WARTON LECTURE ON ENGLISH POETRY

THE STUDY OF FORM AND THE RENEWAL OF POETRY

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WHEN Thomas Warton published his poems in the year 1777, Dr. Johnson amused his friends with an effective epigram:

> Whereso'er I turn my view,
> All is strange, yet nothing new;
> Endless Labour all along,
> Endless Labour to be wrong;
> Phrase that Time has flung away,
> Uncouth words in Disarray;
> Trickt in Antique Ruff and Bonnet,
> Ode and Elegy and Sonnet.

The little squib is also a serious critical judgement; yet it was not Warton's poetry that was 'wrong', but Johnson's criticism. A poem cannot be wrong, as a clock can be wrong, or a sum in arithmetic; for the poet 'nothing affirmes, and therefore never lyeth'. But a critic can certainly be wrong, and is never more likely to be wrong than when he thinks poetry can be said to be so.

Thus we may agree that Warton's poetry is poor stuff; he was, as a contemporary put it, 'of a poetical nature, not a poet'. But Johnson's judgement on it—or rather the habit of mind which led to the judgement—has indeed proved to be wrong; its wrongness was demonstrated by the poetry of the following half-century, the poetry of Wordsworth and Coleridge, Scott and Byron, and their immediate successors. For, whatever we may think, in our last judgement, of the whole business we call the Romantic Movement—so diverse, so uneven in its achievement, so ambitious in some aspects, so casual in others—no one would now deny that it was a great renewal of English art and imagination. And it is equally a matter of agreement that the renewal was prepared and stimulated by those eighteenth-century scholars like Warton, who studied the poetry of the

past, and encouraged themselves and others to think that it was not wholly dead, but could in some way become a source of new life.

I want to look at the contribution that such scholarship—and in particular the study of poetic form—can make from time to time to the renewal of poetry; and has made at various times. I am not assuming that any such contribution is needed to justify literary research; the pursuit of knowledge is justified of itself. But from the utilitarian point of view formal or antiquarian studies will only be vindicated by the appearance of a fine new work which would undoubtedly never have come into being without them: when, say, Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* is followed, thirty years later, by *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. And what may interest us to know is not only whether that kind of result has occurred frequently, and may be expected to occur again, now and then; but how it comes about—what are the processes which lead to the original creation: for this may throw light on many things, including the nature of poetic vision itself.

There is no mystery about some of the steps or processes that have usually been involved; we can trace them easily enough in the work of poets below the first rank, and see how they prepare the way for other, greater, artists, and for the supreme creations. When we come to these, *The Ancient Mariner* or *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*, we do indeed encounter mysteries; but mysteries no greater than we must always acknowledge in works of the imagination. Thus we can see how Warton's and Percy's studies of medieval literature and the ballads worked on the consciousness of eighteenth-century poets. Some confusion, some futility, are inevitable in any period of poetic experiment; there comes into existence a hybrid form, which applies some degree of Augustan polish and point to the ballad-stanza. It turns out to be excellent for burlesque, as in *John Gilpin*, but of very doubtful value, in other moods, moral or sentimental, such as that of Goldsmith's *Hermit*:

> Then, pilgrim, turn, thy cares forego;
> All earth-born cares are wrong:
> Man wants but little here below,
> Nor wants that little long.

It is only fair to add that the qualities of compression and controlled logical structure which here seem to us so inappropriate, so incompatible with the traditional ballad style,

represent an essential element in the creation of the new form: that is, the *literary* ballad. For after all, there was not to be, and never could have been, a precise reproduction of the ancient ballads—though Swinburne attempted it later. Study and imitation were rightly directly toward producing poems which would be more consciously shaped, more coherent and more sustained, than the anonymous folk-originals. The literary or 'refined' ballad runs from Goldsmith to Tennyson, and the later nineteenth century; as a literary 'kind' its pitfalls are obvious, whether one thinks of flat solemnity in Wordsworth, prettiness and shallowness in Tennyson, or the note of forced energy in Kipling. Yet, treacherous as it is, it was one of the great discoveries of the Romantic period, as 'modern' in its possibilities as the dramatic monologue; its potentialities for intense poetry have been proved, not only by Coleridge and Keats, but by the work of Yeats a hundred years later.

But to return to the steps which lead from Percy to *The Ancient Mariner*: of course they are not all traceable, and in the present connexion one must omit the last stage, the conjunction of Wordsworth and Coleridge. But the poetry of Chatterton is one most important advance, because it marks a far deeper insight into what was implicit, morally and aesthetically, in the old ballads. In *The Dethe of Sir Charles Bawdin* Chatterton constructs a solid and rational story in the eighteenth-century manner—here it is an historical anecdote; and he constructs it, in spite of his archaisms, on an equally eighteenth-century linguistic foundation. Yet already there is vital creation: in the enjoyment of mock-medieval language, in a certain forcible crudity of expression, and in the glowing, boyish vision of the Middle Ages. Sir Charles accepts with manly resignation his unjust sentence by the tyrant Richard:

> 'Wee all must die,' quod brave Sir Charles;
> 'Of thatte I'm not affearde;
> 'What bootes to lyve a little space?
> 'Thanke JESU, I'm prepar'd: . . .'

The descriptive narrative is carefully unfolded, with a literary skill alien to the true ballad. We have the procession to the scaffold:

> Uponne a sledde hee mounted thenne,
> With lookes fulle brave and swete;
> Lookes, that enshone ne moe concern
> Thanne anie ynne the strete. . . .

The Freers of Seincte Augustyne next
Appeared to the syghte,
Alle cladde ynne homelie russett weedes,
Of godlie monkysh plyghte:

Ynne diffraunt partes a godlie psaume
Moste sweetlie theye dydd chaunt;
Behynde theyre backes syx mynstrelles came,
Who tun'd the strunge bataunt.

So the way is prepared for *The Ancient Mariner*. All Chatterton's verse is pseudo-medieval; he takes as a basis the metre and syntax of his own time, which is to him a source of strength, being a natural mode of expression. But his poetry is an entirely new creation, because he has had a vision of past civilization. His imagination was awakened partly by the general antiquarian movement of his time, but chiefly by the medieval glories of his native Bristol:

> He was always very fond of walking in the fields, and particularly in Redcliffe meadows . . . There was one spot in particular, full in view of the church, in which he always seemed to take a peculiar delight. He would frequently lay himself down, fix his eyes upon the church; and seem as if he were in a kind of extasy or trance. Then, on a sudden and abruptly, he would tell me, *that steeple was burnt down by lightning*: *that was the place where they formerly acted plays*. . . .[1]

In other words, Chatterton writes out of the inspiration of an individual independent genius, though his experience and insight are those of a boy of sixteen; and there is no essential difference between the *way* in which he makes use of the poetry of the past, and the way of Coleridge and Keats in *The Ancient Mariner* and *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*. These two later ballads are more obviously works of startling individuality, in which the poets project their deepest personal obsessions. But the more striking result comes from the greater depth of feeling and understanding; like Chatterton, the later poets are to find their opportunity in the vocabulary of poetic forms that has been made available to them. Much antiquarian devotion, much blundering or insensitive imitation of old models had to precede the moment when Wordsworth and Coleridge attempted to use ballad-verse for high art. And by that time their knowledge of the old ballads had entered into their critical theory, their

[1] William Smith's account, quoted by E. H. W. Meyerstein, *A Life of Thomas Chatterton* (London, 1930), p. 164.

conception of a new kind of poetry, with a new directness and truth, dictated by powerful, universal emotions.

In the work of isolated individual poets the same method of progress can often be seen. Take as an example the difference between certain lyrics in Blake's *Poetical Sketches*, written before he was twenty, and the *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience*. First we have some *pastiches* of Elizabethan songs:

> My silks and fine array,
> My smiles and languish'd air,
> By love are driv'n away;
> And mournful lean Despair
> Brings me yew to deck my grave:
> Such end true lovers have . . .

In the *Mad Song* there is already a glimpse of the later, more symbolic Blake:

> Like a fiend in a cloud,
> With howling woe,
> After night I do croud,
> And with night will go; . . .

Ten or fifteen years later these early images, half echoes, will be absorbed into his new religion of poetry and prophecy. In *Infant Sorrow*:

> My mother groan'd! my father wept.
> Into the dangerous world I leapt:
> Helpless, naked, piping loud:
> Like a fiend hid in a cloud.

By this time Blake has struck out his personal religious philosophy from the philosophy of Swedenborg; and an important part of it is his assertion that 'the Poetic Genius . . . was the first principle and all the others merely derivative'.[1] He was led to this theory of art as prophecy by the enthusiasm for the Elizabethans and Ossian that is reflected in the *Poetical Sketches*, as well as by his study of Gothic art as an engraver's apprentice.

The summary examples I have been giving need perhaps one more comment, which has to do with the title of this lecture. Wordsworth, Coleridge, Blake were not led to discover new kinds of poetry only by the study of 'form' in its narrowest sense. 'Form' is too often taken to mean merely a certain pattern of

[1] *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell.*

verse, or some other regular measurable principle; nowadays it may even be thought to refer to any kind of regular metre, as distinct from 'free verse'. In fact it includes every aspect of verbal expression—rhythm, vocabulary, tone, syntax—even the spelling and appearance of the poem on the printed page. And form is therefore ultimately indivisible from substance: the distinction between them is only a working hypothesis, and the scholar who investigates form will find himself led on, step by step, to consider the whole process by which the poem has come into being—both from the side of the poet's act of creation and from the side of the society in which he lived. The Romantic poets did not study only the rhetoric or dialectic of the old ballads; Blake did not study only the sound and colour of Elizabethan lyrics: they were led on to reconstruct whole modes of being—phases of civilization crystallized in poetry.

So it is that a literary revolution, a renewal of poetry, can be helped, or even mainly determined, by a study of the past. That something of the kind happened in the Wordsworth–Coleridge revolution is an almost too familiar feature of our literary histories. It is now almost as much accepted doctrine that the Eliot–Pound revolution of forty years ago provides a parallel in our own time: that it also served the purpose of bringing poetry up to date, in a changed society; that it too was a shedding of what was worn or decayed, what had become an end in itself, an encumbrance, and not a means. The parallel is closest when one compares the *Lyrical Ballads*, and above all their *Preface*, with the deliberate aim of the two Americans to find a poetic idiom—new rhythms and diction—which would bring poetry closer to contemporary speech. Consequently we tend to emphasize that aspect of the Modern Movement which shows Pound devising his 'free verse' with the help of Anglo-Saxon poetry, and Eliot learning both from these discoveries of Pound and from Elizabethan blank verse. Among the formal influences those are perhaps likely to be stressed at the expense of others.

Yet, as indeed we know, the mixture was a very rich one—notably richer than in the late eighteenth century. The scholarship which had then begun to explore old and exotic literatures, had spread vastly wider in the nineteenth century, and had opened up new worlds of culture, not only in the European past but in the oriental languages. By the beginning of the present century writers began to be faced with the equivalent of what, for artists, is called 'the imaginary museum': a confused treasure-house of alien forms of expression and experience.

Moreover, the Western world had become far more cosmopolitan —life and thought in all countries had become more interdependent. In France in the nineteenth century there had been a grand explosion of literary creation which could not but be felt by writers everywhere, however vigorous their native traditions. If English poetry were to become modern, it would have to become in some degree less English; this may sound regrettable, but it was what happened, and it went together with a great renewal, a widening of perspectives, an acceptance of a new cultural 'balance of power'.

But the general picture must not obscure the particular point: that the Modern Movement was preceded and prepared, no less than the Romantic revival, by the study of old and alien poetic forms. A large proportion of Pound's earlier technical experiments derive from the late nineteenth century; and here I would think the medieval strain especially important—his enthusiasm for early Italian, Old French, and Provençal, which looks back to the Pre-Raphaelites and Swinburne. Swinburne's translations of Villon, and his life-long addiction to medieval French lyric forms, might seem to have had no better effect than to stimulate the minor poets of the 80's and 90's, and the shallow strains of Henley or Belloc. All this side of Pound's interests might have been counted as mere backwash, flotsam and jetsam of the 90's; as Mr. Nixon put it, in *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*:

> The 'Nineties' tried your game
> And died, there's nothing in it.

But the sense of form in Pound and Eliot owes much, ultimately, to the Pre-Raphaelites, who had gone back beyond Petrarch, beyond even Dante, to the poets of the *dolce stil novo*. Dante remained a supreme model, a paragon of medieval art (and the steady emergence of Dante, through English and American Dante studies, is a fine example of the growth of our 'imaginary museum'); but in *The Spirit of Romance*, in 1910, we see Pound progressing from the mood of Rossetti's *Early Italian Poets* to a quite new appreciation of the quality of Cavalcanti and Guinicelli:

> The best poetry of this time appeals by its truth, by its subtlety, and by its refined exactness . . . it is not rhetorical, it aims to be what it is, and never pretends to be what it is not.[1]

[1] *The Spirit of Romance* (London, 1952), p. 116.

Pound's understanding of the early Italians has undoubtedly had its effect on Eliot's mature style. His sense of the crystalline, four-square, concentration of meaning in, say, Cavalcanti, has entered into the poetry Eliot distils to make a new manner of speaking of moral experience: precise, spare, yet luminous. It is not accidental that *Ash Wednesday*, for all its predominant debt to the *Purgatory* of Dante, opens with a line from Cavalcanti's most famous *ballata*:

> Because I do not hope to turn again . . .
>
> Perch' io non spero di tornar giammai,
> Ballatetta, in Toscana . . .

We can see here a development like that which led from Percy, through Chatterton, to Coleridge. Rossetti's and Swinburne's use of the early Italian forms and material is only a basis for their own kind of rich, blurred, Victorian rhetoric and sentiment. This is what makes *The Blessèd Damozel* an original creation, as startling in its way as its companion-piece, the other poem Rossetti wrote at eighteen, *Jenny*; but there is really nothing of the virtues of medieval poetry in such lines as these:

> 'We two', she said, 'will seek the groves
> Where the lady Mary is,
> With her five handmaidens, whose names
> Are five sweet symphonies,
> Cecily, Gertrude, Magdalen,
> Margaret and Rosalys . . .'

This is Victorian, Tennyson with a difference; it corresponds, in our graph of development, to Chatterton's creation of a new poetry from a keen, confused delight in his vision of the Middle Ages. By the time Pound and Eliot come to admire and recommend Cino and Cavalcanti, they have learnt to appreciate the *thing in itself*, and they can therefore isolate certain qualities—the interplay of emotion and abstract thought, the serious attempt to interpret experience; and these qualities can suggest new directions for their own poetry. They have reached that deeper, more philosophical stage of understanding which corresponds to Coleridge's response to the old ballads.

Just as in the pre-Romantic revival of the eighteenth century, the revival of old forms by the Victorians had its feeble side; it is well represented by the 'rondeliers' of the 1880's, Gosse and the others: 'A dainty thing 's the villanelle.' And we find in 1888

as sarcastic a comment as Dr. Johnson's on the poetry of Warton, when Walter Skeat was goaded into writing a *villanelle*, on how to write a *villanelle*:

> It's all a trick, quite easy when you know it,
> As easy as reciting ABC;
> You need not be an atom of a poet . . .
>
> You start a pair of rimes, and then you 'go it'
> With rapid-running pen and fancy free;
> You need not be an atom of a poet.
>
> Take any thought, write round it or below it,
> Above or near it, as it liketh thee;
> It's all a trick, quite easy when you know it . . .

Yet it adds force to my argument, that even the despised *villanelle*, dwindling into faded prettiness, should have taken on a new lease of life fifty years later, when the Modern Movement had come to a head. The *villanelles* of William Empson in the 1930's, and a single example by Dylan Thomas in the 1950's, show the transformation of this apparently slight and tinkling form into a vehicle for intense, crackling or burning ferocity or bitterness. What was needed to produce these surprising pieces was the conjunction of a fragile but rigid form, divorced from the matter with which it had always been associated, and a new complexity of thought and mood. What was needed, in short, was that an individual genius should attempt, and succeed in, something *incongruous*.

Which brings in another aspect of the question. What I have said so far runs the danger of implying that a study of poetic form must go towards cultivating a sense of literary 'decorum': towards that classical and Renaissance assumption, in other words, that for every subject or type of argument there is an appropriate form and style; and that a capacity to see and apply the appropriate form, or to combine a given form only with an appropriate topic, is the key to good writing. But, while I do believe that there is always a congruence between what is said and the manner of saying it, and that this is indeed the secret, the essential condition, of all good art, it is certain that the congruence may be often quite deeply hidden; and that the scope of the classical and neo-classical idea of decorum is far too narrow to cover its possible variations. 'Decorum' has never failed to restrict the range of poetry—or at least, to try to do so.

But the study of form can operate by a sense of the incongruous, as well as by a sense of 'decorum', to throw off new creations. Indeed, a living sense of decorum (as opposed to a critical formula) is incomplete without a sense of what is incongruous; and this in its turn can become an inspiration for original works which consciously defy the dead assumptions cramping poetry or criticism. Modern poetry in particular has drawn much of its force from the possibilities of incongruity—corresponding plainly enough to the conflicts and confusions of modern experience. But the process is clearer in the work of two seventeenth-century masters: Milton and Dryden. In the religious epic and mock-heroic satire respectively, they show an originality that comes from the conscious exploitation of incongruity within a tradition of established forms.

Both *Paradise Lost* and *Absalom and Achitophel* derive from the Renaissance revival of epic grandeur, the theory and practice of the Heroic poem. Sixteenth-century critics and poets had striven to marry the tradition of chivalrous romance and the remoter glories of classical epic. With the Counter-Reformation and the consolidation of Protestantism, fundamental religious themes, such as the Creation and the Fall, had taken on an increased importance. Milton is not particularly original in his choice of theme for a great and serious poem; if he had kept to his first intention of giving it a dramatic form, his debt to continental religious drama would have been obvious. But in taking the Fall of Man, already linked of course with the Creation and the Fall of the Angels, and developing it on strictly epic lines, he gave the subject a completely new dimension: what begins by appearing to be purely poetic artistry soon takes on a new meaning, becomes an element in the moral design.

The Fall of Man had been treated within the tradition of the morality plays, elaborated by the later Renaissance; the Creation had been cast into hexaemeral narrative poems, aiming at epic dignity, but precluded by the subject from any close allusion to Homer and Virgil; the Revolt and Fall of the Angels had been exploited, for example, by Valvasone in *L'Angeleida*, more or less in the manner of Tasso—that is, in the mode of chivalrous romance with a strong infusion of epic. Only in Milton do we find the three themes, having been brought together, all treated by means of the classical epic forms; and those forms observed to perfection.

The epic forms are important above all in two stretches of the poem which have been admired and condemned to excess,

respectively: the first two Books, with Satan and the fallen angels in Hell, and Books V and VI, with the Revolt and War in Heaven. The admiration and condemnation here have often been misguided: Milton's intention has not been understood, because readers do not realize, or will not accept, that his presentation of Satan and the War in Heaven in Homeric terms is a deliberate incongruity, a deliberate upsetting of many of our preconceptions, in order to further the message of the whole poem. Satan as a defeated leader rallying his forces, and the account of his rebellion and fall, are directly related to Milton's rejection of war as an exercise in true virtue:

> Warrs, hitherto the onely Argument
> Heroic deem'd, chief maistrie to dissect
> With long and tedious havoc fabl'd Knights
> In Battels feign'd; . . . (IX. 28–31)

There is a parallel between Milton's judgement on epic valour and his judgement on ancient philosophy: both emerge only from the combination of drama and comment. Satan's magnificent Stoicism in Book I:

> The mind is its own place, and in it self
> Can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n—

is negatived, or 'placed', by Milton's summary of ancient philosophy as discoursed by the Fallen Angels in Book II:

> Vain wisdom all, and false Philosophie:
> Yet with a pleasing sorcerie could charm
> Pain for a while or anguish, and excite
> Fallacious hope, or arm th' obdured brest
> With stubborn patience as with triple steel (II. 565–9)

So the moving epic valour of Satan's defeated legions—

> such as rais'd
> To highth of noblest temper Hero's old
> Arming to Battel, and in stead of rage
> Deliberate valour breath'd, firm and unmov'd
> With dread of death to flight or foul retreat (I. 551–5)

is negatived by the grotesque malice and senseless destructiveness of the War in Heaven—the invention of gunpowder, the

hurling of mountains—as well as by Michael's words to Adam in Book XI:

> To overcome in Battel, and subdue
> Nations, and bring home spoils with infinite
> Man-slaughter, shall be held the highest pitch
> Of human Glorie, and for Glorie donẽ
> Of triumph, to be styl'd great Conquerours,
> Patrons of Mankind, Gods, and Sons of Gods,
> Destroyers rightlier call'd, and Plagues of men
> (XI. 687–93)

It seems to me that those little incongruities which Dr. Johnson complained of, especially in Book VI ('The confusion of spirit and matter which pervades the whole narration of the war of heaven fills it with incongruity'), as well as the difficulties many readers have in accepting that Satan is both an epic hero and a force for evil, are a part of the deliberate larger incongruity, in which spiritual conflicts are presented in military terms. War originates with Satan, it is invented by the devil. So the glory of war, presented at its finest in classical epic and culture, is satirized or at least criticized, by recreating epic poetry in a new context—an incongruous context. It was by the finest possible appreciation of the form and the appeal of Virgil and Homer that Milton arrived at this result: not an Arthuriad, or even a *Davideis*, but a spiritualized epic, where even the form becomes a comment on good and evil.

The incongruity between the form and substance in *Paradise Lost* is, however, subtle and intellectual: an example of those 'second intentions'[1] in which Milton's poetry abounds, especially in its vocabulary. It might also be said that, even if Milton's intention can be traced, it is not fully effective in controlling the poetry and our response to it. Just as the Satanists argue that Milton's conscious beliefs fail to subdue his instinctive preferences, and that he therefore makes Satan attractive and God repellent, they might hold that Milton's delight in epic warfare breaks out of the moral frame, whether for good or ill: to move us in Book I, or to jar in the War in Heaven. But in any case this debate cannot afford to overlook his deliberate exploitation of an old form in a new way, and in a way which is apparently incongruous.

It is easier to see the uses of incongruity in Dryden, where they are broad and boisterous. When Dryden writes of the English

[1] Walter Pater, 'Style', *Appreciations*, p. 16.

nation, looking back over a century and a half of intermittent religious controversy and civil strife:

> The *Jews*, a Headstrong, Moody, Murmuring race,
> As ever try'd th' extent and stretch of grace;
> God's pamper'd people whom, debauch'd with ease,
> No King could govern, nor no God could please;
> (Gods they had tri'd of every shape and size
> That God-smiths could produce, or Priests devise:) . . .

we are swept along by the vigorous political wit, the delight with which he scores his points; and may be misled into thinking that everything is ease and fun, when it is indeed quite as much a matter of high art and sublimated critical thought. Behind Dryden's wonderful new formula for political verse lies a consideration of the Heroic poem as long as that which produced *Paradise Lost*. Dryden has suddenly perceived that, if the Heroic poem is to be modern, it can only be as a kind of burlesque; but he would not have found the right mixture of greatness and wit, if he had not been preoccupied for many years with the technique of English 'heroic' verse, and with finding a subject and a manner which would enable him to write an English epic.

The spirit of the mock-heroic should be the easier for us to catch because, as I have indicated, so much modern verse relies on an exploitation of the incongruous. When the Modern Movement produced its archetypal work, *The Waste Land*, it was through the sensibility of a very rare individual and his personal crisis. But in its literary method the poem provided a formula for its age: the deliberate, sustained weaving together of established forms and associations—old styles, myths, images—and the experience of modern man:

> . . . The change of Philomel, by the barbarous king
> So rudely forced; yet there the nightingale
> Filled all the desert with inviolable voice
> And still she cried, and still the world pursues,
> 'Jug Jug' to dirty ears.

One may call this mock-heroic, as it is a familiar term, and flexible enough. But I would prefer to call it 'mock-Romantic'; for just as the heritage of the Heroic poem lay behind the mock-heroics of Dryden and Pope, the heritage of the Romantic Movement, from the 1790's to the 1890's, lay behind Eliot. He uses the forms associated with it in deliberately startling connexions: thus the Elizabethan blank verse, which, from

Lamb and Beddoes to Rupert Brooke, was associated with the extravagant, the refined, the grotesque, the consciously poetical, is given by Eliot a hard, dry, purpose, focused on sordid detail:

> While I was fishing in the dull canal
> On a winter evening round behind the gashouse . . .

The mock-heroic, or rather the mock-romantic, is omnipresent in our twentieth-century poetry. And in so far as this new mood or approach has helped poetry to adjust itself to new conditions, and opened up a whole new range of tone and subject-matter, it has proved its value. Yet one may doubt if it is now proving to be a help or a hindrance. As the mock-heroics of Dryden and Pope gave a new lease of life to epic conventions, so the mock-romanticism of the moderns has perhaps only given a new lease of life to romanticism—and perhaps even to the least acceptable side of romanticism. Mock-heroic and mock-romantic verse are really by-products of those traditions they make use of, and it may be that a new impetus of such a derived, almost negative, kind cannot sustain itself successfully for very long. If the mock-heroic in England can perhaps be traced back to *Paradise Lost*, it certainly cannot be traced down further, as a source of vital creation, than Pope's *Epistle to Augustus*. Will mock-romanticism prove to be as short-lived, in this century?

If one analyses some examples from Eliot and from his chief successor, W. H. Auden, one can see how complex and precarious is the modern mood. In Eliot's *Ash Wednesday* it emerges clearly as anti-romantic, the criticism and 'correction' of certain basic impulses of emotion and rebellion which we rightly associate with the Romantic poets and their followers:

> And the lost heart stiffens and rejoices
> In the lost lilac and the lost sea voices
> And the lost spirit quickens to rebel
> For the bent golden-rod and the lost sea smell
> Quickens to recover
> The cry of quail and the whirling plover
> And the blind eye creates
> The empty forms between the ivory gates
> And smell renews the salt savour of the sandy earth.

Regret, the hope of returning to youth and love, the recurrent fierce desire to leap towards freedom and the life of the senses: in the context of the poem, these are defined as temptations,

perhaps the most dangerous obstacles to spiritual resolution and progress, even if they represent the impossible and are mere illusions. Eliot's anti-romanticism has a strictly theological, highly intellectual stamp, reminding us of Milton's repudiation of the heroic ideal. Yet does not the poetic validity, the emotive power, of the passage derive precisely from those impulses which it rejects—or from the images of natural beauty and liberation which go which them? The poet is using emotional resources which he declares to be bankrupt.

A similar contradiction can be seen in Mr. Auden's poems of the early 1930's, in which an urgent new social philosophy was used to criticize and reject the still surviving English social tradition—its patriotic and moral beliefs, its sense of the value of the nineteenth-century combination of class-culture and individual responsibility:

> Heroes are buried who
> Did not believe in death
> And bravery is now
> Not in the dying breath
> But resisting the temptations
> To skyline operations. (XXIV)[1]

A new energy seems to be released by the sardonic, clear-sighted recognition that traditional poses are dead or doomed:

> In my spine there was a base;
> And I knew the general's face:
> But they've severed all the wires,
> And I can't tell what the general desires. (IX)

But the new mood attaches no less excitement to 'the tall unwounded leader Of doomed companions', or 'the insufficient units Dangerous, easy, in furs, in uniform'; the anti-romantic, deflationary tone, the clinical or sociological terms, only become poetry by drawing on a sophisticated version of the morality that seems to be discarded:

> As for ourselves there is left remaining
> Our honour at least,
> And a reasonable chance of retaining
> Our faculties to the last. (XII)

Neither Mr. Eliot nor Mr. Auden could prolong in their own writing the precarious balance they established in the 1920's

[1] This and subsequent quotations are from the *Poems* of 1930.

and the 1930's respectively: Eliot moved towards a more purely religious poetry, Auden moved away from the poetry of revolutionary crisis to a poetry of liberal democracy, suffused with individual feeling and wit. Their innovations were taken over by the next poetic generation, only to reveal that the new conventions were somewhat limiting. Without the immense intellectual distinction of Eliot, or Auden's fertility of invention, the new poetry becomes a poetry of defeat, of emotional poverty. The English poets of the mid-twentieth century are for the most part less anti-romantic than reluctantly unromantic —timid, constricted, depressed.

In all this the poets' awareness of form, particularly of writing in a current modern style, plays an apparently large part. Yet the original sensitivity to form has in fact almost vanished. In this respect the Modern Movement is only following a law of development one can see at work throughout literary history. Once a poetic renewal establishes itself, its more technical aspects tend to be overlooked, partly because they are taken for granted. What tends to drop out, to the disadvantage of later comers, is the discrimination of the 'minute particulars' of form. When a new style is established it is soon debased by the old assumption: that the current style is the only possible style. The neo-classical style became a tyranny in the eighteenth century; the Romantic idea of poetry became a tyranny as the nineteenth century ran its course. The Modern Movement, however various and flexible it may seem, is on the way to tyrannizing over our own time.

The obstacle to change or renewal in poetry is not, therefore, strictly speaking, the resistance offered by dominant or approved *forms*; though these may seem to be barriers, and must be a main object of attack. The real obstacle is always a dominant mood; a state of mind or a set of beliefs in which society has come to be imprisoned. Hence it would be extravagant to claim that the study of form can of itself bring about any wide or deep changes in poetry. The history of English poetry over the last three centuries, glanced at in the instances I have given, rather suggests that a poetic revolution requires, not only an interest in formal experiment, and one or two outstanding individual talents, but a European, or at least a national upheaval. To us in Western Europe and Great Britain, revolutionary change on such a scale has only come, in the past, at fairly long intervals; and as far as modern society and modern poetry are concerned, it seems likely that their present mood will last a long while yet. However,

I may conclude with two examples of the way in which the sway of literary doctrines can be checked or modified by the mere existence of unique poetic genius, as a part of our inheritance. The mere fact of Shakespeare's greatness, in the years between 1660 and 1790, prevented neo-classical criticism from achieving an absolute ascendancy: we may trace its liberalizing effects in Dryden's dramatic essays, and in Johnson's *Preface*. In our own time, could one not say that the verse of Gerard Manley Hopkins has had a similar disturbing but salutary effect on the critical doctrines of the Modern Movement, no less than on the practice of poetry? Since the appearance of Hopkins's poems in 1918, at the moment when the poetic revolution began to take effect, he has come to be accepted as a modern poet, born out of due time. Yet the two leading spirits of the movement, Eliot and Pound, rightly regarded his style and genius as alien and irrelevant to their own purposes. Hopkins in fact is not a modern poet; he concentrates and renews, within the diamond-walled compression of a small body of verse, a quality of language and feeling that we can trace back through Tennyson to Milton, to Donne, to Shakespeare, to the Middle Ages and Anglo-Saxon verse. His influence and prestige have led to some bad writing in the last thirty years; but they have also served to keep alive the appreciation of a kind of poetry which would otherwise be almost wholly disesteemed. The fact that many of Hopkins's admirers would not accept this view does not make it wholly untenable.

We have seen that in the study of poetry, the poetry of the past has again and again, at different times and in different ways, contributed to a rebirth of creative art; and there is good reason to think that poetic vision cannot fulfil itself except in a society where literary studies keep alive the sense of what has been done supremely well, and may be done again—though of course it will always be done with a difference.