences between the medium of language in one country and in another. Dante, Shakespeare, Racine, Burns, are all using words, but this word-medium differs almost as completely as one musical instrument from another. Contrasting the English language with the Italian, Patmore noted that English "has about four times as many vowel sounds as Italian and a corresponding consonantal power; that is to say, it differs from the Italian about as much as an organ differs from a flute." It was his opinion that Rossetti never really learnt to write English like an Englishman, and therefore failed to get the most out of his medium. "Rossetti uses little beside the flute-notes of our English organ; and, if he had made himself complete master of those notes, it would have been the most that could have been expected of him."¹ The physical basis of a language is bound to exercise considerable influence upon the quality of the poetry that can be written in that language. Nor is the physical basis the sole consideration here: such matters as syntax, the various constructions and word formations peculiar to a language, will also play their part.

Last of all, the words in every language preserve much of the emotional history of the race which has used them. Words which have been employed on high occasions retain some of the splendour which those occasions gave to them. Those words in particular which have passed out of the living speech continue a ghostly existence by virtue of their most memorable associations with literature; words gain as well as lose by having fallen into disuse. *Twain*, for example, has an imaginative value to-day that it can hardly have possessed in the seventeenth century. It would be difficult to track down all the associations which this word

¹ *Principle in Art* ("Rossetti as Poet"), p. 107.

arouses in the mind of a well-read Englishman, but most of them could probably be traced to the Authorized Version of the Bible.

In the year that King Uzziah died I saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple. Above it stood the seraphims: each one had six wings; with twain he covered his face, and with twain he covered his feet, and with twain he did fly.

In the French versions of the Bible, *twain* in this passage from Isaiah is rendered by the word *deux*; the English reader here has the advantage. If one adds further associations,

And behold the vail of the temple was rent in twain,

and

They twain shall be one flesh,

one begins to understand how this word, quite apart from its strangeness to modern ears, is capable of arousing vague but powerful emotions. To the poet, in fact, words are rarely just a means of expression: they are also—they must constantly be—a main source of his thoughts and feelings.

CHAPTER VIII

OTHER POETS

THERE remains the question of literary indebtedness, of the extent to which the poet's inspiration may be derived from previous workers in the same field.

It was one of the claims made by Coleridge on behalf of Wordsworth that he was an original poet; he was not a mere borrower of other men's thoughts and feelings.¹ Yet even so original a poet as Wordsworth can scarcely help being influenced by other poets, and by the books they have written and the words they have used. Few poets, indeed, have been steadily unaware of the work of their predecessors; while some have felt what they did feel only with the help of the poets who went before them; and others, if not so dependent upon their predecessors for their poetic experience, have had that experience enriched from time to time by fortunate recollections from the past.

When a poet is greatly indebted to the work of his predecessors, the fact is generally deplored. It is felt that he is a mere imitator, lacking sufficient originality and creative force to base his poetry directly upon life itself. Such objections are perhaps most frequently to be met with among those who set a low value upon the poetry of the eighteenth century, and who are glad of what seems to be a firm and reliable stick with which to beat Pope and

¹ *Biographia Literaria*, ed. J. Shawcross, vol. ii, p. 113.

his contemporaries. It is true that the thoughts and sentiments of great poets are frequently—perhaps even characteristically—won from their own meditative observation rather than from books¹; but some of the greatest of them (and Shakespeare and Milton can be included here) have owed a considerable part of their poetic experience to other writers. To take exception to this fact is to circumscribe quite unjustifiably the field of the poet's experience. A knowledge and a love of classical poetry, or the poetry nearer to his own day, may be a real and valuable part of the poet's emotional experience. Among English poets, the Authorized Version of the Bible has been as productive of the poetic event as a primrose by a river's brim, or the setting sun, or Mary Morison. Shakespeare, it is true, may have brought most things to the test of his own inner experience; but had Sir Thomas North been less of a writer it is surely conceivable that *Antony and Cleopatra* might have been less of a play. It may be objected that what Shakespeare took from North's *Plutarch* was nothing more than a theme and a number of characters. Such an objection is altogether untrue to the facts. In the famous description of Cleopatra's progress along the Cydnus, the dramatist, as is well known, does little more than improve upon the historian.

She disdained to set forward otherwise, but to take her barge in the river of Cydnus, the poepe whereof was of golde, the sailes of purple, and the owers of silver, whiche kept stroke in rowing after the sounde of the musicke of flutes, howboyes, citherns, violls, and such other instruments as they played upon in the barge. And now for the person of her selfe: she was layed under a pavillion of cloth of gold of tissue, apparelled

¹ *Biographia Literaria*, vol. ii, p. 118.

and attired like the Goddess Venus, commonly drawn in a picture; and hard by her, on either hand of her, pretie faire boyes, appavelled as painters do set forth God Cupide, with little fannes in their hands, with the which they fanned wind upon her. Her ladies and gentlewomen also, the fairest of them were appavelled like the nymphes Nereides (which are the mermaides of the waters) and like the Graces, some steering the helme, others tending the tackle and ropes of the barge, out of the which there came a wonderfull passing sweete savor of perfumes, that perfumed the wharfes side, pestered with innumerable multitudes of people. Some of them followed the barge all alongst the river's side: others also ranne out of the citie to see her coming in. So that in th' end, there ranne such multitudes of people one after another to see her, that Antonius was left post alone in the market place, in his imperiall seate to geve audience.

The heightening of North is to be found in such details as Shakespeare's more vivid realization of the little Egyptian boys working their fans, or the ripples following after each stroke of the oars. To this last feature of the royal progress, recollections of Elizabethan pageantry upon the Thames or similar delights upon the Avon may have contributed. But when all allowance is made for the way in which the dramatist transformed North's narrative, the truth remains that but for North and his *Plutarch* we might never have had the passage at all. Shakespeare had no timid scruples about being original; he never seems to have felt that he must not quarry from another man's works. The whole of his past experience was available to him when he wrote, and some of that experience he had gained from his reading. It is possible to go even farther, and to assert that Shakespeare's reading was often under-

taken for the purpose of supplying him with the necessary experience. I prefer the term "experience" here to "knowledge" or "information," because it must be obvious that Shakespeare obtained far more from North's *Plutarch* or Holinshed's *Chronicle* than a mere collection of facts. In Dryden's pretty phrase about Ben Jonson, "you track him everywhere in their snow."

It may seem unnecessary to insist upon the frequent debts that an author owes to his predecessors, but the whole question of literary indebtedness is beset with confusion. What is accepted willingly enough in Shakespeare is perhaps admitted more reluctantly in Jonson, and may even be pointed to as a blemish and a sure sign of poetic inferiority in a Dryden or a Pope. It is perhaps not unfair to say that at the present day most critics have a secret or openly expressed conviction that a poet who finds much of his inspiration in literature can never be more than a poet of the second order. "The literature which really counts," a modern critic writes, "is the literature which is made, not out of other literature, but out of life."¹ I do not believe that it is possible to draw so simple a distinction. "Made out of life" and "made out of literature" are not, of course, very precise expressions; but great poetry has surely been made by a poet whose initial experience originated in "other literature," whether it was the *Odyssey*, or Plutarch's *Lives*, or Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*. No doubt if it was great poetry the poet entered so fully into the older writer's experience that he felt anew the whole poetic circumstance. No doubt, too, this later experience differed at many points from that of the earlier writer; it came to the poet already organized in the form of literature,

¹ *An Introduction to the Study of Literature*, W. H. Hudson, 1917, p. 418.

and it re-emerged only after it had passed through a new personality and had come in contact with the spirit of a later age. But it is equally certain that amidst all the necessary modifications due to culture, environment, and personality, the influence of the earlier writer and of the words in which he expressed himself was one of the most important factors which determined, for good or for ill, the course of the modern poem. To cavil at the literary origin of such poetry is surely to deny the excellence of an achievement because of some theory as to what it is proper to attempt.

There must, however, be some reason for the widespread distrust of the poet who derives much of his experience from literature, and not directly from life. The explanation most probably lies in the fact that if great poets *may* sometimes get their inspiration from books, mediocre poets, and those who are not poets at all, almost invariably do. Yet there is a distinction to be made here that is frequently overlooked. The mediocre poet plagiarizes because he has not sufficient creative energy to be original. He is at the mercy of every poet who has written before him; he repeats faintly and with loss the thoughts and feelings, the language and the rhythms, of other men. The great poet, on the other hand, is stimulated by the work of other writers, either because he has seen in it undeveloped possibilities, or because he has had a new and valuable experience from his reading, and has thus been moved to work over the old ground again. With such a poet the borrowings he makes are used to finance larger enterprises; they are the means by which new activities are started, and greater energies called into play. It is the new wealth thus created that really matters, not the loan which made it possible. The borrowings of the mediocre poet, on

the contrary, are never profitably employed; they result in a mere transference of capital. At best this transference is made without serious loss; at the worst, the capital is tragically dissipated. The mediocre poet can produce nothing original, because he has had no new and individual experience.

An analogy from another art may make the distinction clearer. It is my experience that if I try to compose a tune, I become involved almost immediately in tunes that I already know; it is impossible for me, who am not very musical, and who have certainly almost no creative energy pressing for an outlet in terms of music, to resist melodies already organized. I can give no definite and controlled direction to my musical impulses, and those were in any case feeble from the start. The result is that any stray tune roaming through my head can immediately surprise and capture my attention, and I willingly surrender to it. Exactly the same sort of fate overtakes the poet whose original impulse is weak. His mood, his theme, his thoughts and feelings, and even the very language in which he expresses them, may all be the property of some other poet. That often he may never suspect his own indebtedness does not in any way lessen it. The ultimate test by which he will be judged is the result, the achievement.

There is rarely such a thing as a "School of Poets," in the same sense as we speak of a "School of Painters." The so-called Lake Poets happened to be living in the Lake District about the same time, and to be on more or less friendly terms; but their work was very different. The Cockney School was a name for Leigh Hunt and those young poets who were suspected of sharing his political views. Poets do not normally range themselves

under some master and endeavour to learn from him; they rarely receive instruction, and still more rarely profit by it. There are plenty of instances, however, of young poets consciously putting themselves to school; but the master is usually some great poet of the past. Keats, for instance, apprenticed himself first of all to Spenser; he had his Milton period, and he had, both before and after his acquaintance with Milton, a deep admiration for Shakespeare. The influence of all three is clear in his poetry.

What is it, however, that one poet can learn from another? The usual answer would probably be "technique." It is quite true that in such matters as language and versification a poet is often greatly indebted to his predecessors. There are even poets—of whom Chatterton is one—who are scarcely poets at all except when they are consciously imitating the manner of an earlier generation. But the fact that Chatterton was almost quite unable to express himself as a poet in the language of his own day seems to indicate that a poet often learns more from his predecessors than technique. Chatterton is one who has learnt to think poetically by saturating his mind in the poetry of an earlier period. So is Beddoes, and so to a smaller extent is George Darley, whose verses

It is not beauty I demand

are almost indistinguishable from the lyrical work of the mid-seventeenth century, and so deceived Professor Palgrave that he placed them in the second book of his *Golden Treasury*. It may be objected that to write as Chatterton did in the idiom of an age long past is not to write with the whole of one's personality; such poetry can express only a part of oneself, and can only express that part by deliberately suppressing the rest. Such an objection

may be met, in part at least, by pointing out that the poet's personality and that of the person who bears the poet's name from day to day are rarely the same thing. In Keats the two came very near to being one; but in this respect he is unusual. The poet is not always poet. When he is most so, he has withdrawn himself from many of those impulses and habits of thought that give him his character as a citizen. Chatterton undoubtedly withdrew into a private poetical world when he wrote his Rowley poems; but so did Spenser, the active and intelligent secretary to Lord Grey in Ireland, when he was writing the *Faerie Queene*. The danger for such poets as Chatterton is not so much that they may write with a divided personality and so express only a part of themselves, as that they may be insufficiently naturalized in the world of their imagination. There was always the risk that cold airs from the eighteenth century might blow into Chatterton's Eden and wither his strange bright flowers. If this seldom happens with Chatterton, it is a measure of the completeness of his imaginative surrender to the Middle Ages. With James Thomson's *Castle of Indolence* one finds oneself less secure; grateful, indeed, for what is there, but always rather apprehensive of what one may come upon round the next corner. Still, *The Castle of Indolence* is an interesting example of how a poet who is none of the greatest may find almost the whole of his inspiration in the work of another, and yet create something that is new and original, and that has value in itself. What Thomson learnt from Spenser was not merely to mimic his stanza or his odd diction; he learnt, to a quite surprising extent, to think like Spenser.

Of the same sort was Keats' indebtedness to Shakespeare. He did not acquire a mere knack of putting things

in a Shakespearean way; he actually learnt from Shakespeare how to set his imagination about its business:

Thus ending loudly, as he would o'erleap
 His destiny, alert he stood : but when
 Obstinate silence came heavily again,
 Feeling about for its old couch of space
 And airy cradle, lowly bow'd his face,
 Desponding, o'er the marble floor's cold thrill.
(Endymion.)

Here Keats is feeling and thinking of the silence as Shakespeare might have done. "The marble floor's cold thrill" is what Keats might have produced on his own account from the first day he began to write poetry, and perhaps it was this side of him that Leigh Hunt encouraged most. But Keats experiences the returning silence as his constant and close reading of Shakespeare has taught him to feel it; the imagination of the young poet has been exercising itself on *Lear* and *Othello*, and he has already caught something of the natural movement of Shakespeare's mind. If I add that Milton appears to have a hand in this passage, it is only to show that at this time Keats was constantly hearing the voice of that poet too, and modifying his rhythms in obedience to it.

Such a relationship between two poets is far from uncommon. One will certainly fail to understand the attitude of the traditional eighteenth-century poet to the Ancients if one thinks of him as one who merely pillages their works and incorporates their thoughts in his own verse. The relationship was far more interesting than that. The constant imitation of Horace, for instance, often implied the attempt of a fervent admirer to make the Latin poet speak as it might be supposed he would have spoken had he lived in the eighteenth century. It was Horace's

mind, his comfortable attitude to life, his easy philosophy that interested so many of his eighteenth-century imitators; and realizing how frequently his odes had a clear application to contemporary life in their own eighteenth-century England, they sought in their imitations to express their own thoughts and feelings through the lips of Horace. If large liberties were sometimes taken with the text of Horace, the results are often undeniably charming. The feeling is sincere, and, within the necessary limits of conscious imitation, new. Nicholas Rowe, for instance, imitating Horace, book i, epistle iv, could write as well as this:

A Table chearfully and cleanly spread,
 Stranger alike to Riot and to Need :
 Such an Estate as no Extremes may know,
 A free and just Disdain for all things else below.
 Amidst uncertain Hopes, and anxious Cares,
 Tumult'ous Strife, and miserable Fears,
 Prepare for all Events thy constant Breast,
 And let each Day be to thee as thy last.
 That Morning's Dawn will with new Pleasures rise,
 Whose Light shall unexpected bless thy Eyes.
 Me, when to Town in Winter you repair,
 Batt'ning at Ease you'll find, sleek, fresh, and fair ;
 Me, who have learned from EPICURUS' Lore,
 To snatch the Blessings of the flying Hour,
 Whom ev'ry Friday at the *Vine* you'll find
 His true Disciple, and your faithful Friend.

This conscious imitation of the earlier poets is, indeed, characteristic of eighteenth-century poetry, and it must be distinguished from strict translation. "If a man should undertake to translate Pindar word for word," Cowley complained, "it would be thought that one madman had translated another." He therefore aimed at writing "in

imitation of the style and manner of the Odes of Pindar," not making it so much his aim to let a reader know what Pindar spoke as "what was his way and manner of speaking."¹

It was not merely the Ancients who were thus imitated. Sir William Jones is said by Chalmers to have left a play in which he had tried to imitate Shakespeare, "not by adopting his sentiments or borrowing his expressions, but by aiming at his manner, and striving to write as he supposes he would have written himself, if he had lived in the eighteenth century."² One is reminded of the practice of Edmund Smith, a contemporary of Nicholas Rowe's. "When he was upon a Subject," his friend Oldisworth notes, "he would seriously consider what Demosthenes, Homer, Virgil, or Horace, if alive, would say upon that Occasion."³ Edmund Smith, in fact, caught fire from the Ancients. This is not, perhaps, the way in which great poems are likely to be written, but it was the way in which some at least of the eighteenth-century verse-writers wrote genuine poetry. The dead author was continually touching with fire the lips of his disciples.

I have dealt at some length with imitation, for the eighteenth-century's attitude towards this matter is one which the twentieth century has made little attempt to understand. The eighteenth-century poet was far from ashamed of imitation; he took pride in it. He considered, indeed, that he ought to be inspired by the great poets of the past, and he was conscious of their presence whenever he wrote. He was content often if some of that glory which

¹ Preface to his *Pindaric Odes*.

² *The Works of the English Poets*, 1810, vol. xviii, p. 433.

³ *The Works of Mr. Edmund Smith*, 1719, p. 10.

still blazed around the literature of Greece and Rome fell across his own pages. His own emotions were frequently those of a reader, but they were none the less genuine on that account. It is true that one or two of the eighteenth century's own sons showed some impatience at this constant indebtedness to the Ancients. "Shall we be as mere leaden pipes," asked Edward Young, "conveying to the present age small streams of excellence from its grand reservoir in antiquity: and those too, perhaps mudded in the pass?"¹ But it is unfair to the best in eighteenth-century imitation to think of the poet as merely draining off ideas and similes and poetical circumstances out of classical literature and conveying them to his own poem. If he stole it was often as a Wesley or a Whitefield may steal from the Bible; the theft was almost unconscious. To the evangelist the Bible is a large part of his most vital experience, its phrases and its imagery have become inseparable from his own natural expression. Similarly, to many an eighteenth-century poet the works of such an author as Horace were the soil which might nourish a new and quite sincere emotion, and an emotion that moved him in his turn to create. The faults of eighteenth-century poetry lie not so much in its origins as in a simple fact too often overlooked—the mediocrity of most of its poets.

The echoing of phrases from an earlier poet has probably always given more delight to commentators than displeasure to readers of poetry. I confess to a feeling of dismay at coming upon the least trace of acknowledged quotation in poetry; the bare sight of inverted commas seems to dissipate at once the magic and destroy the

¹ *Conjectures on Original Composition*, Edward Young, ed. Edith J. Morley, p. 31.

oracular utterance of the poet. But it hurts no susceptibilities to find Spenser's

Triton, blowing loud his wreathèd horne
reappearing in Wordsworth's

Or hear old Triton blow his wreathèd horn.

Nor does it destroy the charm of Collins' beetle winding "his small but sullen horn" to learn that Milton's grey-fly had already wound "her sultry horn" in *Lycidas*. Such reminiscences are always liable to start up in a poet's mind at odd moments. If he is wise he will not cast them out from any misplaced anxiety for complete originality. There is no such thing; for every poet, whether he likes it or not, must feed on the past.

He must also feed on the present. He will be affected—though this again may not be obvious to himself—by his contemporaries. In his preface to *The Revolt of Islam*, Shelley puts this necessary indebtedness clearly. "I have avoided," he writes, ". . . the imitation of any contemporary style. But there must be a resemblance, which does not depend upon their own will, between all the writers of any particular age. They cannot escape from subjection to a common influence which arises out of an infinite combination of circumstances belonging to the times in which they live; though each is in a degree the author of the very influence by which his being is thus pervaded. . . . And this is an influence which neither the meanest scribbler nor the sublimest genius of any era can escape; and which I have not attempted to escape." The poet will be indebted to his contemporaries for some of his ideas, or, at any rate, for making it easier for him to hold those ideas; he may be indebted to them for a new

mode of expression, or a new range of thought and feeling. Mr. T. S. Eliot, for example, has conferred all those benefits on some of his contemporaries; he has given them a new field of poetic experience, and he has shown them—more particularly in *The Waste Land*—how it may best be cultivated.

The ways in which an artist may be influenced by his fellow artists are very various, and any account which aimed at being exhaustive would have to take into consideration the impressions left upon his mind by creative workers in other fields of art. In *The Road to Xanadu*, Professor Lowes has shown how Coleridge's imagination was stirred, not merely by his reading of such books as Frederick Martens' *Voyage into Spitzbergen and Greenland*, but also in all probability by the illustrations appended to the English translation of it. The effect, too, upon Keats' mind of the Elgin marbles and other representations of Greek art is common knowledge. It is not perhaps fantastic to predict that the art of the cinema is likely to leave some traces on the poetry of our own day. Addison, in a series of essays which have been undervalued because they seem to put forward too mechanical a view of poetry, and too mean a conception of the imagination, urges the poet to take as much pains in storing his mind with images as the philosopher does in cultivating his understanding. "He should be very well versed in everything that is noble and stately in the productions of art, whether it appear in painting or statuary, in the great works of architecture which are in their present glory, or in the ruins of those which flourished in former ages. Such advantages as these help to open a man's thoughts, and to enlarge his imagination, and will therefore have their influence on all kinds of writing, if the author knows how

to make right use of them.”¹ I wish to insist that such quickening of the imagination as the poet receives from painting or sculpture or architecture—or from the works of other poets—is properly a mode of inspiration. False conceptions of originality should not blind us to this fact. The poet must sometimes reclaim waste ground for poetry, he must sometimes plough where no man has been before him; but we can hardly demand that he should give up sowing in the old fertile fields because there remain territories not yet under cultivation.

¹ *Spectator*, No. 417.

CHAPTER IX

CONCLUSION

So long ago as in the year 1766 Lessing published his critical work, *Laokoon*, in which he set himself the task of limiting the boundaries of poetry and painting by a consideration of the very different media of those two arts. I mention him now, but he might well have been mentioned earlier, for the critical avenue which he opened up has led me to many of the points I have been making. It might have been expected that Lessing's invitation to the critics not to think of poetry without remembering its physical basis would have resulted in a large output of critical literature elaborating usefully the various issues he had raised. But nothing, or very little, of the sort has happened. Actually, indeed, the medium of poetry was much more a live issue to the critics who preceded him (as may be seen, for instance, in the neo-classic concern over form and diction), than to the Romantic critics who followed after. There is perhaps more than one good reason for the nineteenth-century critic's failure to profit adequately from the points to which Lessing had drawn his attention; but the chief reason is undoubtedly to be found in the great achievements of creative literature in the period following upon the publication of Lessing's book. One of the results of this was to distract attention from questions of "mere technique" (which had received

more than their share of it in the eighteenth century), and to encourage the belief, natural under the circumstances, that the all-important fact for poetry was the poet's inspiration. I hope I have made it sufficiently clear that I share this belief; but it has been my main purpose in this essay to suggest that this inspiration is generally inseparable from the medium in which the poet is working. It has been my experience, however, that many people who are willing enough to admit that the medium plays a large part in other arts—that, to take an example of the late Professor Bosanquet's, "you cannot make the same things in clay as you can in wrought iron, except by a *tour de force*"¹—are oddly unwilling to extend this truth to poetry. The poet is constantly thought of as someone communicating an experience which was already, before he set to work upon it, whole and entire; the words he uses are looked upon as simply embodying that experience, never modifying it, either by adding to or taking away from it. It is in the hope of qualifying such a conception of the poet's activity that I have written this essay.

Admitting that poetry is the communication of some experience, where does that experience end? Has it ended before communication began, or is it not rather still capable of growth during all the time that composition is going on, and right up to the moment of the poet's final correction? There must undoubtedly come a time when the glowing heat of the experience has begun to cool, when it is incapable of being moulded any further by fresh impulses. No doubt a poet revising a poem that he wrote five or ten years ago is coming to it almost as a stranger. The experience it embodies has become objective to him; he has little more chance of feeling again just what he felt

¹ *Three Lectures on Æsthetic*, B. Bosanquet, p. 59.

then, and all that he felt, than has the ordinary sensitive reader of his poem. If he introduces changes at this later date, they have come from a different experience—the experience he has got from reading his own poem, and from such glimmerings of the earlier poetic event as he still retains. But while a poet is actually at work upon the first draft of his poem, the experience which he thought he had to communicate may grow far beyond his original conception of it; and I have suggested that some of the forces responsible for this growth and for the shaping of the poem in his mind are to be found nowhere else than in his medium—in the words he is using, in his rhymes, in the metrical form, and so on. When a poem grows in this way, developing in accordance with the nature of the medium, one has no right to accuse the poet of having had a weak or muddled experience. The extent to which inspiration is directly obtained from the medium will vary from one poet to another; but the difference to the poetry is not one between a genuine and a false inspiration, between sincerity and insincerity. It is, as I have endeavoured to show, a difference of kind, depending upon the completeness of the original experience and the extent to which it was already focused in the mind of the poet when he began to write.

Where he can visualize the experience as an emotional event already possessing a definite outline, the medium of communication—though it can never, of course, fail to exercise some influence—will be almost passive. But where the experience, though sufficiently powerful, is not fully possessed and comprehended by the poet before composition—either because he has not thought long and deeply over it, or because it is too complex, or simply because it is in his nature to write from an immediate

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excitement—then, I believe, the medium with all its varying possibilities is more likely to take a hand in suggesting to the poet some, at least, of his material, and in influencing the direction in which his thoughts shall move. To take a hand: I will not contend for more than that; but it would be something if this fact were more generally recognized. Criticism might then devote less time to the separate consideration of poetic form and matter, and busy itself with the poem, which is the product of both.

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