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POETRY AND THE  
ORDINARY READER



**By M. R. Ridley:**

**SHAKESPEARE'S PLAYS: A Commentary**  
**THE NEW TEMPLE SHAKESPEARE (Editor)**

# POETRY AND THE ORDINARY READER

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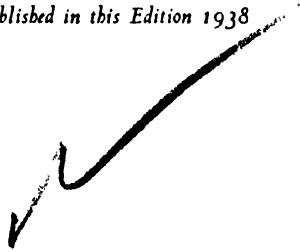
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## PREFACE

THIS book started as a series of talks given for the B.B.C. under the same title. It appeared from some of the resulting correspondence that there might be room for a book in which the substance of the talks was given more permanent form, with more detailed treatment of certain points, and fuller illustrations, than the limits of time permitted in the talks themselves. The book has now for a while been out of print, and I have taken the opportunity offered by republication to clear up some obscurities by a certain amount of rewriting and by expanding the sections on Similes and on the Study of Contemporary Poetry. But I have made no attempt to change that informality, inevitable in a 'talk,' which it is certainly difficult and probably undesirable to eradicate.

My thanks are due to the following authors and publishers who have kindly permitted me to draw illustrations from copyright matter:

Basil Blackwell (*A Hope for Poetry* by C. Day Lewis); Burns, Oates & Washbourne Ltd (*In no Strange Land* (*The Kingdom of God*) from *The Works of Francis Thompson*); Chatto & Windus (*Requiem, To S. R. Crockett*, and *The Scotsman's Return* from *Poems* by Robert Louis Stevenson); The Clarendon Press (*A Passer-by, Elegy on a Lady, London Snow* from *The Poetical Works of Robert Bridges* (6 vols.) and for references to Garrod's edition of *Keats*); Constable & Co. (*Bees' Song, An Epitaph*, and *The Listeners*

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References are also given throughout, where possible, to the *Golden Treasury* (3rd edition, Macmillan, with additional Book V selected by Laurence Binyon) and to the *Oxford Book of English Verse*.

M. R. R.

June 1938.

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## CHAPTER I

### THE STUDY OF POETIC TECHNIQUE

THE object of this book is to help its readers to enjoy poetry. That is a simple and unambitious aim, and there will be no theories of poetry nor disquisitions on aesthetics. But the enjoyment of poetry is something worth attaining. It is, I suppose, along with the enjoyment of music, with which indeed it has many affinities, one of the truest, profoundest, and most inexhaustible of human pleasures, a pleasure therefore which surely should not be forgone without at least the attempt to secure it. Many people miss it, either because they erroneously think that they have not the capacity for it (just as many people say, as erroneously, that they have no ear for music) or because they have no idea how to set to work to use their capacity. There is a notion as common as it is foolish that, whereas any one can enjoy prose (which in this context usually means fiction), the enjoyment of poetry is the prerogative of a few high-brows with some special odd kink in their make-up or some unusual capability. If one examines this notion, even for a moment, its foolishness becomes immediately apparent. After all, what is poetry? Whatever magical effects it may produce, it is on the face of it nothing but particular words arranged in a particular order. Any one, therefore, who can understand the meanings of words, who can hear sounds, and who has the most elementary sense of rhythm, has the *capacity* for enjoying poetry. But there is a large number of us who fail to use their capacity because they do not know how; they



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do not know what to look for. To take a very homely parallel, not in the sphere of art at all; if one takes a man who knows nothing whatever about the game of football to see a football match, all he will see is thirty or twenty-two people taking very violent and apparently rather purposeless exercise; he will be aware of a certain general air of excitement; and he will probably discover, if he is reasonably intelligent, that it is the object of each side to get the ball to the other end of the ground. But the methods by which they propose to achieve this end, and the rules which limit and condition their efforts, will be a completely closed book to him. Because he knows nothing of the technique of the game, he will not really in any proper sense enjoy it, and all the finer points will quite certainly escape him. Exactly the same is true in the very different realm of poetry. For the full enjoyment of poetry, enjoyment raised to a pitch where the word becomes too trivial to describe that stirring of the emotions, that troubling of the waters of the spirit, which the great poets can produce, some training and some experience are needed. Poetry is indeed 'particular words in a particular order'; but we have to be quick to see *why* the words are those particular words, and *why* they are in that particular order. The reader who has taken the trouble to understand why is very richly repaid. To revert to our homely parallel, the man who knows a game when he is watching it says to himself, 'That man is out of position and the combination will break down,' or 'He had no business to make that move in those circumstances, and he didn't deserve to succeed,' or 'Only the born player could have done that, unorthodox though it looked, at that moment.' Just so with the man who really knows his poetry; he says, 'That word is out of place and ruins the line,' or 'That metre is the wrong one for that subject,' or 'The use of that unexpected word there is the touch of the true poet,' and

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so on. In short, you must understand the technique of the game. Otherwise, just as the ignorant watcher gets nothing but a feeling of uninstructed excitement, so the untrained reader gets little from reading poetry but a vague emotional reaction, which is a poor thing in itself, and the pleasure of which soon palls. There are, no doubt, many people who will tell us that such technical study of poetry is 'out of place in the mysterious realms of the imagination,' or that it 'blunts the fineness of one's aesthetic perceptions,' or other such meaningless phrases. There is no need to believe them. Is any one seriously going to tell us that a knowledge of sonata form, or the ability to disentangle a combination of motifs, is going to destroy our appreciation of the Moonlight Sonata or the prelude to *Die Meistersinger*? Well, no more is a knowledge of sonnet form, or an ear for subtle echoes of sound, going to destroy our appreciation of Milton's sonnet on his blindness or Keats' *Ode to a Nightingale*.

\*It is perhaps worth while spending a moment or two in making sure that we have no misunderstandings as to what we are doing, and clarifying our ideas upon the right relation between technical analysis and full appreciation. It is true that while a reader, or any investigator of any work of art, is conducting the actual process of analysing the technical methods by which the total effect is produced, his emotions must of necessity be in abeyance. But when he has completed this technical analysis, this more or less scientific dissection, then he returns, not to the *study* but to the *appreciation* of the work as a whole, and returns with an infinitely enhanced awareness of its beauty. It is also, I think, important that, in so returning, he should deliberately change his attitude of mind, and that at any rate the details of the technical analysis should not be too vividly present in his consciousness. The reader of poetry should bring from his technical study an acuter ear and

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a generally increased sensitiveness to the details and intricacies which make up the total effect, and which before such study are apt to remain unnoticed, or at best to merge into a misty and blurred impression.

Before going further it may be worth while to test this by an experiment. Here is a passage, very familiar, so familiar that it would be hackneyed if it was not one of the things which no familiarity can stale. Will any reader who wishes to try the experiment first just read it, aloud, with no attempt at all to study technical details?

Or ever the silver cord be loosed, or the golden bowl be broken, or the pitcher be broken at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern; then shall the dust return to the earth as it was; and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it.

(Ecclesiastes xii. 6, 7.)

Every one is aware that that is a beautiful piece of English prose. But I suggest that we miss a great deal if we are aware merely of a vague general beauty and are not acutely aware of certain specific beauties. May we therefore analyse this passage? 'Or ever the silver cord be loosed.' You notice the pair of sounds, the short *i* and *er* in 'silver.' Next, 'or the golden bowl be broken.' Here comes in, as it were, the second subject. The writer is playing with the long *o* sounds of 'golden,' 'bowl' and 'broken,' a sort of bell tolling. Now in the next passage you will notice how the two sounds already announced, or rather the pair of sounds and the single long vowel, are twice repeated, but with the order in the second repetition reversed: 'or the pitcher be broken at the fountain,' and, this time with the long *o* first and the pair of sounds second, 'or the wheel broken at the cistern.' You will notice also, in that first half of the complete passage, the undercurrent of the OR sound of 'or' and 'cord.' In the next part the long *o* is entirely discarded, though the other sounds persist: 'then shall

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the dust *return* to the *earth* as it was and the *spirit* shall *return* unto God who gave it.' Now we have the whole passage in front of us. So far we have studied only the vowel sounds. What of the consonants? These are probably, in this passage, less important than the chiming vowels, and less important than they are in other passages which we shall consider later, but they are worth a passing notice, the repeated *v* and *l* of the first phrase, the repeated *b* and the carrying on of the *l* in the second phrase, and the repeated *t* of the pitcher-cistern passage, linked to the first two phrases by the recurrence of the *b* and the *l*. But the most noteworthy point is the marked difference between the consonants of the first two phrases and those of the last two. In the first two ('or even'—'broken') there are only three dentals, one *t* and two *d*'s; in the last two ('then'—'gave it') there are eleven, eight *t*'s and three *d*'s, and one cannot help being aware of the more staccato movement which is produced by this preponderance, and which stresses the complete change in effect produced by the next point for our analysis, namely the change of rhythm. In the first half the cadences are mainly what is called 'falling'; that is to say that in each group of words into which the reader naturally divides the passage there is an unaccented syllable following the main accent, ('pitcher'—'be broken'—'at the fountain,' and so on). The second half is mainly in rising rhythm, i.e. the unaccented syllables *precede* the main accents ('shall the dust'—'return'—'to the earth,' and so on, though with a most effective final fall, 'gave it') and, as we shall see later, when studying rhythm more in detail, one of the differences between rising and falling rhythm is that the former is much more abrupt and staccato. There is one more point worth noticing, the effect in the pitcher-cistern section of the word 'wheel.' If the rhythm ran in some such way as this,

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‘or the pitcher be broken at the fountain, or the *lever* be broken at the cistern,’ there would be the monotony of exact rhythmical repetition, which is avoided by the omission of the word ‘be’ and by the use of the strong monosyllable. This variation in rhythm is a technical point which is always worth looking out for. There is a somewhat similar instance in the often misquoted last line but one of Stevenson’s *Requiem*:<sup>1</sup>

This be the verse you grave for me:  
*Here he lies where he long’d to be;*  
*Home is the sailor, home from sea,*  
*And the hunter home from the hill.*

Not

*Home is the sailor, home from the sea,*  
*And the hunter home from the hill.*

We have now conducted a fairly careful piece of technical analysis; we have certainly not by any means exhausted all the material for such analysis that the passage contains, but we have done enough for the purposes of our experiment. If any reader will now again read the passage aloud he will, I think, find that his now attuned ears are awake to new and subtler beauties than they heard the first time.

Or ever the silver cord be loosed, or the golden bowl be broken, or the pitcher be broken at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern; then shall the dust return to the earth as it was; and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it.

Any reader who does not agree that this is so, who considers indeed that for him the passage has lost rather than gained, or who feels that to apply such methods to such a passage is a kind of desecration, will have less than no use for the remainder of this book, and will save himself a good deal of unnecessary exasperation by

<sup>1</sup> *Golden Treasury*, ccccxli; *Oxford Book of English Verse*, 848.

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closing it at once or throwing it in the fire. But those who have found the experiment illuminating may care to repeat it on other passages. Take, for example, the first three verses of the sixtieth chapter of Isaiah:

‘Arise, shine; for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee. For, behold, the darkness shall cover the earth, and gross darkness the people: but the Lord shall arise upon thee, and his glory shall be seen upon thee. And the Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising:

This is a famous passage in which the writer is playing upon another long vowel, in this case long *i*. ‘Arise, shine; for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee.’ There is no mistaking in that the abruptness of the attack, caused partly by the rising rhythm and partly by the ringing emphasis on the vowel of ‘arise’ and ‘shine’ and ‘light.’ Then comes a passage in which the key vowel is first discarded, and then, as the shadows begin to fade, rather tentatively, even timorously, resumed: ‘For, behold, the darkness shall cover the earth, and gross darkness the people: but the Lord shall arise upon thee, and his glory shall be seen upon thee.’ Then in the third verse the sounds of the first are repeated, but even more triumphantly and insistently: ‘And the Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising.’ One can, of course, try exactly the same experiment on any famous passage, whether of prose or poetry. Some further examples are given in the Appendix (p. 129). But for the moment may I put before you a very familiar piece of more obvious poetry (more obvious because it is written in recognizably verse lines), the first stanza of Keats’ *Ode to a Nightingale*?<sup>1</sup> In that stanza there is a point which it is extremely easy to miss. We shall recur to

<sup>1</sup> G. T. ccxc; O. B. E. V. 624.

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this stanza later, but I submit it to you at once, with no comment, nor even an indication of what the specific problem is, as an 'exercise' for the entertainment of any readers who are beginning to think that there is perhaps something to be gained by the methods of analysis which we have examined.

My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains  
My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,  
Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains  
One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk:  
'Tis not through envy of thy happy lot,  
But being too happy in thy happiness,  
That thou, light-wingèd Dryad of the trees,  
In some melodious plot  
Of beechen green, and shadows numberless,  
Singest of summer in full-throated ease.

Now there are all sorts of technical points the study of which equips the reader for the full enjoyment of poetry, and the following chapters will attempt to do no more than introduce you in a most elementary way to such study. For example, unless one makes some sort of study of the rhythms which poets use, one is reading with ears that are largely deaf. Why are certain metres suitable for certain subjects? Why is 'The Assyrian came down like the wolf on the fold' effective, if rhetorical, and 'Oh Fame, if I e'er took delight in thy praises' cheap and tawdry? Is it merely the sentiment, or is it something to do with the relation between metre and subject? What is it that differentiates Milton's blank verse from, let us say, Shakespeare's or Tennyson's?

Again, how exactly are we to read poetry so that we hear it as the poet intended us to hear it? I shall try to illustrate how vitally important it is that we should train ourselves to *hear* poetry and not *see* it, if we are to safeguard ourselves against missing all manner of effective

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ornaments and often something much more essential than mere ornament. What, again, is the effect of rhyme, whether in the close-knit heroic couplet, or in the loosest forms of the same metre, or when it is welding an elaborate stanza form into a coherent whole, or when it is giving a dancing grace to a succession of shorter lines? We have to be alert also not to miss assonances, those delightful echoings of sound in which all the great poets have been so skilful. We have to be alive to differences of poetic form, to the different emotional effects, for example, produced by the Shakespearean sonnet form with its three verses and clinching final couplet, and the Miltonic form, at once freer and more unified.

We need not pay too much attention to those who would have us believe that this line of study is misguided, and indeed somewhat irreverent, because it has no relation to the way in which the poet worked. Such objectors usually seem to believe that the poets all dashed off their best work in a first fine careless rapture, and, like Shakespeare (if it is true even of him), never blotted a line. Except for occasional miracles like Coleridge's *Kubla Khan*,<sup>1</sup> that marvellous product of a kind of trance, all the great poets have been craftsmen, and not infrequently you can surprise them in their workshops. Take two instances. Milton's *At a Solemn Musick*,<sup>2</sup> that superb invocation to the Blest Pair of Sirens, reads as though it had been written in a white heat of ecstasy, within a few minutes of the conclusion of a great piece of music, while the vibration of the final chord had hardly faded from the poet's ears. But, in actual fact, in the manuscript book in the library of Trinity College, Cambridge, there are in Milton's own hand for large portions of that poem four drafts, the earlier often almost comically bad. He made, for example, five different shots before he finally adopted the

<sup>1</sup> G. T. cccxvi; O. B. E. V. 350.    <sup>2</sup> G. T. cxlvii; O. B. E. V. 300.



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phrase which is apparently so inevitable, 'endless morn.' Milton made that poem, one of the most flawless, and, one would think, one of the most spontaneous, in our language, in the sweat of his brow and with a deal of carpentering.

Take again two of the most famous, and justly famous, lines in English—a chief jewel of the regalia—Keats' lines on the magic casements:

The same that ofttimes hath  
Charm'd magic casements, opening on the foam  
Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.

But that jewel needed a good deal of cutting. We know that Keats first wrote 'the wide' instead of 'magic,' and that he wrote two other words, almost certainly 'ruthless' and 'keelless,' before he achieved 'perilous,' thereby, amongst other things, producing a more fluent rhythm and discarding an obvious for a more subtle assonance. At this point I wish to guard against a misapprehension. The last thing I have any wish to suggest is that Keats deliberately said to himself, 'I don't want the assonance<sup>1</sup> on the hard *c* of "casements," but on the *p* of "opening," and so I must dig about in the dictionary for a word with *p*.' No poet, I suppose, ever worked like that, nor indeed any one who had advanced beyond the kind of Meccano stage of versification which is done with a footrule and a rhyming dictionary. It was just that Keats' ear was dissatisfied by 'keelless' and satisfied by 'perilous'; but that does not mean that we, starting as it were from the other end, cannot quite legitimately, and extremely profitably, set to work to discover, if we can, *why* his ear was satisfied by the one and not by the other;

<sup>1</sup> The commoner word, 'alliteration,' is, according to the dictionary, properly used to describe only the recurrences of sound at the beginnings of words, and therefore in the main of consonantal sounds; it is therefore perhaps better to confine ourselves to the more general word, 'assonance,' which will cover internal as well as initial recurrences.

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and in the process of discovery we train our own ears to a greater delicacy of appreciation.<sup>1</sup>

Finally, let no one suppose that when he has made such technical study he has in any sense 'explained' poetry. There is something in all great poetry far beyond the reach of this technical examination. In his short story, *Wireless*, Kipling, who, besides being many other things, was an acute literary critic, makes an interesting and significant comment. The narrator is speaking of the 'magic casements' passage and of another in *Kubla Khan*:

A savage place! as holy and enchanted  
As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted  
By woman wailing for her demon-lover!

and he says: 'Remember that in all the millions permitted there are no more than five—five little lines—of which one can say: "These are the pure Magic. These are the clear Vision. The rest is only poetry."' That magic is not in any sense explicable. But technical study will at least secure this, and I am not sure that it is not the greatest part of its value, that you dwell on the poem long enough, that you live with it till 'the sure magic strike.' One of the cardinal difficulties about the appreciation of poetry is to secure that in some way we should allow it *time* to produce its effect, and further, since no two readers react identically, time for it to produce its own peculiar effect on each reader's individual capacity for appreciation. To have a poem flung at one's head by an imperious and imprudently enthusiastic critic, with a demand for an uncritically docile surrender to its 'appeal,' is perhaps the most certain way to ensure our permanent dislike of that poem. Equally, however, to take a poem and merely read it over and over again (worst of all to be compelled to learn it as a

<sup>1</sup> For further examples see Appendix, p. 150.

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set task of repetition) does indeed leave our own critical faculties in independence, but, being a process uninstructed and monotonous, does not produce any progressively deepening insight into the poem. We need, that is, to devise some method whereby we can spend a considerable time over the poem, but in such a way that we feel that the time spent is leading us somewhere. Nothing can explain the strange alchemy whereby the 'particular words in a particular order' are suddenly transmuted into the fairy gold. But I am sure that the road which is most likely to lead one at any rate part of the way to the end of the rainbow where the crock lies buried is just this dusty one of technical study. And if one can rouse one's interest in this study, and regard it not merely as a means to an end, though that it primarily is, but also as having an interest of its own, the road is not so intolerably dusty after all.

## CHAPTER II

### THE SOUND OF POETRY. I. RHYTHM

LET us now begin the examination of something more specific, namely the *sound* of poetry. Because poetry has a sound. Most readers will be tempted to say, 'Well, we don't need anybody wasting ink and paper to tell us that.' Part of the object of this chapter is to try to make these readers less sure of it. One of our troubles nowadays in appreciating poetry is that we all of us read so much print. It may be nothing more than the daily paper, or it may, for that matter, be only advertisements, but at any rate we are perpetually reading, and the result of this is that to a great many of us, perhaps the majority, words convey their meanings through our eyes, not, that is, by their sounds but by their appearances. It is probably true that any one who is a rapid reader is taking in meanings not even by the appearance of individual words but by the appearance of whole blocks of words. Any one who is interested can test this by picking up any ordinary novel and watching his own processes as he reads.<sup>1</sup> And this tendency has gone so far that many of us, even when we do hear a word in speech, proceed to visualize it as it would look in print. For example, if we are listening to the broadcast weather report, and we are told, as happens with regrettable frequency, that there is a deep depression approaching from the Atlantic, do we not many of us *see* the words 'deep depression' rather

<sup>1</sup> Or, if he still does not believe this, let him amuse himself, the next time he is in a train, by watching the eyes of someone opposite who is reading a book. They move in jerks, seldom more than two to a line of print.

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than *bear* them? Now, since 'deep depression' is not a particularly euphonious combination of sounds, and as, in spite of a very obvious alliteration, it has no artistic design upon us, it does not very much matter whether we see it or hear it. But for poetry it matters enormously. Poetry, even now, is meant to be what all poetry originally was, heard, not seen. The channel by which it reaches the mind must be the ear, not the eye. This for two reasons. First, a large part of the appeal of poetry is a musical appeal. Those who demand of their reading, and of poetry as well as prose, that its appeal should be primarily intellectual, and who attach the first importance to what they call the 'meaning' of what they read, are apt to feel a certain resentment at this peculiarity of poetry, and they are no doubt quite right in demanding from any literature something a great deal more than mere euphony. But they cannot get away from the plain facts. Both music and poetry appeal to that very primitive instinct which reacts to a recurrent regular beat—for example the tom-tom which inflames the savage at his dance or the brass band leading a procession which sets every one within earshot marching in step. This beat we call time in music and rhythm or metre in poetry, and in both arts its function is the same. Further, the melody of music, and even in some strange way its harmonies, have their counterparts in the sounds, as apart from the accents, of the words in poetry. Therefore, unless we are content to miss all this side of poetry, to be deaf to a great deal which the poet, as he wrote, intended, we must in some way overcome the handicap imposed by our daily practice of taking in words through the eye, and manage to *bear* poetry. That is, we must get someone to read it to us, or find a convenient solitude or a submissive audience and read it aloud ourselves, or, if we are obliged, as for the most part we are, to read in silence, then we must train ourselves to hear it with a

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sort of inner ear. But in any case we must at all costs escape from the domination of the eye. For—and here is the second though less important point—even when the eye does not displace the ear it is continually deceiving it into thinking it is hearing something which it is not hearing. We shall recur to this point later, but it will not be waste of time to look at a few instances immediately. In *Comus*, line 96, Milton says:

the gilded car of day  
His glowing axle doth allay.

Now every one sees at once, and because he sees therefore hears, the obvious assonances on *g* and *d* and *l*. But if you are told that at least as important an assonance in that passage is on *k* some of you will not at first believe it, because the first *k* is masquerading as the *c* in 'car' and the second *k* is playing hide-and-seek as the first half of the *x* in 'axle.' Even if that passage is read to you, you probably miss the assonance, because of the trick already mentioned of visualizing the words as you hear them. If the passage had been in some totally unfamiliar foreign language your ears would have caught it, but because it is in English you are instinctively splitting the sounds up into their familiar component words and then seeing those familiar words, so that 'car,' when you hear it, and much more so when you read it, is C-A-R, not K-A-R, and the second letter of 'axle' is a most uncompromising *x* which not one person in a hundred even thinks of as being *ks*.

For our second instance may we revert to a passage which I submitted to you in the preceding chapter, the first stanza of Keats' *Ode to a Nightingale*? I want to draw your attention to the point which I mentioned as being so easy to miss. It is clear that the main sound which is ringing through that stanza is short *n* followed by either *n* or *m*. But three of the recurrences at first

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*sight* almost inevitably escape one; the word 'some' in lines 3 and 8 and the word 'one' in line 4. If you can get somebody to read that very familiar stanza aloud, or read it to yourself with your ears open, you will hear, I think, how much it gains when you are not missing three notes in it; and if you must read it to yourself and therefore see it, forget if possible all the spelling you ever learnt and see the word 'one' not as o-n-e but as w-u-n. (It is perhaps worth considering whether we are here on the track of one reason why so many people enjoy poetry when they are children and find the enjoyment fading as they grow. The child, in the nature of the case, has not had enough of this disastrous training in the reading of printed words to falsify the impression which sounds make upon his ear.) Here is the stanza with the *um* and *un* sounds indicated by heavy type:

My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains  
My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,  
Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains  
One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk:  
'Tis not through envy of thy happy lot,  
But being too happy in thy happiness,  
That thou, light-winged Dryad of the trees,  
In some melodious plot  
Of beechen green, and shadows numberless,  
Singest of **summer** in full-throated ease.<sup>1</sup>

So now the real difficulty becomes apparent. We clearly have to take in the words as words, or the poem will not mean anything; but we also have to hear them, or we miss a great deal of the meaning in a wider sense. It is not nearly so simple a business as just saying 'we must hear the poem,' because, for all that I have been

<sup>1</sup> For further examples of the 'deceiving eye,' see Appendix, p. 136. And there has been one trifling example already in this book. I wonder how many readers objected, on p. 5, that the right count in the first phrase was three *d*'s and no *f*. But the last sound of 'loosed' is in fact a *f*.

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stressing the sound of poetry, only part of poetry's appeal, not all of it, is musical. And the more one studies poetry the more one becomes aware that there is hardly any poet in whom the balance of the appeals, the musical appeal to the ear, and the intellectual appeal to the mind, and perhaps one should add the pictorial appeal to the eye, are kept in such perfect adjustment that we need not be on our guard against the preponderating influence of one of them. For example, we are often told that Swinburne writes very beautifully about nothing, in other words that his appeal is solely musical. This is less true than it often appears. What is true is that Swinburne's melodies, quite apart from any sense which the words may convey, are so magically beautiful that they tend, unless we are extremely watchful, to anaesthetize the intellect, and we find it almost excruciatingly difficult to wrench ourselves out of the kind of opium dream into which the music has lulled us and force ourselves to take in the poet's meaning. When we do so, we find that quite frequently he has a reasonable amount to say (though whether indeed much of it is worth saying is another matter). Browning, on the other hand, is as a rule very full of meaning, not, as a rule, in spite of Browning societies, particularly recondite, but very often so obscurely phrased, and adorned with such grotesque imaginative gargoyles, that all the attention we possess is enlisted in the task of discovering what he is after, and so, unless we take deliberate pains about it, we have no attention left for listening to his melody. The upshot is that Browning is frequently supposed to be a poet who paid no attention to the musical side of poetry. Whereas in fact he is alike one of the most original and one of the most successful metrical experimenters in the English language, and is capable of very real and very diverse beauties of melody.



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From all this I hope it begins to appear that the full appreciation of poetry calls for a good deal of quite conscious preliminary training, and, while we are actually reading, for an unrelaxed attention to keep our various receptive faculties in harmony and equilibrium, so that none of them is dominated or ousted by the others.

It is natural to begin a more detailed examination of the sound of poetry with some study of rhythm. I wish to enter into technicalities as little as may be, but the acceptance of some of them saves a great deal of time. The recurrent beat which I mentioned earlier depends either upon 'quantity' or upon 'accent.' In Greek and Latin poetry it depends upon quantity, and as the ordinary technician's method of indicating rhythms, even in English, depends upon the Greek and Latin methods and terminology, and as furthermore the classical rhythms, and the rules which govern them, have considerable intrinsic interest, it will not be waste of time to spend a few moments in considering them. This is particularly so because the relation between poetical rhythm and musical time is very much more obvious in 'quantitative' than in 'accentual' scansion. The classical metrists counted certain syllables as 'long' and certain others as 'short.' A line of poetry was composed of a certain number of 'feet,' a 'foot' consisting of two or more syllables. The test of the similarity of one 'foot' to another was the total 'length' of the syllables composing each 'foot,' and with one or two unimportant exceptions a 'short' syllable was regarded as having half the value of a 'long' syllable. That is to say, supposing that a 'long' syllable is regarded as being equivalent to a crotchet in music, a 'short' syllable is equivalent to a quaver. It is clear then that if the famous 'foot' known as a dactyl, i.e. a 'long' syllable followed by two 'short' syllables, is represented as ♩ ♪ ♪, the exact equivalent of




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that in time will be ♩, which is in fact the 'foot' known as a spondee and is, as in the most famous of the classical metres, the hexameter, regarded as being the equivalent of the dactyl. And, let us at once rid ourselves of the notion that the classical writers as it were appointed a committee, which said quite arbitrarily 'Certain syllables are by the rules of this game to be counted "long" and other syllables counted "short."' If you start with the assumption that there was perhaps some sense in their methods, you will very shortly see that almost all their rules were based upon actual fact. A 'short' syllable is one containing a short vowel provided that the short vowel is not hampered by two consonants following it. A 'long' syllable is one containing a long vowel. Will you for a moment consider three English words, 'but,' 'boot,' and 'bust'? First take the pair 'but' and 'boot.' Is it not obvious that, quite apart from any rules, it does actually take you longer to arrive at the end of the combination of sounds in the word 'boot' than at the end of the combination of sounds in 'but'? To give each word its proper value your voice is obliged to dwell longer (longer in time, in actual fractions of a second) on the long vowel of 'boot' than on the short vowel of 'but.' Further, in the word 'bust,' though the vowel itself is just as short as in the word 'but,' you cannot get to the end of the whole word so quickly because your tongue has to get itself round two consonants instead of only one. Consequently it was a perfectly reasonable practice which regarded a short vowel followed by two (or more) consonants as 'long,' not as 'short.' And equally reasonable that a short vowel followed by two consonants of which the second is a liquid should be regarded as 'doubtful,' since the liquid comes more trippingly from the tongue. Compare for example 'Whitby' with 'Whitley,' or 'cutpurse' with 'cutlass,' or 'agnostic' with 'agree.'




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The chief feet recognized by the classical metrists were as follows:

### I. Disyllabic.

<i>a.</i> Iamb		usually indicated by	∪ —
<i>b.</i> Trochee		”	— ∪
<i>c.</i> Spondee		”	— —

### II. Trisyllabic.

<i>a.</i> Dactyl		”	”	— ∪ ∪
<i>b.</i> Anapaest		”	”	∪ ∪ —
<i>c.</i> Tribrach		”	”	∪ ∪ ∪

There is a variety of others, but they are not particularly common, and they occur mainly in metres which are either non-existent or unusual in English and are therefore hardly relevant to our present purpose.

English metre depends primarily upon accent, little if at all upon quantity, the place of a ‘long’ syllable being taken by an accented syllable and that of a ‘short’ syllable by an unaccented. And, as we shall see, this dependence upon accent permits very much greater variety in beat than was possible in Greek and Latin. The whole question of English prosody is indeed extremely complicated. To begin with, whereas a ‘long’ syllable (in the classical sense) is a long syllable, and that is all about it (it cannot be ‘more long’ or ‘less long’), a stressed syllable may be heavily or lightly stressed, and unhappily we have not yet elaborated a recognized notation which will indicate the gradations. For example, to take an instance to which we shall recur, here are two lines of six syllables each:

To war and arms I fly.

A sword, a horse, a shield.

Now if we scan those by the classical notation we get the same scheme for each, namely three iambic feet,

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∪ — | ∪ — | ∪ — |, and even if we try marking stresses we get the same result . | . | . |

Both methods, that is, make the lines identical with one another. But to the sensitive ear they are not identical at all, since there is a 'weak stress' on 'I' in the first line, and none on the corresponding 'a' of the second. Or, if you prefer, this may be regarded as an instance of a further complication which is bound to be present in accentual scansion, namely that one cannot wholly disregard 'length' in the classical sense; in this instance it is perhaps not so much that 'I' is stressed, even weakly, as that it is a 'long' syllable, and therefore the voice has to linger on it more than on the 'a' which is both unstressed and 'short.'

There are those who think that we should try to simplify the whole question by discarding all notion of 'feet' and concerning ourselves only with stresses; but this is not satisfactory, since a metre depends not only upon the number of stresses in a line but upon the regularity of their incidence, that is upon the recurrent intervals between the stresses, those intervals being normally occupied by unstressed syllables. Unless the stresses are more or less equally spaced you have not got a metre at all. Take for example the first line of Gray's *Elegy*:

The curfew tolls the knell of parting day.

By whatever notation you propose to indicate it the regular beat in that line is manifest. But suppose you re-write it as:

The curfew the knell of parting day tolls,

there are still five 'stresses,' but there is no longer anything that can be called a rhythm. And the classical notation with its 'feet' is a convenient method of making

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obvious to the eye the regular recurrence. The original line would be indicated as  $\cup - \cup - \cup - \cup - \cup -$ , which clearly falls into feet thus,  $\cup - | \cup - | \cup - | \cup - | \cup - |$ , whereas the rewritten line would be indicated as  $\cup - \cup \cup - \cup - \cup - -$ , and that equally clearly cannot be divided into similar feet, that is, it has no recognizable rhythm. But it is fair to point out at once that whereas in a classical metre the intervals between successive long syllables are exactly similar, much greater irregularity, or at any rate apparent irregularity, is permissible in accentual metres, largely because the intervals between stresses, though they must be roughly identical in duration, and though, as has just been said, normally occupied by unstressed syllables, need not be occupied by a recurrent number of unstressed syllables (since two very light syllables, e.g. 'in a,' are about equivalent in time to a less light, though still unstressed syllable, such as 'for'), but are sometimes occupied simply by silence, which in music would be represented by a 'rest.' Perhaps, as I have been using the classical notation, though with the caution that it represents something different in English from what it does in Latin or Greek, it will be as well to conclude this general introduction to the study of metre by an instance which will emphasize the wide divergence in practice between the two metrical methods. I think that the divergence is more superficial than is sometimes thought, since the time element, which is the essence of quantitative scansion, is an inescapable and important element even in accentual scansion, and the instance which I am taking is particularly interesting, since, though relevant to all English prosody, it was actually used by its inventor to show that Anglo-Saxon scansion was both quantitative and accentual.<sup>1</sup> Here are ten

<sup>1</sup> A paper by W. E. Leonard in *Studies in English Philology in Honor of F. Klaeber*. (Quoted by courtesy of the University of Minnesota Press.)

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lines. The number of syllables per line varies from twenty-one to six. But all those ten lines can be and should be read to exactly the same metrical beat. The way in which the inventor intended the experiment to be conducted is as follows. The reader should read the first line over several times, tapping with his pencil on the arm of his chair to mark the syllables on which the stress of his voice naturally falls. Having thus determined the beat he should try to read the passage straight through, keeping exactly the same beat and allowing one full beat at the end of each line. If he has done it right the eightieth tap of his pencil will come after the end of the tenth line.

Over yonder afar in Morocco's domains where the roofs of  
the mosques are ashine. . . .

They're fearing now already some night-attack of mine. . . .

Yonder afar in Morocco where roofs of mosques do shine. . . .

Yonder afar in Morocco where roofs of mosques shine. . . .

They're fearing already some night-attack of mine. . . .

Afar in Morocco where mosque roofs shine. . . .

Far down south the mosque-roofs shine. . . .

Where they're fearing, fearing, fearing some night-attack of  
mine. . . .

Far down south mosque-roofs shine. . . .

Over yonder afar in Morocco's domains in the kingdom so  
soon to be mine.

I will now try to indicate the answer to the problem by printing the passage again, dividing the lines into feet, marking the stresses, and giving an equivalent musical notation for each line. (See pages 24 and 25).

I admit, and the more readily because the admission emphasizes the intricacies of the subject, that the musical

Over yón der afár | in Moróccó's domaíns | where the roófs | of the mósques | are ashíne |

They 're féaríng nów | alréády | some níght | -attáck | of míne |

Yón der afár | in Moróccó | where roófs | of mósques | do shíne |

Yón der afár | in Moróccó | where roófs | of mósques | shíne |

They 're féaríng | alréády | some níght | -attáck | of míne |

Afár | in Morócco | where mósque | -roófs | shíne |

Fár | dówn | south | the mósque | -roófs | shíne |

Where they 're féaríng, féaríng | some níght | -attáck | of míne |

25

Fár | dówn | south | mósque | -roófs | shíne |

Over yónder afár | in Morócco's | domáins | in the kíngdom | so sóon | to be míne |



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notation chosen is arbitrary. It might well be argued that the base is anapaestic, that the feet in the first line ought therefore to be represented not by two semi-quavers and a crotchet but by two quavers and a crotchet, and that the pause at the end of the line ought therefore to be indicated by a minim rest. The trouble with that notation would be that the equivalent in a disyllabic foot would be two crotchets, and with the possible exception of 'where roofs' twice, and 'where mosque' once, there is no foot which can rightly be regarded as a spondee (two crotchets).

This example, whatever its intrinsic interest, will at least have emphasized the fact that the whole business is set about with difficulties. To make any attempt to deal with them would occupy far too much space in a book of this scope, and would be only in part relevant to the book's purpose. In what follows there will therefore be many statements which are highly disputable, but which there is no time to dispute about. Some of the problems will become explicit as we go along, and readers will be able to make up their own minds about them. For the moment it is enough to say that the rhythm of lines will be indicated either by 'stresses,' or by the classical notation, or by both, whichever seems most helpful, it being understood that the classical long mark (—) stands for an accented syllable.

The main differences of rhythm in English depend on whether the accent comes at the beginning or end of the foot and whether there is one unaccented syllable to the foot or more. When the accented syllable follows the unaccented the rhythm is known as 'rising,' and when it precedes it, as 'falling.'

Let me now try to illustrate certain of the chief English metres. To begin with I will try to select lines in which the natural accent of the voice falls in each foot upon the syllable which will make the rhythm completely regular.

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1. That sīnks | with āll | wě lōve | bělōw | the vērge.

That is the most famous and frequent of English metres; it is in rising rhythm with two syllables to the foot and is ordinarily described as an iambic pentameter.

2. Īn mŷ lāst | hūmblē prāyer | tō the spīr | ĭt ābōve.

That is rising rhythm, anapaestic.

3. Here is an instance of rising rhythm but with a combination of iambic and anapaestic feet (and incidentally one syllable over):

One wōrd | ĭs tōō ōf | tēn prōfāned

Fōr mē | tō prōfāne | ĭt.

Now for the other type of rhythm.

4. Hāppŷ | fīeld ōr | mōssŷ | cāvērŷ,

Chōlcēr | thān thē | Mērmāid | tāvērn.

That is falling rhythm, each foot being a trochee.

5. Here are two instances of dactylic falling rhythm, of very different emotional effect:

Lōve, bŷ hārsh | ēvīdēncē,

Thrōwn frōm ĭts | ēmīnēncē,

Ēvēn Gōd's | prōvīdēncē

Sēémīng ěs | trānged.

and

Pōwērfūllēst | prēachēr ānd

Tēndērēst | tēachēr ānd

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Kīndliēst | crēature ĩn

ōuld Dōne | gal.<sup>1</sup>

That in its pure form is not a common metre in English.

6. Here is the much commoner combination of dactylic and trochaic falling rhythm:

Blīnd with thīne | hāīr thē | éyēs ōf | dāy,

Kīss hēr ũn | tīl shē bē | wēáried | ōut.

When one begins even the most elementary study of English rhythms one discovers at once that, because the scansion depends upon accent and not upon quantity, it is not always easy to make up one's mind what metre a poem is written in, partly because it is a common licence in certain English metres to have, either at the beginning or the end of the line, a superfluous syllable which does not count in the technical scansion. Thus, if you have a line which is quite clearly in a trisyllabic rhythm, but also clearly has one syllable too many, it will make all the difference to your view of the metre whether you 'count out' the syllable at the beginning or end. Take for example a combination of syllables which is technically represented thus:

— ◡ ◡ — ◡ ◡ — ◡ ◡ — ◡ ◡ —

There we clearly have four trisyllabic feet plus one syllable. But if we are just going to work with a foot-rule and a chopper we can force the line to scan either

— ◡ ◡ | — ◡ ◡ | — ◡ ◡ | — ◡ ◡ | —

or

— | ◡ ◡ — | ◡ ◡ — | ◡ ◡ — | ◡ ◡ —

<sup>1</sup> A. P. Graves, *Father O'Flynn*. On the antecedents of this song see the author's autobiography *To Return to All That* (Cape).

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The same thing is true, though not so frequent, in disyllabic rhythm and quite common in the combination of disyllabic and trisyllabic which we looked at above. It follows that one of the problems, and the very interesting problems, which frequently challenge us in reading English poetry is that of settling in our own minds exactly what metre a poem is written in. And quite frequently we do not get anything like a certain clue until we have read quite a number of lines of a particular poem. Let me illustrate. If you look at Campbell's *Battle of the Baltic*<sup>1</sup> you will find that the first line does not give us much choice, but that the second and third lines can be very reasonably read either as trochaic (falling), thus:

Sīng the | glōriōus | dāy's ŕe | nōwn,  
Whén to | bāttle | fiérce cāme | fōrth

or as anapaest-iambic (rising), thus:

Sīng the glōr | iōus dāy's | ŕenōwn,  
Whén to bāt | ŕe fiérce | cāme fōrth

and we have to make up our own minds which way of reading we think the poet intended. Here is another instance, Scott's *Gathering Song of Donald the Black*:<sup>2</sup>

Pibroch of Donuil Dhu,  
Pibroch of Donuil,  
Wake thy wild voice anew,  
Summon Clan Conuil.  
Come away, come away,  
Hark to the summons!  
Come in your war array,  
Gentles and commons.

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<sup>1</sup> G. T. ccli; O. B. E. V. 581.

<sup>2</sup> G. T. ccxlviii.

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Now that can be read in a variety of ways. The first and third lines at any rate can be read either as iambic,

Pibróch | of Dón | uil Dhú | ; Wake thý | wild vóice | anéw  
or dactylic,

Pfbroch of | Dónuil Dhu; Wáke thy wild | voíce anew |

though we shall have trouble if we try to read the second and fourth as iambic. But it is clear that if we read the first and third as iambic we make the whole movement of the poem very much slower than if we regard them as dactylic. There is even another possibility, that the right way to read the first and third lines is to regard the first syllable as superfluous and the rest of the line as anapaest plus iambic,

Pi | broch of Dón | uil Dhú | ; Wake | thy wild voíce | anéw |

which is more rapid rhythm than complete iambic but is rising rhythm whereas dactylic is falling. (And is the fifth line two dactyls or two anapaests?) The clue to the way in which one fancies Scott heard the poem in his own head is given by the opening of verse 2, which runs as follows:

Come from deep glen, and  
From mountain so rocky;  
The war-pipe and pennon  
Are at Inverlocky.

I do not think that anybody with an ear for poetry at all will feel contented to read those lines otherwise than as dactylic,

Cóme from deep | glén, and from | móúntain so | rócky; the |  
wár-pipe

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and so on; and if you have an uneasy suspicion that they ought to be anapaestic,

Come | from deep glén | and from móún- | tain so róck | y

and so on, the last two lines of this same verse, which as they open seem to support this view, finally demolish it:

Come every hill-plaid, and  
True heart that wears one,  
Come every steel blade, and  
Strong hand that bears one.

It is just as natural—perhaps more natural—to say Come é | very steel bláde | as to say Cóme every | stéel blade | ; but if you do, you find that you cannot read the last line at all, except with a change of rhythm so violent as to be impossible.

A peculiarity of English rhythm is now, I imagine, beginning to emerge. Many readers must be objecting, with regard to some of my instances, ‘You call that foot an iambic, but the accent of my voice does not naturally fall on the syllable where, if the foot was an iambic, it ought to fall.’ The objection is perfectly valid. It is comparatively difficult in English to find a succession of lines, supposedly in a given metre, of which each line does really completely conform to the technical requirements of that metre, so long as we allow our voice accent to fall where the sense demands that it should fall: and in point of fact any succession of lines which did so conform would, to an ear attuned to the variety of English rhythms and the actual methods of the great English poets, be almost intolerably monotonous. What the English ear appears to demand is this: the beat should come sufficiently often in the ‘right’ (i.e. the technically correct) place to ensure that the sense of the particular recurrent rhythm should not be lost, but, so

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long as that is secured, the poet not only may, but should, play almost what tricks he pleases. Let me give you just one instance, which is from blank verse, but which illustrates the general principle, which is applicable to all metres. It is an instance which Stevenson takes in his essay on *The Art of Writing*. Milton has a famous line:

Athens, the eye of Greece, mother of arts.

Even if one did not know that Milton wrote it, one could have no possible doubt that that is an English blank verse line, and the technical 'norm' of English blank verse is five iambic feet. Yet if you break up that line into feet you will find that it has three very definite iambs and two equally definite trochees, namely 'Athens' and 'mother.' But your ear is not deluded into supposing that the rhythm is anything but iambic, because the contrary impression left by the strong trochee of the first foot is immediately counteracted by the two following iambs, and the trochee of the fourth foot is again counteracted by the iambic of the fifth. But what the poet must not do is to start such a line with two trochees, because in that case the trochaic impression is made too strong and the line becomes broken-backed, consisting merely of two trochees followed by three iambs without any recognizable rhythm running through it. He must not, as Stevenson justly remarks, start his line:

Mother Athens . . . ,

but it will perhaps provide an amusing example of the subtleties of English metre if I remark that in the earlier edition of this book I made a particularly stupid misstatement, saying that the poet must not write:

Athens, mother of arts, the eye of Greece.

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That, in fact, is a perfectly legitimate English blank verse line, partly because the first trochee stands completely away from the rest of the line, but even more because, though the line does indeed start with two trochees, the ear is immediately rescued from the erroneous impression by the two feet which follow, which are very strongly marked iambs, iambs, that is, in which the first syllable is particularly light and the second syllable particularly strong.

As we shall see later, the skilful management of this clash between the technical norm and the natural voice accent is one of the chief metrical graces of English poetry.

But to return from this necessary digression to the consideration of the effects of different rhythms. It is, I think, indisputable that different rhythms do naturally produce different emotional effects. This is a commonplace in music. The mere beat of a march is different in its effect upon one from the beat, let us say, of a waltz, quite irrespective of the difference in melody which no doubt usually accompanies the difference in beat.<sup>1</sup> Or, to take an isolated instance, the tremendous impact of the opening of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony depends surely not only upon the actual notes but also upon the rhythm. I do not mean that in poetry a particular rhythm can be suitably used for only one particular effect, for, as we saw just now, dactylic rhythm can be used both for *The Bridge of Sighs*<sup>2</sup> and for *Father O'Flynn*. For the moment, then, let us put it no higher than this, that the change of a poem's metre alters its effect. For example: we all know the effect of Milton's blank verse, that magnificent, solemn, stately, dignified progress, the inexorable march of the legions. It is iambic, that is rising, rhythm. Let us see what

<sup>1</sup> It is interesting in this connection to compare the melodies of *Scots wha hae* and *The Land of the Leal*.

<sup>2</sup> G. T. cclxxiv; O. B. E. V. 654.



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happens if we re-write it in trisyllabic and disyllabic falling rhythm, that is in English hexameters. Here is Milton:

Of man's first disobedience, and the fruit  
Of that forbidden tree, whose mortal taste  
Brought death into the world and all our woe  
*(and so on)*  
Sing, Heavenly Muse.

Now let us try it like this:

Sing, O Muse, of the first disobedience of man and the  
mortal  
Taste of the fruit forbidden, which brought death into the  
world and  
All our woe.

Or take the famous line and a half:

Thick as autumnal leaves that strow the brooks  
In Vallombrosa,

and try it as

Thick as autumnal leaves, that in Vallombrosa descending  
Strow the brooks—

That, if I may say so, is, I think, not a bad English hexameter line; but it certainly is not Milton, nor anywhere near Milton. Look again at a very small difference between the Authorized and Revised Versions in a famous passage. There is not even an alteration of rhythm, for it is still falling rhythm, but a spondee is substituted for a dactyl.

How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, Son of the  
Morning, (A.V.)

and

How art thou fallen from heaven, O Daystar, Son of the  
Morning. (R.V.)

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Or look at the refrain of Lamb's poem *The Old Familiar Faces*.<sup>1</sup> The refrain as Lamb wrote it is 'All, all are gone, the old familiar faces.' Suppose we rewrite that as 'The old familiar faces all are gone'; we cannot be said to have altered the sense, but we have robbed the line of three-quarters of its peculiarly plaintive effect. You will find in the Appendix some other poems which repay study along these lines, but it is perhaps worth while examining at once in some detail, if only to convince ourselves of the marked difference which differences of rhythm produce, the opening lines of two famous poems, which were written as a pair, and which greatly lose from the way in which they are so often read in isolation, namely Milton's *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*.<sup>2</sup>

### (a) Beginning of *L'Allegro*.

Hence, loathèd Melancholy,  
Of Cerberus and blackest Midnight born  
In Stygian cave forlorn  
'Mongst horrid shapes, and shrieks, and sights unholy!  
Find out some uncouth cell,  
Where brooding Darkness spreads his jealous wings  
And the night-raven sings;  
There, under ebon shades and low-brow'd rocks  
As ragged as thy locks,  
In dark Cimmerian desert ever dwell.

10

But come, thou Goddess fair and free,  
In heaven yclep'd Euphrosyne,  
And by men, heart-easing Mirth,  
Whom lovely Venus at a birth  
With two sister Graces more  
To ivy-crownèd Bacchus bore:  
Or whether (as some sager sing)  
The frolic wind that breathes the spring,

---

<sup>1</sup> G. T. cclxiv; O. B. E. V. 577.

<sup>2</sup> G. T. cxliv, cxlv; O. B. E. V. 310, 311.

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Zephyr, with Aurora playing,  
 As he met her once a-Maying— 20  
 There on beds of violets blue  
 And fresh-blown roses wash'd in dew  
 Fill'd her with thee, a daughter fair,  
 So buxom, blithe, and debonair.

Haste thee, Nymph, and bring with thee  
 Jest, and youthful jollity,  
 Quips, and cranks, and wanton wiles,  
 Nods, and becks, and wreathèd smiles,  
 Such as hang on Hebe's cheek, 30  
 And love to live in dimple sleek;  
 Sport that wrinkled Care derides,  
 And Laughter holding both his sides.  
 Come, and trip it as you go  
 On the light fantastic toe;  
 And in thy right hand lead with thee  
 The mountain nymph, sweet Liberty;  
 And if I give thee honour due,  
 Mirth, admit me of thy crew,  
 To live with her, and live with thee  
 In unreprouèd pleasures free. 40

(b) Beginning of *Il Penseroso*.

Hence, vain deluding Joys,  
 The brood of Folly without father bred!  
 How little you bestead  
 Or fill the fixèd mind with all your toys!  
 Dwell in some idle brain,  
 And fancies fond with gaudy shapes possess  
 As thick and numberless  
 As the gay motes that people the sunbeams,  
 Or likest hovering dreams,  
 The fickle pensioners of Morpheus' train. 10

But hail, thou goddess sage and holy,  
 Hail, divinest Melancholy!

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Whose saintly visage is too bright  
To hit the sense of human sight,  
And therefore to our weaker view  
O'erlaid with black, staid Wisdom's hue;  
Black, but such as in esteem  
Prince Memnon's sister might beseem,  
Or that starr'd Ethiop queen that strove  
To set her beauty's praise above 20  
The sea-nymphs, and their powers offended:  
Yet thou art higher far descended:  
Thee bright-hair'd Vesta, long of yore,  
To solitary Saturn bore;  
His daughter she; in Saturn's reign  
Such mixture was not held a stain:  
Oft in glimmering bowers and glades  
He met her, and in secret shades  
Of woody Ida's inmost grove,  
Whilst yet there was no fear of Jove. 30

Come, pensive nun, devout and pure,  
Sober, steadfast, and demure,  
All in a robe of darkest grain  
Flowing with majestic train,  
And sable stole of Cipres lawn  
Over thy decent shoulders drawn:  
Come, but keep thy wonted state,  
With even step, and musing gait,  
And looks commercing with the skies,  
Thy rapt soul sitting in thine eyes: 40  
There, held in holy passion still,  
Forget thyself to marble, till  
With a sad leaden downward cast  
Thou fix them on the earth as fast:  
And join with thee calm Peace, and Quiet,  
Spare Fast, that oft with gods doth diet,  
And hears the Muses in a ring  
Aye round about Jove's altar sing:  
And add to these retirèd Leisure  
That in trim gardens takes his pleasure. 50

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*L'Allegro* starts with the banishment of Melancholy, in a slow-moving ten lines. The scansion is no doubt technically iambic, but you will notice that the incidence of the pauses breaks the words up into a number of phrases which are trochaic. One does not, for example, read the first line of all as 'Hence loáth | ed Mél | anchó | ly' but as 'Hence | loáthed | Mélan | chóly.'<sup>1</sup> So, 'bláckest Mídníght,' 'Stýgian,' 'hórríd,' 'broóding Dárkness,' 'ébon,' 'rágged,' and 'désert éver,' are all trochaic. And it is noteworthy that when Milton falls into markedly rising rhythm at the beginning of line 7 he jerks it back almost with a wrench at the hyphen. 'And the níght- | ráven | sings.' Then, after an interesting transitional passage, we come at line 25 to the invocation proper to Mirth. It is clear at once that something has happened to the rhythm, which is now light and dancing. One is tempted to say at first quite simply that this is because it has become iambic. But on examination this will not do, since there are plenty of natural trochaic groups still about, 'yóuthful jóllity,' 'Laúghter hólding,' and so on. But I think that further examination does reveal this, that in almost every line, either at the beginning or end of it, the iambic rhythm is very strongly suggested; 'Quíps | and cránk,' 'Nóds | and bécks,' 'On the líght,' 'derídes,' 'as ye gó.' And also, and this is perhaps the most important point of all, whereas in the first ten lines of the poem there is an excess of strongly accented syllables over the number demanded by the technical scansion, in the later passage there are just as few accents as are compatible with retaining the reader's awareness

<sup>1</sup> This is an excellent instance of the point mentioned earlier, that whereas in quantitative metre any long syllable is as long as any other, in accentual metre there are all possible gradations in stress. In this example it is clear that 'Hence' takes the fullest possible weight of the voice, the first syllable of 'loathed' rather less, the first syllable of 'Melancholy' probably less still, and the third syllable of 'Melancholy' a stress so light as to be almost negligible.

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of the rhythm. Lines 26, 33, and 34, for example, have only three accents where they 'ought' to have four, whereas line 5 had five where it 'ought' to have had three.

Exactly the converse of all this is true of *Il Penseroso*.

In the introductory passage there are fewer accents than the norm demands, though one has to admit that there is no very marked increase in iambic groups. But when in line 31 we start on the invocation to the pensive nun there is no question what has happened. The second line of it tells us where we are, with its strong opening trochees, 'Sóber | stéadfast |'. And this is followed up by 'flówing,' 'décent shóuldern,' 'holy pássion,' and, above all, lines 49 and 50 in which the strong trochees of 'gárdens tákes his pléasure' are emphasized by the disyllabic rhyme.

In the Appendix will be found some other passages for study (p. 137).

Now if the sound of poetry, and in particular its rhythm, is so important an element in the effect it produces, it is evidently vital that we should make up our minds how poetry is to be read, since, at the risk of wearisome repetition, I must again emphasize the fact that poetry must be *heard*. Each reader, therefore, whether he is reading to others or to himself, must decide on his method of reading, and how he is going to vary his method according to the particular poem. He is not at all relieved of this responsibility by the fact that no two people will hold the same view about his particular method. One will like it, and another will think it the worst reading he has ever heard. It is more than likely that both are wrong, and that his reading, however careful he is about it, bears no relation whatever to what the poet himself heard when he wrote his poem. For herein lies one of the cardinal difficulties about the

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reading of poetry, that there is such unfortunate latitude for the individual executant. In rendering a piece of music there is, within limits (sometimes wide limits), only one correct way to play it, or, if that statement seems to exclude the personality of the individual player and the variations that he may legitimately introduce, one can put it in the other way, that at least a wrong note is a wrong note, that there is no getting away from the time signature, and that the composer can indicate with comparative exactness alterations in time, loudness or softness, and the general spirit in which he intends the piece to be played. But the unfortunate poet has almost no method of indicating such things. He can do a little by his choice of rhythm, since one will not naturally read a light dancing metre at the same pace nor in the same tone of voice as a heavier and slower metre, nor will one read a drinking song in the same spirit as one would read an elegy. But short of these extreme cases there is a most disconcerting latitude. All one can do, therefore, is to make up one's mind whether there are certain basic principles which underlie the correct rendering of any piece of poetry and then do one's best to adhere to these principles with such modifications in application as the individual poem suggests. All the following suggestions are, I am well aware, disputable, but they will at least serve as a starting-point for the individual reader from which, whether by agreement or disagreement, he can proceed to make up his own mind. I think that in the first place almost all poetry should be read more slowly than prose, to allow time for its sounds to tell; second, that the rhythm, though not overstressed, must at any rate not be obscured (this is particularly important with regard to blank verse, to which we shall return in a moment); then that the reading, except with certain kinds of light verse, should not be 'conversational,' since there is a 'singing' element in poetry which is far removed from ordinary speech, and

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that still less should it be theatrical, since you are not reciting, nor was the poem (unless it is a very bad poem) intended for recitation, and besides perhaps the most important single thing about the reading of poetry is that you must allow the poem to produce its own effect, and not be perpetually flinging the effects at the head of your listener, or for that matter at your own head if you are reading to yourself. Take any piece of poetry which you know well, and which has a reasonable amount of feeling and dramatic contrast about it, and experiment in various methods of reading it aloud, or, best of all, get someone else to read it aloud for you in different styles.<sup>1</sup> Try for example the theatrical, in which the reader plays all manner of tricks with his voice, shifts abruptly, and frequently without any reason, from *fortissimo* to *pianissimo*, and is liable to affect the third-rate actor's accent. This is bad, but it does at least leave the poem something different from ordinary prose. Then try the method that may be called the pseudo-intelligent. In this style the reader is not trying to be dramatic; he is trying to do something which he calls 'bringing out the meaning.' The intention is usually more laudable than the execution, and the results are usually jerkiness and the placing of emphasis on impossible words. There are various other bad styles, worst of all perhaps being the soulful monotone, but, after experimenting with them to see just how badly poetry can be read, try finally to read the poem as you think it should be read. You will find that this involves at any rate some preliminary study of what you think the poet was aiming at, and then a consideration of how you can best transmit his intended effect to your listener.

With regard to the reading of blank verse there are certain peculiar difficulties, and as this metre is not only

<sup>1</sup> Newbolt's *The Death of Admiral Blake* (G. T. ccccvii) is an excellent poem to experiment on.



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one of the commonest in English but is also the metre in which our greatest poets have written much of their greatest work, these difficulties must be faced. Take first a very simple instance, the famous passage towards the end of *The Tempest*:

We are such stuff  
As dreams are made on, and our little life  
Is rounded with a sleep.

That clearly cannot be read as follows: 'We are such stuff; as dreams are made on and our little life; is rounded with a sleep,' since that is not sense. But neither, I think, should it be read exactly as though it were prose, with no indication at all that the lines end at 'stuff' and 'life.' There is a school of readers which considers that it should so be read. That is because they are running away from the nonsensical stressing of the rhythm at the expense of sense. But the fact that the poet is 'running on' at the end of his lines does not entitle the reader to do his best to make it appear that he was writing prose. If the poor man wrote verse, he presumably wanted it to sound like verse; and running away from an obvious fault is no excuse for running to an extreme. I suggest that there is a perfectly reasonable and right compromise. When there is no pause in sense at the end of a line, what you must not do is to *alter the pitch* of your voice; but it is possible to keep your voice, as you would in prose, on the same note, thereby retaining the reader's awareness of the continuity in sense, and yet make a slight pause at the end of the line, thereby retaining his awareness of the verse rhythm. We have, I suppose, all of us been exasperated in the theatre, when Shakespeare is being played, by the way in which many actors, perhaps the majority, seem to take special pains to obscure the fact

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that their lines are verse, even if blank verse. Here is a passage which is usually so maltreated:

The barge she sat in, like a burnish'd throne,  
Burn'd on the water; the poop was beaten gold,  
Purple the sails, and so perfuméd, that  
The winds were love-sick with them; the oars were silver,  
Which to the tune of flutes kept stroke, and made  
The water which they beat to follow faster,  
As amorous of their strokes. For her own person,  
It beggar'd all description: she did lie  
In her pavilion, cloth-of-gold of tissue,  
O'er-picturing that Venus where we see  
The fancy outwork nature: on each side her  
Stood pretty-dimpled boys, like smiling Cupids,  
With divers-colour'd fans, whose wind did seem  
To glow the delicate cheeks which they did cool,  
And what they undid did.<sup>1</sup>

That passage is an excellent and exacting test of any one's capacity for reading blank verse, and any one who can so manœuvre his voice that without awkwardness he can indicate that the word 'that' ends a line has little more to learn about the technique of reading. But for whatever reason, whether because it is thought to be more natural, or because of a cowardly retreat from its difficulties, that passage is usually delivered on the stage as though it were prose. The truth is that it is very bad prose. Its high colour and its somewhat strained exaltation of vocabulary are only in place when it is recognized for what it is, a magnificent piece of rhetoric in verse. In the Appendix are some passages on which the reader who is interested can experiment with regard to the way in which blank verse should be read, but it is perhaps worth while at once considering further a point that we have already touched on, namely that clash which

<sup>1</sup> *Antony and Cleopatra*, II. ii. 199-213.

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is observable in all good English poetry between the natural accent of the voice and the technical metrical beat. Stevenson, in an essay already mentioned, well points out that to the technician the ordinary English blank verse line consists of five feet, but that to the reader no good blank verse line is five groups of sound. To the reader, indeed, five is the one number which is anathema. As a rule there are either four or three groups, and the breaks between them do not coincide with the breaks between feet. The great Miltonic line

All night the dreadless angel unpursued

is no doubt to be scanned as

Āll nīght | thē dṛēad | lēss ān | gēl ūn | pūrsūed.

But heaven forbid that any one should read it so; it is to be read as four sound-groups:

All nīght | the dṛēadless | āngel | ūnpursūed.

(Many of us would probably think that Stevenson has a group too many and that there is no break between 'dreadless' and 'angel'; but that does not affect the general point.)

Take three famous lines from Marlowe:

Was this the face that launcht a thousand ships,  
And burnt the topless towers of Ilium?  
Sweet Helen, make me immortal with a kiss.

The first two lines, if naturally read, are dangerously near to the steady iambic beat, though even they consist of three (or four), not five, groups. But the third line breaks clean away, and falls into three groups, neither of the two breaks between which coincides with the break between feet.

Sweet Hélen | make me immórtal | with a kíss.

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Here are two extreme instances, the first again from Marlowe:

See, see, where Christ's blood streams in the firmament!

with its magnificent strong monosyllables in the centre which must all be given their full value. The second from Donne, a line which seems to some readers to go too far and be almost unreadable:

Blasted with sighs and surrounded with tears.

It is of course possible to wreck that line by reading it as dactylic:

Blástěd wĭth | síghs ańd sŭr | rōunděd wĭth | teārs,

and to wreck it even worse by making it blatantly iambic:

Blástěd | wĭth síghs | ańd sŭr | rōunděd | wĭth teārs.

Iambic indeed it is, but our awareness of the fact must, as we read, be very nearly unconscious. The critical point is of course the first syllable of 'surrounded.' Unless that can be in some way marked, the line takes the bit in its teeth and hurries to an undignified conclusion. What is wanted, I think, is that that syllable should be ever so slightly 'held': i.e. if we were to enlist musical notation to help us there would be a pause mark over that syllable, to show that the voice is not to *stress* it but to *linger on* it a trifle longer than in prose would be natural.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Two other passages of blank verse for study are given in the Appendix, p. 141.

## CHAPTER III

### THE SOUND OF POETRY. II. RHYME AND ASSONANCE

Now let us go on from the consideration of rhythm, one of the most fundamental things in poetry, to a consideration of various slighter ornaments and graces, frills if you like, tricks some of them. Let us begin with rhyme. Rhyme no doubt is mainly just a pleasing jingle, though it can be very skilfully used in knitting together an elaborate stanza form, as we shall see when in a later chapter we study poetic form in general. The simplest of all the uses of rhyme is that in the couplet, whether octosyllabic:

But at my back I always hear  
Time's wingèd chariot hurrying near,

or decasyllabic:

Damn with faint praise, assent with civil leer,  
And without sneering, teach the rest to sneer;

But in the decasyllabic couplet, at least in the 'close' form of which Dryden and Pope were such masters, the insistent rhymes rather emphasize the sense than delight the ear. More specifically musical effects are produced when the rhymes alternate. If you wish to see how an alternation so simple as *abab* (the technician's way of saying that the first and third lines rhyme, and the second and fourth) pleases the ear,

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look at the fifth verse of Gray's *Elegy written in a Country Churchyard*.<sup>1</sup>

The breezy call of incense-breathing Morn,  
The swallow twittering from the straw-built shed,  
The cock's shrill clarion, or the echoing horn,  
No more shall rouse them from their lowly bed.

Transpose the second and third lines, which can be done without violation to the sense, and see how much more mechanical and less musical you have made it. What in fact you have done is to make two heroic couplets instead of a four-lined verse.

Different effects are produced by different kinds of rhyme. The ordinary rhyme in English is monosyllabic,<sup>2</sup> and it is probably for that reason that the disyllabic rhyme, when we get it, is, if skilfully managed, such a pleasure to the ear. We came on an instance a short time back when examining *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*. Here is a poem which keeps up the disyllabic rhyme throughout its six lines; and I think that one gets a certain sense that the poet, even in that short time, is a trifle exhausted by the effort.

Lady, when I behold the roses sprouting  
Which clad in damask mantles deck the arbours,  
And then behold your lips where sweet love harbours,  
My eyes present me with a double doubting:  
For viewing both alike, hardly my mind supposes  
Whether the roses be your lips, or your lips the roses.<sup>3</sup>  
(ANON.)

But here is another which has two pairs of disyllabic rhymes to each verse, but which has no sense of strain,

<sup>1</sup> G. T. cxxxvii; O. B. E. V. 453.

<sup>2</sup> I do not mean that the words which rhyme are usually monosyllables—they may be, and frequently are, polysyllables—but that the actual rhymes are only single syllables, e.g. *multitude*, *subdued*.

<sup>3</sup> G. T. lxx.

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and in which much of the superb effect is due to those rhymes:

Whither, O splendid ship, thy white sails crowding,  
Leaning across the bosom of the urgent West,  
That fearest nor sea rising, nor sky clouding,  
Whither away, fair rover, and what thy quest?  
Ah! soon, when Winter has all our vales opprest,  
When skies are cold and misty, and hail is hurling,  
Wilt thou glide on the blue Pacific, or rest  
In a summer haven asleep, thy white sails furling.

I there before thee, in the country that well thou knowest,  
Already arrived am inhaling the odorous air:  
I watch thee enter unerringly where thou goest,  
And anchor queen of the strange shipping there,  
Thy sails for awnings spread, thy masts bare:  
Nor is aught from the foaming reef to the snow-capp'd  
grandest  
Peak, that is over the feathery palms, more fair  
Than thou, so upright, so stately and still thou standest.

And yet, O splendid ship, unhail'd and nameless,  
I know not if, aiming a fancy, I rightly divine  
That thou hast a purpose joyful, a courage blameless,  
Thy port assured in a happier land than mine.  
But for all I have given thee, beauty enough is thine,  
As thou, aslant with trim tackle and shrouding,  
From the proud nostril curve of a prow's line  
In the offing scatterest foam, thy white sails crowding.<sup>1</sup>  
(ROBERT BRIDGES.)

Trisyllabic rhymes are harder still for the poet to find in English, and, though common enough in comic verse, and used by Browning and others for their 'trick' rhymes, they have hardly been used at all for serious verse. The great exception is Hood's *The Bridge of Sighs*,<sup>2</sup> which,

<sup>1</sup> G. T. ccclxii; O. B. E. V. 835.

<sup>2</sup> G. T. cclxxiv; O. B. E. V. 654.

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apart from being one of the most moving poems in the language, is certainly also one of the most brilliant *tour de force* that any poet ever attempted and achieved.

Touch her not scornfully;  
Think of her mournfully,  
    Gently and humanly;  
Not of the stains of her,  
All that remains of her  
    Now is pure womanly.

The richest field for the discovery of 'trick' rhymes of this kind is the poems of Browning, whom both the ingenuity and grotesqueness of them delighted; and among his poems there are probably more packed into the foot run in *Pacchiarotto, and how he Worked in Dis-temper* than in any other. Here are seven consecutive lines from that astonishing piece of effervescent poetical clowning:

While, treading down rose and ranunculus,  
You *Tommy-make-room-for-your-Uncle* us!  
Troop, all of you—man or homunculus,  
Quick march! for Xanthippe, my housemaid,  
If once on your pates she a souse made  
With what, pan or pot, bowl or *skoramis*  
First comes to her hand—things were more amiss!

There is a class of rhymes to which at least passing attention must be given, which may be called 'false' rhymes; some people would call most of them 'eye-rhymes'; rhymes that is such as 'love—grove,' 'alone—  
one,' 'by—majesty' and so on. The commonest of all perhaps is the use of the word 'wind' (in the meteorological sense) in places where if it is to rhyme strictly it must be pronounced as though it was being used in the sense of winding up a skein of wool. Now if there is



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any sense in calling these 'eye-rhymes' it means that everything I have said as to the importance of hearing poetry and not seeing it is in need of very drastic modification, since it is implied by this description that the poet relies upon the reader's eye deluding him into hearing a rhyme where no rhyme is. But I do not think the position need be abandoned without a struggle. It is worth noticing that in all these rhymes the *consonantal* values are correct, so that the proper term for them is perhaps 'half-rhymes' rather than 'eye-rhymes.' I doubt whether an absolute 'eye-rhyme' exists in serious English poetry. No poet for example would rhyme 'though' with 'tough,' perfect eye-rhyme though that is, since the second has a consonantal sound that the other lacks. But he might rhyme the one with 'through' and the other with 'cough.' The truth I think is this, that these rhymes are just one more instance of the instinct of the English poets for departing from the strictly correct just as far as they can without destroying the sense of the correct, thereby producing what, at any rate to the English ear, is a very charming variety. (I say to the English ear, since I received a most interesting letter from a Dutch correspondent who pointed out that as the 'eye-rhyme' is very strictly taboo in Dutch poetry the Dutch reader of English is perpetually having his ears tortured.) And it is right to observe that as the English poets are continually using rhymes which are rhymes only to the ear, and which outrage the eye (of which on our previous premises they are no concern), they cannot, if one may put it so, have it both ways. I think then that we can continue to neglect the eye and allow our ears to be pleased, and also slightly stimulated and awakened, by these rhymes which do not completely correspond to our expectation. And I also think that in the few cases, such as the 'wind' already mentioned, where we can make an 'eye-rhyme' also an 'ear-rhyme'

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by an unusual pronunciation, we make a mistake if we do so.<sup>1</sup>

Before leaving this subject of rhyme for the moment (though we shall return to it apropos of stanza form) there are two points, among the many which must be left to the reader's own study, to which I would like to draw attention. One is the difference between the *abab* scheme in the simple four-line verse and *abcb*. For example:

To her fair works did Nature link  
The human soul that through me ran;  
And much it grieved my heart to think  
What Man has made of Man.

Through primrose tufts, in that sweet bower,  
The periwinkle trail'd its wreaths;  
And 'tis my faith that every flower  
Enjoys the air it breathes,<sup>2</sup>

compared with

We watch'd her breathing thro' the night,  
Her breathing soft and low,  
As in her breast the wave of life  
Kept heaving to and fro.

---

<sup>1</sup> And I think I can prove that at least one great English poet did not himself thus mispronounce 'wind' to make it rhyme. The first four lines of the second stanza of Keats' ode *To Autumn* are:

Who hath not seen thee oft amid thy store?  
Sometimes whoever seeks abroad may find  
Thee sitting careless on a granary floor,  
Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind.

When Keats was writing this poem out he wrote the fourth line as:

Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wing.

It is surely inconceivable that he could have written 'wing' unless he had been hearing in his head 'wind' and not 'wīnd.'

<sup>2</sup> G. T. cccxix.

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So silently we seem'd to speak,  
So slowly moved about,  
As we had lent her half our powers  
To eke her living out.<sup>1</sup>

There appear to be two differences. The *abcb* scheme allows somewhat greater freedom of movement, but it also throws more emphasis on the rhymed words.

Secondly, there is one particular scheme which is doing exactly the opposite of what rhyme from the structural point of view ordinarily does, namely give finish and completeness to a self-contained verse. In this scheme, the famous *terza rima*, it is employed in joining each verse to the next and producing a feeling of interlocked continuity. It is trying, that is, to secure the double advantages of the unchecked progress of blank verse with the additional ornament of rhyme. It is Dante's metre in the *Divine Comedy*. Instances are not very easy to find in English, but here are some verses from Morris's *The Defence of Guinevere*:

'Not so, fair lords, even if the world should end

'This very day, and you were judges here  
Instead of God. Did you see Mellyagraunce  
When Launcelot stood by him? what white fear

'Curdled his blood, and how his teeth did dance,  
His side sink in? as my knight cried and said,  
"Slayer of unarm'd men, here is a chance!

"Setter of traps, I pray you guard your head,  
By God I am so glad to fight with you,  
Stripper of ladies, that my hand feels lead

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<sup>1</sup> G. T. cclxxix; O. B. E. V, 653.

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“For driving weight; hurrah now! draw and do,  
For all my wounds are moving in my breast,  
And I am getting mad with waiting so.”

Finally, to conclude our study of rhyme, let us look at a most interesting piece of versification. Most people are aware that Collins's *Ode to Evening*<sup>1</sup> is unrhymed; but challenge any one to produce from Tennyson an unrhymed five-line verse and he will probably tell you that there is no such thing. And you will find that nine out of ten ordinary readers who are not primarily interested in technique, often though they have read the particular poem, have been unconsciously tricked by the poet into thinking that it rhymed:

Tears, idle tears, I know not what they mean,  
Tears from the depth of some divine despair  
Rise in the heart, and gather to the eyes,  
In looking on the happy Autumn-fields,  
And thinking of the days that are no more.<sup>2</sup>

Now let us consider an ornament which all poets use in greater or less degree, but with very varying measures of skill, namely assonance. You may call this a kind of internal rhyme, but it does not as a rule produce at all that rather staccato clinching effect which is produced by the ordinary rhyme. It is more usually a kind of echo, of which we are often not much more than subconsciously aware and of which we are too often, for want of alertness, not aware at all. Here is an instance of assonance at its simplest:

Pale, beyond porch and portal,  
Crowned with calm leaves, she stands  
Who gathers all things mortal  
With cold immortal hands;

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<sup>1</sup> G. T. clxxxvi; O. B. E. V. 459.

<sup>2</sup> G. T. ccclvi.

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Her languid lips are sweeter  
Than love's who fears to greet her  
To men that mix and meet her  
From many times and lands.

That is a passage of assonance on PKLMT, very lovely but very obvious. There is something in the fourth verse of this same poem, Swinburne's *Garden of Proserpine*, which is rather more subtle:

No growth of moor or coppice,  
No heather-flower or vine,  
But bloomless buds of poppies,  
Green grapes of Proserpine,  
Pale beds of blowing rushes  
Where no leaf blooms or blushes  
Save this whereout she crushes  
For dead men deadly wine.

In lines three and four assonance is doing what rhyme often does, knitting two lines together. The third line, 'But bloomless buds of poppies,' has a very obvious alliteration on B, and line four, 'Green grapes of Proserpine,' has an equally obvious alliteration on GR, but the two lines share in a strong assonance on P:

But bloomless buds of poppies,  
Green grapes of Proserpine.

Here is a rather curious instance from Shelley:

Lulled by the coil of his crystalline streams.

There is a kind of interlocked *terza rima* assonance. If we call sound L number 1, K (i.e. hard C) 2, Z (i.e. the soft *s* of 'his' and 'streams') 3, and ST 4, then, as you will see, the order is 1121324143. You will find all manner of entertaining examples of this kind of thing in Milton,

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who for sheer richness of music is in a class by himself in English. Here is an instance:

Jousted in Aspramont or Montalban.

In that line there is a sort of 'looking-glass' assonance. The second proper name is, so far as vowels are concerned, the first turned on its head, and the first syllable of it indeed is the last syllable of the other, consonants and all. That is the master amusing himself with a display of virtuosity. Milton is also extremely fond of a particular type of assonance in which the sounds are first each given in separate words and then, after an interval, are picked up in one word.

For example:

Now to the moon in wavering Morris move,

where the vowel of 'moon,' the *v* of 'wavering,' and the *m*'s of 'moon,' and 'Morris' are all picked up in the final monosyllable.

Or

And Tiresias and Phineus, prophets old,

where the *t*, *r*, *s* and *ph* of the proper names are all picked up in 'prophets.'

There is another type of sound-ornament which is used not just for musical effect but is definitely imitative or suggestive. There is, for example, a passage in Tennyson's *Morte d'Arthur* which describes Bedivere carrying the dying Arthur over the rocks; the first few lines describe his progress with a welter of explosive labials and dentals and such-like, till at last he comes out in sight of the lake and the moon, when all these are discarded almost *en bloc*, and we hear little but *m*'s and *n*'s and liquids:

Dry clash'd his harness in the icy caves  
And barren chasms, and all to left and right

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The bare black cliff clang'd round him, as he based  
His feet on juts of slippery crag that rang  
Sharp-smitten with the dint of armed heels—  
And on a sudden, lol the level lake,  
And the long glories of the winter moon.

Tennyson is an expert at this ornament, as indeed he is an expert, by the admission of even his severest critics, in all that has to do with the technique of his craft. Look at

The moan of doves in immemorial elms  
And murmuring of innumerable bees,

and notice two things, first the skill with which he writes 'murmuring' instead of the technically correct 'murmur,' and secondly the fact that, in spite of appearances, there are no *s*'s in those lines at all, but three *z*'s. There is an amusing poem, a children's rhyme, of de la Mare's, which is a fantasy on *z* and is printed as such. It is called *The Bees' Song* and it starts:

Thousandz of thornz there be  
On the rozez where gozez  
The Zebra of Zee.

And to see the same assonance used for serious and most effective purpose, look at Keats' ode *To Autumn*<sup>1</sup> where there is an average of one *z* sound to a line and where in the last five lines of the first stanza he is using just this same combination of *m* and *z* for the same end as Tennyson:

To swell the gourd, and plump the hazel shells  
With a sweet kernel; to set budding more,  
And still more, later flowers for the bees,  
Until they think warm days will never cease,  
For Summer has o'er-brimm'd their clammy cells.

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<sup>1</sup> G. T. ccciii; O. B. E. V. 627.

## CHAPTER IV

### POETIC ORNAMENT. I. SIMILE AND METAPHOR

NEXT come some devices which are addressed not to the ear but to the intelligence, or at least to the working imagination: simile and metaphor. We had better start by getting clear the difference between the two, since, though they are closely akin, the effects which they produce are often very different. A glance at the derivation of the two words will be illuminating. 'Simile' is simply a Latin word meaning 'like.' 'Metaphor' comes from a Greek word meaning 'transference,' that is, in its literary sense, the carrying over of an image from one sphere, in which it is normally used, to another. If, for example, I say that a writer 'prunes his style' I am transferring an image from gardening to writing, and I am using a very obvious metaphor. If I say that 'I was very much "taken aback" by this rejoinder' I am probably hardly aware that I am using a metaphor at all, since 'taken aback' is one of those 'dead' metaphors which have become so much part of ordinary speech that their metaphorical sense has been almost lost; but in fact I am transferring a very vivid image from sailing. But with the simile there is not this direct transference; the picture is fully drawn in one sphere and compared with the corresponding picture in the other sphere. I write a simile and not a metaphor if I say: 'As the gardener prunes his rose trees so that they shall bear better blooms, so this writer excises irrelevancies so that his style shall be more effective,' or 'I was rendered just as helpless as a ship when a shift of wind takes her sails on the wrong side.' Very briefly, then, it appears that metaphor



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is compressed simile, and it will therefore be as well to consider simile first. When a poet gives his readers a simile he has as a rule been speaking of something which he wants to make more vivid, which at any rate he wants to be sure that his readers do not miss. He therefore stops for a moment, and puts before them another picture which has points of similarity with what he was first talking about. He invites them to look upon this picture and on that. The mere fact that they have to stop gives time for the first picture to tell, and the comparison inevitably makes the details of the first picture more vivid. Here is a very elementary instance from Shelley's poem *To Night*:

the weary Day turned to his rest,  
Lingering like an unloved guest.

By the time that you have got the picture of the unwanted guest hanging about on the doorstep, and dragging out tedious good-byes, you have clearly in mind the poet's impatience for the end of day and the coming of night. Now there are in poetry two quite distinct types of simile. The first might be called the 'primitive' type; it is the type which is common in certain forms of 'primitive' epic. Its only object is to enhance the vividness of the picture, and in drawing his simile-picture the poet therefore confines himself rigorously to the points which the two pictures have in common, and refuses to add anything to the simile-picture, for the mere sake of completeness, which is not justified by a detail in the other. The other type of simile might be called the 'literary,' since it occurs commonly in the so-called 'literary' epic. In this the simile-picture, just as before, is being used to enhance the vividness of another picture, but the poet does not stop at that. Having once started on his simile-picture he proceeds to develop it,

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not just as a means to an end but as an independent work of art or adornment in itself.

May we spend a short time studying these two types of simile, and begin by going away back to the two great writers who so perfectly used the two? At the opening of the third book of the Iliad the two hosts have advanced across the plain to battle. Paris, fully armed, comes out before the Trojans and challenges the Greek leaders to meet him in single fight. Then, says Homer,

when Menelaus saw him standing out before the host, as a lion rejoices when he lights upon a great carcass, whether of stag or of wild goat, when he is hungry, and he devours it ravenously lest the swift hounds and the hunters may set upon him, so Menelaus rejoiced when he saw the god-like Paris, for he thought to take vengeance on the sinner, and he leapt from his chariot to the ground. And when Paris saw him suddenly in the front rank he was afraid and shrank back among his companions; as a man seeing a snake in a woodland thicket starts back trembling and shrinks away and his cheeks grow pale, so Paris drew back into the ranks of Trojans in fear of the son of Atreus.

Now observe; in each case the poet, to illustrate an episode of his narrative, draws a complete picture of an analogous occurrence: the lion is ravenous for food, Menelaus for revenge; each sees unexpectedly what may satisfy the hunger; each, fearing interruption, is in haste to seize the chance: in the second instance the appearance of Menelaus and of the snake is equally sudden; the effect on Paris and on the man is the same: there is only one detail in either of the simile-pictures which is not paralleled in the actual episode, a detail put in, therefore, merely for the sake of completeness in the simile-picture. Now you will notice that the author by the use of this type of simile secures various desirable ends: first, he arrests attention by a sudden change of subject: next, by

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compelling his hearers to visualize two pictures at the same time, and to compare the details in the one with those in the other, he is keeping the imagination at full stretch; further, he is making it easier for his hearers to apprehend vividly, by this comparison of details, something which mere description could not render so vivid; the description, for example, of a man's state of mind is apt to be vague or dull, but compare it to a physical hunger of a lion and it immediately becomes clear; and lastly, I suggest, as a further desirable end which is often overlooked, that the poet by his simile gains time for his hearer. The simile-picture takes some time to draw, and during that time the hearer has leisure to grasp in full the other picture. Take the first fifteen lines of the third book, in which the clamorous advance of the Trojans is compared to the flight of cranes, the Achaeans are shown advancing in silence, and the dust-cloud raised by the hosts is compared to a mist upon the mountains:

When both hosts were arrayed under their leaders, the Trojans came on with clamour and crying like birds, as the clamour of cranes rises to Heaven when they flee from the winter and the boundless storms, and with clamour they fly towards the streams of Ocean, bearing death and destruction to the Pigmy men, and at early morning they bring strife; but the Achaeans came on in silence, their hearts hot for battle, well-purposed to stand firm one by another. And as the south wind shrouds the mountain peaks in mist, hated by the shepherd but better than night for the thief, and a man can see no further than a stone's throw, so beneath the feet of the hosts as they came rose the thick dust-cloud, and they moved forward swiftly over the plain. But when now they were come near to one another . . .

For the space of time which those lines occupy in recitation the hearer is indeed seeing the cranes and the mist,

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but also, perhaps with another part of his mind, he is watching the hosts advance. Without this or some similar device, the poet can only say that they are advancing, and then, before the hearer has time to see the actual movement of the advance, the advance is finished and the hosts have met. And I think that often the irrelevant, or superfluous, details are not used, as is frequently supposed, merely to give vividness to the simile-picture, though they do this too, but are used partly to give time, and are particularly common when the scene is of such a character (e.g. a scene of rapid and changing movement) that time is needed for its proper apprehension. When, for instance, in the Sixteenth Iliad we want time to watch the bustle and movement, as the Myrmidons arm at the order of Achilles, there is an eight-line simile comparing them to wolves. But when the picture can be called up in its final form, when it is not necessary that it should change or develop under our eyes, when e.g. the lines, instead of advancing against one another, are locked in more or less static conflict, then two lines of simile about a man building a wall will suffice.

As an illustration of the other type look at a famous passage in the Sixth Aeneid.<sup>1</sup> It well illustrates both the beauties and the dangers of the literary simile. Down in Hades a great crowd of shadows is gathered to cross the river to the Elysian plains:

As in the forests the leaves fall thick from the trees at the first frosts of autumn, or as the birds flock shorewards from the deep when the cold of the year sends them fleeing over the sea to sunny lands, so the shades stood, each praying for the first passage over, and they stretched out their hands in longing for the further shore.

It is an exquisite description; but you will observe that in the first part the only appropriate feature of the leaves

<sup>1</sup> *Aen.* vi. 309-14.

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is their number; that they are falling is irrelevant; and in the second part the imagination ranges beyond what is germane to the business and defeats its immediate ends; the significant point is the gathering of the birds, but the imagination follows them in their southward flight, and so is distracted from the shades on the bank. The touch is exquisite in itself, but it mars the picture for its immediate purpose. Or if, with Sellar, you defend it, and the defence is possible, by finding in the sunny lands a hint of the happier life beyond the barrier, then consider this example. There is a comparison, in the fifth book of the *Aeneid*, of the Trojan youth, engaged in the complicated evolutions of their military tattoo, first to the Labyrinth and secondly to dolphins.<sup>1</sup> Both the Labyrinth and the dolphins are vividly described, but of these two similes the first, one may safely say, is thoroughly bad, since the rapidly shifting intricacies of the horsemen are made not more but less vivid by comparison with the static intricacies of the maze; and the second simile is introduced merely to remedy the deficiencies of the first.

Milton has both types of simile. Here is the Homeric; Satan rouses his stupefied followers:

They heard, and were abasht, and up they sprung  
Upon the wing, as when men wont to watch  
On duty, sleeping found by whom they dread,  
Rouse and bestir themselves ere well awake.

(*P. L.* i. 331-4.)<sup>2</sup>

And here is the Virgilian:

Behold a wonder! they but now who seemd  
In bigness to surpass Earths Giant Sons

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<sup>1</sup> *Aen.* v. 588-95.

<sup>2</sup> Some of the quotations from Milton are given in his own spelling, some in modernized spelling, so that any readers who are interested can consider whether they feel a difference in effect.

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Now less then smallest Dwarfs, in narrow room  
 Throng numberless, like that Pigmean Race  
 Beyond the *Indian* Mount, or Faerie Elves,  
 Whose midnight Revels, by a Forrest side  
 Or Fountain some belated Peasant sees,  
 Or dreams he sees, while over head the Moon  
 Sits Arbitress, and neerer to the Earth  
 Wheels her pale course, they on thir mirth & dance  
 Intent, with jocond Music charm his ear;  
 At once with joy and fear his heart rebounds.

(P. L. i. 777-88.)

You notice that all the business of the peasant and the moon, lovely though it is, and though it does not, as in the Virgilian instance, at all detract from the vividness, is yet quite irrelevant. Milton has also a type of simile, peculiar I think to himself, in which the picture starts by being more or less a primitive simile; it then branches out into almost irrelevant details, but from one of these details emerges finally another primitive simile. It is worth studying in some detail an instance of the wheel thus coming full circle:

His Legions, Angel Forms, who lay intrans't  
 Thick as Autumnal Leaves that strow the Brooks  
 In *Vallombrosa*, where th' *Etrurian* shades  
 High overarch't imbowr; or scatterd sedge  
 Afloat, when with fierce Winds *Orion* arm'd  
 Hath vext the Red-Sea Coast, whose waves orethrew  
*Basiris* and his *Memphian* Chivalrie,  
 While with perfidious hatred they pursu'd  
 The Sojourners of *Gosben*, who beheld  
 From the safe shore their floating Carkases  
 And broken Chariot Wheels, so thick bestrown  
 Abject and lost lay these, covering the Flood.

(P. L. i. 301-12.)

The autumn leaves are probably a reminiscence of the *lapsa cadunt folia frigore primo*, though more fully

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appropriate; since they are strowing the brooks, as the angel forms the burning marle, and they are as passive as the 'intrans't' legions: the value of Vallombrosa and the Etrurian shades, however, is purely a sound value, a literary—or, if you like, musical—device: we then pass to sedge floating, and some curious things happen: at the mention of the Red Sea the historical imagination is kindled, and sees the ruin of the Egyptians, allusively described, which comes in at first merely as an elaboration, and then by unobtrusive degrees becomes another simile on its own account.

Matthew Arnold shall illustrate for us further the perils that beset the literary simile when it is made so complete that you can extract a simile from its context without much loss to itself, and regard it as a piece of literary cameo-cutting in its own right. I do not mean that Arnold's similes are irrelevant. The central point of them is relevant, or no one of the artistic sense of Matthew Arnold would admit them at all, but the picture is elaborated with a number of details, which do indeed make the picture complete in itself, but which do not enhance, and sometimes by an incongruity even detract from, the significance of the comparison. For example in Book II of *Balder Dead*, line 90, Hermod arrives at the bridge, and on the bridge there is

a Damsel watching arm'd,  
In the strait passage, at the further end,  
Where the road issues between walling rocks.

There then follows this:

Scant space that Warder left for passers by;  
But, as when cowherds in October drive  
Their kine across a snowy mountain pass  
To winter pasture on the southern side,  
And on the ridge a wagon chokes the way,

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Wedg'd in the snow; then painfully the hinds  
With goad and shouting urge their cattle past,  
Plunging through deep untrodden banks of snow  
To right and left, and warm steam fills the air—  
So on the bridge that Damsel block'd the way.

Now in the first place it is not clear that the simile is particularly felicitous even in its central point, since even if Hermod on Odin's charger can reasonably be compared to cowherds and kine, there would seem to be few things less like a damsel armed than a wagon wedged in the snow, and all the details which complete the picture are not only unnecessary for the comparison, but, worse than that, force the reader to look so long upon the incongruity that he is bound to feel uneasy with it. On the other hand far from all of the similes are thus incongruous, and some are particularly exquisite. Most of all perhaps, that in Book I, lines 228-35:

Nor yet could Hermod see his brother's face,  
For it grew dark; but Hoder touch'd his arm:  
And as a spray of honeysuckle flowers  
Brushes across a tired traveller's face  
Who shuffles through the deep dew-moisten'd dust,  
On a May evening, in the darken'd lanes,  
And starts him, that he thinks a ghost went by—  
So Hoder brush'd by Hermod's side.

Though even here you observe that the deep, dew-moistened dust and the May evening have nothing to do with the comparison, any more than the clear river, and the lake, and the autumn days, are relevant in the famous simile of the swallows in Book II, lines 157-63:

And as the swallows crowd the bulrush-beds  
Of some clear river, issuing from a lake,  
On autumn days, before they cross the sea;  
And to each bulrush-crest a swallow hangs



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Swinging, and others skim the river streams,  
And their quick twittering fills the banks and shores—  
So around Hermod swarm'd the twittering ghosts.

And this simile illustrates excellently one of the perils of literary imitation. It is, one imagines, very certainly an imitation of the Virgilian passage about the ghosts on the bank of the Styx, and Matthew Arnold imports from that description the words 'before they cross the sea.' But there is this difference between the great literary artist and his unsuccessful imitator: Virgil is describing the gathering of birds before they migrate across the sea as a parallel to ghosts standing upon the shore of the Styx and praying to cross it; whereas Matthew Arnold introduces into his description a note which is not merely otiose but definitely contradictory, since the ghosts he is describing are already in Hell, and there is no possibility of their crossing anything or migrating to any other place. The two points on which Matthew Arnold is laying stress are the swarm of the ghosts and their twittering, and those only.

Now his similes are an excellent test of a poet. You can see first whether he is getting his picture clear in his own mind and secondly you can see what kind of pictures naturally occur to him. Shelley, I think, great poet though he is, often breaks down on his similes, since they frequently do not make the picture clearer at all. Look at some from the *Skylark*:<sup>1</sup>

From the earth thou springest,  
Like a cloud of fire;

or

Thou dost float and run,  
Like an unbodied joy whose race is just begun;

or

Like a poet hidden  
In the light of thought.

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<sup>1</sup> G. T. cclxxxvii; O. B. E. V. 608.

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Now I suggest that to the great majority of us a skylark is much more familiar, and a clearer picture, than either a cloud of fire, an unbodied joy, or a poet hidden in the light of thought, whatever that may mean; nor do I think that the similes which follow, of the high-born maiden, the glow-worm, and the rose, are very helpful. But this criticism is of course based upon a premise that a poet is, or ought to be, by his similes trying to make clearer what he started by talking about. And it is at least arguable that in the *Skylark* Shelley is trying to do nothing of the kind, that in a sense he has got his similes the wrong way round, and that, though verbally he is trying to make his skylark clearer by his similes, what in point of fact he is doing is trying to make the thought which is embodied in the similes clearer by the familiar picture of the skylark. Or if you like to put it in another way, his simile is a kind of development of the literary simile to a point where it really ceases to be a simile at all, and he is simply writing a series of beautiful and somewhat mystical impressions which are loosely knit together by their imagined common resemblance to a skylark.

Let us now look at Keats. Try the end of the famous sonnet *On First Looking into Chapman's Homer*.<sup>1</sup> How vivid it all is, the suddenness, the abrupt realization as an actuality of something which had been only matter of report, the wonder. Could anything be more trenchant to make clear a mental experience than those two vivid experiences which are half mental, half visual? The two similes are for their full parallelism two of the most perfect in English and as the sonnet is also one of the most perfect examples of its form it is worth printing it in full for your examination, familiar though it is. (And may I in passing call your attention to a point which I think most people in their recollection of that sonnet

<sup>1</sup> G. T. cccx; O. B. E. V. 634.

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forget, partly because it is hard to indicate in reading, that the phrase 'and all his men look'd at each other with a wild surmise' is a parenthesis, so that the last line is not concentrating your attention upon a silent group but upon a single silent figure against the background of a group, silent though no doubt that also was.)

Much have I travell'd in the realms of gold,  
And many goodly states and kingdoms seen;  
Round many western islands have I been  
Which bards in fealty to Apollo hold.  
Oft of one wide expanse had I been told  
That deep-brow'd Homer ruled as his demesne;  
Yet did I never breathe its pure serene  
Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold:  
Then felt I like some watcher of the skies  
When a new planet swims into his ken;  
Or like stout Cortez, when with eagle eyes  
He star'd at the Pacific—and all his men  
Look'd at each other with a wild surmise—  
Silent, upon a peak in Darien.

If one launched out upon this fascinating study of similes there would be no stopping within the limits of a book. It is a study which every one must pursue for himself, but I should like to draw attention to what seems to me a remarkable point, that in two of Keats' great poems, *Ode to a Nightingale* and *To Autumn*, if we discount 'as though of hemlock I had drunk,' which is hardly a proper simile, in the whole of those two poems there is only one simile, and that is the very brief 'like a gleaner' in *To Autumn*.<sup>1</sup> That surely is just because Keats' touch

<sup>1</sup> I should like to append an *obiter dictum*, which is barely relevant to the present discussion, but may be interesting to readers of Keats. *To Autumn* is sharply differentiated from the other odes, but because its language is of the same type, and its form almost identical, the difference is easy to miss. In the other odes there are frequent 'flights of fancy,' such things as:

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is so sure, his initial presentation of his pictures so vivid and so concrete that they need no extra vivification. The function of simile (to try a little simile on our own) is exactly that of reaction in a wireless receiver; and if your station is strong enough you don't need it and you avoid the risk of distortion. Which is not to say that in other poems when the need arises Keats is not one of the great masters of simile.

I should like to conclude this brief discussion of simile by a quotation from a writer who, in addition to the superb common sense which is often and rightly noted, had a comprehensive range and a penetrating wisdom which make him sometimes the most provocative and always the most dependable of English critics. We may go elsewhere for excitement, and elsewhere for the thrust of the spot-light concentrated upon one aspect of the subject; but when we want the dispassionate daylight we come back to Johnson.

\*A simile, to be perfect, must both illustrate and ennoble the subject; must show it to the understanding in a clearer view, and display it to the fancy with greater dignity; but either of these qualities may be sufficient to recommend it. In didactic poetry, of which the great purpose is instruction, a simile may be praised which illustrates, though it does not ennoble; in heroics, that may be admitted which ennobles, though it does not illustrate. That it may be complete, it is required to exhibit, independently of its references, a pleasing

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'. . . I will fly to thee,  
Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,  
But on the viewless wings of Poesy,'

or

'His soul shall taste the sadness of her night,  
And be among her cloudy trophies hung.'

But with the exception of the personification of autumn above mentioned, and even that is a very matter-of-fact personification, the whole of this poem is pure 'realism,' an exact record of straightforward visual impressions.

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image; for a simile is said to be a short episode. To this antiquity was so attentive, that circumstances were sometimes added which, having no parallels, served only to fill the imagination, and produced what Perrault ludicrously called 'comparisons with a long tail.' In their similes the greatest writers have sometimes failed: the ship-race, compared with the chariot-race, is neither illustrated nor aggrandized; land and water make all the difference: when Apollo, running after Daphne, is likened to a greyhound chasing a hare, there is nothing gained; the ideas of pursuit and flight are too plain to be made plainer; and a god and a daughter of a god are not represented much to their advantage by a hare and a dog.

• Now as to metaphor. Meredith once said that concentration and suggestion were the two things that he valued and was always striving for in poetry. The poet who is striving for concentration is going to use metaphor rather than simile, metaphor being, as we have seen, compressed simile. Metaphor is transference, and the acceptability of any particular metaphor depends largely upon whether we find the transference easy or hard. In simile it matters less that the two pictures which are being drawn should be, on the face of it, congruent, since we have an interval in which we are invited to shift our view from the contemplation of one picture to that of the other, and any incongruity will be less disconcerting, and may indeed be stimulating. But when we are being invited to keep two incongruous pictures in our consciousness at the same moment, some readers are stimulated and some are repelled. Donne is one of the masters of what might be called the 'harsh' metaphor. But he also provides a most interesting example of the half-way house between simile and metaphor. In *A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning* he writes this:

Our two soules therefore, which are one,  
Though I must goe, endure not yet

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A breach, but an expansion,  
Like gold to aery thinnesse beate.

If they be two, they are two so  
As stiffe twin compasses are two,  
Thy soule the fixt foot, makes no show  
To move, but doth, if the'other doe.

And though it in the center sit,  
Yet when the other far doth rome,  
It leans, and hearkens after it,  
And growes erect, as that comes home.

Now that starts as an avowed simile ('as stiffe twin compasses are two'), but almost at once the soul and the fixt foot become identified, and in the third stanza 'it' refers to both at once, so that instead of being able to look first at the pair of compasses, and then shift our imaginative gaze to the two souls, we are asked to look at the same instant at a soul and the leg of a pair of compasses, and this to many readers is an invitation which they emphatically decline. A possible danger of compressing a simile into a metaphor is well illustrated by another passage of Donne, where he writes:

Our eye-beames twisted, and did thred  
Our eyes, upon one double string.

If a poet wrote 'As when a jeweller threads pearls on a string, so the glances of our eyes met,' no one would be seriously disturbed; but as the thing stands it conjures up for many readers an unpleasant picture of needle and thread being pushed through eye-balls. The upshot appears to be this, that metaphor, if rightly used, can be more terse and therefore more effective than simile, but that its effectiveness depends upon the ease with which the individual reader can conduct the transference which

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it demands. Take an example from Shakespeare. He says:

To put down Richard, that sweet lovely rose,  
And plant this thorn, this canker, Bolingbroke.

No reader with such things as 'My love is like a red, red rose' (a simile) in his mind, has the smallest difficulty in identifying Richard with a rose. And Shakespeare, who is a master of metaphor, provides innumerable illustrations over the whole range, from the metaphor that is so natural that it is hardly felt to be a metaphor at all, to the metaphor which is almost as startling as some of Donne's. Here is a famous passage which well illustrates both simile and metaphor:

Besides, this Duncan  
Hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been  
So clear in his great office, that his virtues  
Will plead like angels, trumpet-tongu'd against  
The deep damnation of his taking-off;  
And pity, like a naked new-born babe,  
Striding the blast, or heaven's cherubin, hors'd  
Upon the sightless couriers of the air,  
Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye,  
That tears shall drown the wind. I have no spur  
To prick the sides of my intent, but only  
Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself,  
And falls on the other.

And here, also from Shakespeare, is a whole run of metaphors, so fast on one another's heels that one is almost inclined to say 'mixed metaphors.' Antony is lamenting the loss of his followers:

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

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If you want to appreciate the compression of metaphor try the experiment of expanding that passage into the fullness of all the implied similes.

•It will, I hope, now be clear that the function and effect of metaphor are different from those of simile. Simile is a comparatively leisurely business, and appeals largely to the eye; it stimulates our visual imagination. Metaphor is more abrupt, and makes a more insistent demand upon the intellect, since, if we are to appreciate it to the full, we have very rapidly to create two pictures for ourselves in at least enough detail to allow our minds to accept the legitimacy of the transference.

I said earlier that one can, as it were, get a line on a poet by a study of his similes. One can do the same thing even more certainly by a study of his metaphors, since the simile is always a conscious effort, conducted at leisure, whereas metaphor is more nearly the involuntary idiom of the poet's imagination. As the earliest, and one of the greatest, of literary critics remarks, apropos of various literary devices: 'It is a great thing, indeed, to make a proper use of these poetical forms, as also of compounds and strange words. But the greatest thing by far is to be a master of metaphor. It is the one thing that cannot be learnt from others; and it is also a sign of genius, since a good metaphor implies an intuitive perception of the similarity in dissimilars.'

If one can learn much about a poet from his deliberate similes, and even more from his metaphors, one can learn something from his favourite single words, especially his epithets, since however deliberate his choice of a particular word for a particular context, the general range and temper of his vocabulary is inevitably the unconscious expression of himself, of the lines along which his mind travels and the regions in which his imagination naturally moves.



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Here are some suggestions about Shelley and Keats which readers can test for themselves. I will give you the conclusions of what sounds a very laborious and mechanical operation, the selection namely of a number of words which seemed more or less characteristic of one poet or the other, and a comparison of the frequency of their occurrence in the poems by the two poets included in the *Golden Treasury*, adding to Keats, who is in that collection somewhat under-represented, to make the sum total about level, the three odes to the *Grecian Urn*, *Psyche*, and *Melancholy*, and *The Eve of St Agnes*. Now in certain obvious words like 'sweet,' and allusions to the moon or scents, there is little to choose between them. (This surprised me a little, for I thought that Keats would be stronger on scents than Shelley.) But certain other words sharply differentiate them. In words describing music, especially the actual word 'harmony,' Shelley stands alone. So also in words describing light, 'lightning,' 'fire,' 'bright,' 'radiant,' he has an enormous preponderance; also in words describing rapidity of movement, and in allusions to winds and waves (mobile things, you observe) and, rather oddly, to kissing, which is one of Shelley's most frequent metaphors. Shelley's imagination moves naturally in the region of the unattainable, the illimitable, and the undefined:

The loftiest star of unascended heaven,  
Pinnacled dim in the intense inane,

whereas Keats is only happy with his feet on firm earth among 'things that he can touch and see,' the 'chuckling linnets,' the 'low-creeping strawberries' with their 'summer coolness,' the 'pent-up butterflies' with their freckled wings, the rosy hue on the stubble-plains, or the twittering swallows. To give details, which sound more like football reports than poetic criticism, if you take the music group the score is 16 to 4 in favour of

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Shelley; light, fire, etc., 47 to 9; winds and waves 41 to 9. On the other hand Keats has far more to say than Shelley about visual impressions; if you take the words like 'see,' 'behold,' 'gaze,' Keats has 32 to Shelley's 9. Then there is a class of words in which Keats, as it were, scores a love game, words like 'rich' and 'ripe,' and allusions to the *taste* of things, whether of food or of drink. Again if you take words like 'cold' and 'warm,' descriptions, that is, of sensations apprehended by the sense of *touch*, he moves in a different world from Shelley. And then there is of course that peculiar feature of Keats' work, the hyphenated epithet. Now all that may sound terribly mechanical, but I think you will find that if you re-read the poets with that in view you will be more vividly aware of the ethereal beauty of the one, so well described as Ariel, and the richer beauty of the other, and as I think also his greater variety. When you have the key it is almost comic to observe how little a distance Shelley can get without talking about light or winds or waves or mists or swiftness or kissing or the infinite.

You can apply the same test to any poet you like and the results are almost always illuminating, since in no other way is a poet certain to give himself away so unconsciously and therefore so completely. Test for example how far Swinburne can go in any typically Swinburnean poem without the use of one, and probably several, of the following words, 'sick,' 'sullen,' 'sterile,' 'barren,' 'poisonous.'

## CHAPTER V

### POETIC ORNAMENT. II. PROPER NAMES

I WANT NOW to devote a chapter to the study of a particular poetic ornament which is of great importance, and the skilful use of which is often a mark not only of the clever adorer but of the really great poet. This is the use of proper names. This subject has from the reader's point of view a considerable advantage in that there is nothing particular to discuss about it. All that the critic can do is to give as many and as varied instances as may be of the kind of way in which the poets use this particular part of their material, and hope thereby to encourage his readers to pursue a fascinating line of study for themselves.

I suppose that of all English poets Milton most compellingly exploited the magic of proper names, and for the ordinary reader the most part of his names have just a musical value, since to the majority of us they are not very familiar, and have no particular associations. Hence we are momentarily free of that difficulty which I mentioned earlier of trying to do two things at once, both hear the word and take in its meaning. We can concentrate on hearing. Take for example *Lycidas*<sup>1</sup> at line 159:

Or whether thou to our moist vows deny'd,  
Sleep'st by the fable of Bellerus old,  
Where the great vision of the guarded Mount  
Looks toward Namancos and Bayona's hold.

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<sup>1</sup> G. T. lxxxix; O. B. E. V. 317.

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Or take that exquisite passage in Book III of *Paradise Lost*, lines 26–36, where the earlier lines, lovely though they are, are yet leading up to the climax of the last two:

Yet not the more  
Cease I to wander where the Muses haunt  
Clear spring, or shady grove, or sunny hill,  
Smit with the love of sacred song; but chief  
Thee, Sion, and the flowery brooks beneath,  
That wash thy hallowed feet and warbling flow,  
Nightly I visit; nor sometimes forget  
Those other two, equalled with me in fate,  
So were I equalled with them in renown,  
Blind Thamyris and blind Maeonides,  
And Tiresias and Phineus, prophets old.

And sometimes he just plays fantasias on proper names as in *Paradise Lost*, I. 408:

in Hesebon  
And Horonaim, Seon's realm, beyond  
The flowery dale of Sibma clad with vines,  
And Eleale to the asphaltic pool.

Or with a virtuosity seemingly so casual that it all the more makes one catch one's breath at its perfection, *Paradise Regained*, II. 360:

knights of Logres, or of Lyones,  
Lancelot or Pelleas, or Pellenore.

Of course you can, if you like, summon to your aid a learned commentator who will tell you what the fable of Bellerus was, or who Thamyris was, or where Eleale and Logres were, but is your pleasure any the keener for the knowledge? The real answer to this rhetorical question is not the 'no' which it appears to expect, but 'yes,' since Milton, one of the most learned of poets, always knew

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what he was talking about, and used his proper names for their associations as well as their sounds. But for the modern reader, less learned than Milton, the *primary* pleasure to be derived from those lines is the enchantment of the ear. And merely from the musical point of view all those passages richly repay examination, particularly perhaps the last, which is an admirable instance of that trick of Milton's mentioned above whereby he joins in one word sounds which have occurred earlier in separate words. Your ears can hardly have missed the way in which 'Pellenore' picks up the / and the r and the n of 'Logres' and 'Lancelot,' and also for that matter the whole first syllable of 'Pelleas,' and the word 'or.' If you care to pursue this technical analysis further you will notice the 'attack' of the explosive initial letter of the last two proper names as contrasted with the liquids of the first three. I am not sure that in studies of assonance enough attention is always paid to the different effects produced by different letters in themselves, quite apart from whether they are echoing preceding sounds. It is clear, I think, that Milton uses the type of letter here under consideration for a particular abruptness of effect when he wants to awake attention. Look for example at the opening of stanza 22 of the great Nativity hymn:

Peor, and Baalim,  
Forsake their Temples dim.

Just try the substitution of any more liquid proper names, and hear how the effect is weakened.

It is worth remarking that neither of our greatest English poets before Milton is at all a notable exponent of this use of proper names. Chaucer makes very little use of them except as necessary labels for the straightforward purposes of his narrative, or to acknowledge (sometimes mockingly to parade) his authorities, or to

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introduce points of topical interest. Shakespeare uses them occasionally in passages rather lyric than dramatic, such as the Lorenzo-Jessica passage at the end of *The Merchant of Venice*, or in a lovely four lines in *Love's Labour's Lost*,<sup>1</sup> but for the most part he seems little interested in them, except to get exasperated when he has to accommodate to his blank verse such intractable persons or places as Sir John Ramston or Northampton.<sup>2</sup> This absence of a particular literary adornment provokes some interesting speculations as to the deductions which may be drawn from it. Are Chaucer and Shakespeare better poets or worse poets than Marlowe or Milton or Macaulay, or is it that they feel that they can afford to neglect this literary device, or that their particular type of poetry will not artistically admit it? It would be a facile answer so far as Shakespeare is concerned to say that he had not the literary background of the three poets mentioned, but this will not do at all for Chaucer, who, though not a scholar of Milton's calibre, had something of Macaulay's width of reading. I fancy that the true answer is double-barrelled; (1) that this type of adornment is only in place in certain kinds of poetry, notably in lyric, or in the type of epic commonly called literary, and (2) that it is only naturally used by poets of wide reading, in whose minds the proper names arise spontaneously and without deliberate research. Chaucer,

<sup>1</sup> 'For valour, is not Love a Hercules,  
Still climbing trees in the Hesperides?  
Subtle as Sphinx, as sweet and musical  
As bright Apollo's lute, strung with his hair.'

<sup>2</sup> 'Sir Thomas Erpingham, Sir John Ramston,  
Sir John Norbery, Sir Robert Waterton and Francis Quoint,'  
(*Richard II*, II. i. 283-4.)

'Last night I hear they lay at Northampton,  
At Stony-Stratford will they be to-night,'  
(*Richard III*, II. iv. 1-2.)

and cf. *Henry V*, I. ii. 33-95.

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for all his reading, is in his greatest work writing straightforward narrative, and has little time, even had he the wish, for this kind of ornament; Shakespeare, at any rate in his later and greater work, is primarily dramatic, and proper names, even if his reading had given him that store of them which it probably had not, would have had to justify their presence by their dramatic relevance.<sup>1</sup> Marlowe had all the literary background which makes the ornamental use of proper names spontaneous, and he wrote a great deal of lyric under cover of the dramatic form, and so we get things like

Zenocrate, lovelier than the love of Jove,  
Brighter than is the silver Rhodope,  
Fairer than whitest snow on Scythian hills.

Matthew Arnold has the same background, and is writing 'literary' epic, so that in *Sobrab and Rustum* he can congruously use such names as Hyphasis and Hydaspes, and in *Balder Dead* can yield without any qualms of conscience to the almost irresistible temptation of the resounding names of the Norse mythology. But Browning, with a width of reading as extensive as any of his predecessors, is always writing fast, and in his best work is also composing work which, even if its technical label may be lyric (as in many of his shorter poems), or narrative (as in *The Ring and the Book*), is none the less in its essence dramatic, so that the adornment of proper names, which can be felicitously introduced only by the poet in his own person, and not by the supposed speaker, is not admissible.

In more modern poets you will often find proper names used merely as a musical ornament, as for example

<sup>1</sup> For example, in two famous passages in *Othello* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, Aleppo and Cydnus have little more than a geographical significance; they are the names of a river and a city, the scenes of past actions of characters in the play.

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in *The Blessed Damsel*,<sup>1</sup> where Rossetti is quite open about it:

'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.'

Or Kipling's poem on the mine-sweepers:

Mines located in the fairway,  
Boats now working up the chain,  
Sweepers—*Unity, Claribel, Assyrian, Stormcock, and Golden Gain.*

Or the outlandish names in his *Mandalay*, or the delicious run of plant names in his *Our Fathers of Old*:

Excellent herbs had our fathers of old—  
Excellent herbs to ease their pain—  
Alexanders and Marigold,  
Eyebright, Orris and Elecampane.  
Basil, Rocket, Valerian, Rue,  
(Almost singing themselves they run)  
Vervain, Dittany, Call-me-to-you—  
Cowslip, Melilot, Rose of the Sun.  
Anything green that grew out of the mould  
Was an excellent herb to our fathers of old.

A juxtaposition of 'everyday' names with ones more 'elevated' can be effective, as in Francis Thompson's *In no Strange Land*:<sup>2</sup>

the traffic of Jacob's ladder  
Pitched betwixt Heaven and Charing Cross.

And lo, Christ walking on the water  
Not of Gennesareth, but Thames!

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<sup>1</sup> G. T. cccxxi; O. B. E. V. 771.

<sup>2</sup> G. T. cccclvii.



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And sometimes the use of an unfamiliar name can have a curiously clinching effect, as at the end of one of the poems in A. E. Housman's *A Shropshire Lad*:

To-day the Roman and his trouble  
Are ashes under Uricon.

But it is clear that if to beauty or effectiveness of mere sound can be added something else, not indeed meaning, but association, then the total appeal will be greatly strengthened. And in this connection it is worth while considering for a moment patriotic poetry. Some people will say that that is the same thing as no poetry at all, but that I think is because they have in mind the wrong kind of patriotic poetry. There are some nations who move easily among abstractions. The French and the Greeks are typical. The French can feel for things like *La Gloire* and *La France* and feel profoundly. No state in history has evoked a patriotism deeper or more fiery than Athens, the city of the rocks and the violet crown whose citizens were her lovers. But when we read what is perhaps the most splendid expression of that patriotism in the great funeral oration of Pericles we find that we do not very easily breathe that rarefied air. We are just not made that way. Our patriotism is rooted deep in the soil and wants something firm and concrete to attach itself to. It is also very shy about expressing itself. (You observe that whereas the Germans with perfect sincerity could sing *Deutschland über Alles*, the best our troops could do in the way of a war song was to sing about Tipperary, Piccadilly, and Leicester Square, or to invite one another to have a banana.) When Campbell loses his head, and declaims at us <sup>1</sup>

The meteor flag of England  
Shall yet terrific burn;

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<sup>1</sup> *Ye Mariners of England*, G. T. ccl; O. B. E. V. 580.

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we ask him what in the name of common sense he thinks he is talking about; and when he says of Britannia (an abstract figure who at the best of times is a little comic)

With thunders from her native oak  
She quells the floods below,

the mariners of England whom he so patronizingly apostrophizes are apt to remark that they find the enemy a more practical target than the floods and that Britannia needs a course in gunnery. Even when we read John of Gaunt's famous speech in *Richard II* do we not find ourselves subconsciously making excuses for him, on the grounds of his old age and nearness to death? Let us look for a moment at that magnificent piece of rhetoric.

This royal throne of kings, this scepter'd isle,  
This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars,  
This other Eden, demi-paradise,  
This fortress built by Nature for herself  
Against infection and the hand of war,  
This happy breed of men, this little world,  
This precious stone set in the silver sea,  
Which serves it in the office of a wall,  
Or as a moat defensive to a house,  
Against the envy of less happier lands,  
This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England,  
This nurse, this teeming womb of royal kings,  
Fear'd by their breed and famous by their birth,  
Renowned for their deeds as far from home,—  
For Christian service and true chivalry,—  
As is the sepulchre in stubborn Jewry  
Of the world's ransom, blessed Mary's Son . . .

(*Richard II*, II. i. 40-56.)

Down to that point is it anything more than rhetoric, however magnificent? Surely seats of Mars, other Edens, demi-paradises, and precious stones, even when

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set in the silver sea, leave us cold and a trifle uncomfortable; but just at the end come four words on which I think you can hear his voice change, and which contain more of the essence of British patriotism than all the rest of the speech put together:

Renowned for their deeds as far from home,—  
For Christian service and true chivalry,—  
As is the sepulchre in stubborn Jewry  
Of the word's ransom, blessed Mary's Son:  
This land of such dear souls, this dear, dear land.

'This dear, dear land.' There at last is the true Englishman speaking. He has come down from his airy abstractions and conceits and metaphors and has got his feet firmly planted on the soil. But I suggest to you that even still the territorial range is too wide to be typical. When an Englishman thinks of England it is not an abstract England that he thinks of, nor even the area that is labelled England on the map and coloured red. It is a particular part of England, that corner of the world, that *angulus terrarum*, full of the things that were about his boyhood, which is dear to him above all others and for him is England. It may be the Devon combes, or the churches and windmills of the fens, or the 'blue goodness of the Weald,' or the green roll of the Cheviots surging away and away into the distance, or the pines and heather and peat water of Glen Affric, or the aloof wizardry of Skye; or it may be for that matter the hurrying racket of Piccadilly Circus. But wherever it is, it is the pictures of this corner that rise in his mind when he thinks of his own country, whether he lives in it, or has to recall it with a heartache from the outposts. Each of us has his own England, or Wales, or Scotland, or Ireland, or Canada, or New Zealand, or wherever it is.

It is, by the way, because of this kind of love of country that Burns has found his way so far ben in the

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heart of Scotland. The Scotch are a home-loving nation. That may seem an odd thing to say of a nation that beyond all others has gone out from its home to inherit and dominate the earth. But home-loving is not the same as home-staying, and Scotland is the holding-ground for the anchor however much cable is paid out. And it is a great thing for the wanderer to be able to carry his home with him between the two covers of a printed book, which, even though not strikingly rich in actual place-names, is yet full of the country and the country's people.

It is perhaps worth noticing that this localized patriotism is not the least significant of the similarities between us and that great nation of antiquity, the Romans. The *angulus terrarum* which I quoted is from perhaps the most Roman of Roman poets, Horace, whose poems are full of just this love of the countryside. Some of you will remember the young warrior in Virgil who lies dying, and he does not think of glory, or fame, or the like, as a Greek might have done, but of his home in Argos:

et dulces moriens reminiscitur Argos;

and it was a sure instinct that made Macaulay (who by the way is, in his own forthright and unsubtle fashion, one of our great masters of proper names) write of Horatius:

But he saw on Palatinus  
The white porch of his home;  
And he spake to the noble river  
That rolls by the towers of Rome.

Now it follows that to find the true patriotic poetry of our race you must not go to the anthologies of patriotic verse, for there you will find the errors of Campbell and the worst atrocities of Kipling. Of Kipling I mean when he is being avowedly and blatantly patriotic and talking of the white man's burden and such-like. But

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Kipling knew the truth, if ever a man did, and in both poetry and prose gave it unrivalled expression, though his titles will not help you, since the finest of his English patriotic poems is called *Sussex*,<sup>1</sup> and the most essentially imperial of his poems has a title more suggestive of Herrick and is called *The Flowers*. Let me give you the famous lines from *Sussex* which even unsupported would put it beyond doubt that Kipling was a poet.

We have no waters to delight  
Our broad and brookless vales—  
Only the dewpond on the height  
Unfed, that never fails—  
Whereby no tattered herbage tells  
Which way the season flies—  
Only our close-bit thyme that smells  
Like dawn in Paradise.

Now that is the most trenchant and packed description, and you cannot, I think, have missed the sudden magical impact of the last word 'Paradise.' But—and here we come back to the main subject of this chapter—it is clear that if for this description you can substitute just one proper name, that will with its associations conjure up the whole picture for you, then you are using that compression and conciseness which is one of the graces of poetry. Now it is this feeling for the country which pervades such a vast proportion of English lyrics, making them all in the truest sense patriotic, and filling them with proper names. It may of course be general, as in Shakespeare's 'daisies pied and violets blue,'<sup>2</sup> or Marvell's annihilation of all that's made to a green thought in a green shade,<sup>3</sup> or Flecker's cry,

Oh shall I never never be home again?  
Meadows of England shining in the rain  
Spread wide your daisied lawns.

(*Brumana.*)

<sup>1</sup> G. T. ccciv.    <sup>2</sup> O. B. E. V. 125.    <sup>3</sup> G. T. cxlii; O. B. E. V. 359.

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But more characteristically it is more particular, and has a name, Kirconnell Lea,<sup>1</sup> or Leven Water, or the Bells of Shandon that sound so grand on the pleasant waters of the River Lee,<sup>2</sup> or the Tummel and Loch Rannoch and Lochaber of a lovely if overdriven song, or the Lake Isle of Innisfree,<sup>3</sup> or Grantchester, or a whole huddle of half comic, half heart-twisting names as in

Then hey for croft and hop-yard, and hill, and field, and pond,  
With Bredon Hill before me and Malvern Hill beyond.  
The hawthorn white i' the hedgerow, and all the spring's attire  
In the comely land of Teme and Lugg, and Clent, and Clee,  
and Wyre.

(MASEFIELD, *London Town.*)

It comes with its most poignant force in the songs of the exiles, whether it be the Jacobite exile who longed for the sight of

the lordly strand of Northumberland  
And the goodly towers thereby,

(SWINBURNE, *A Jacobite's Exile.*)

or that other Jacobite who

Heard on Lavernia Scargill's whispering trees,  
And pined by Arno for his lovelier Tees.

(MACAULAY, *A Jacobite's Epitaph.*)<sup>4</sup>

Or it may be Stevenson in the South Seas writing to his friend:

Blows the wind to-day, and the sun and the rain are flying,  
Blows the wind on the moors to-day and now,  
Where about the graves of the martyrs the whaups are crying,

My heart remembers how!

(*To S. R. Crockett.*)

<sup>1</sup> G. T. cxxxv; O. B. E. V. 387.

<sup>2</sup> G. T. cccliii; O. B. E. V. 864.

<sup>3</sup> O. B. E. V. 677.

<sup>4</sup> O. B. E. V. 657.

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Or the same Stevenson remembering more commonplace things with just as deep a love:

The public house, the Hielan' birks,  
And a' the bonny U.P. kirks.

*(The Scotsman's Return from Abroad.)*

But through all these exiles' songs alike thrills that passionate love of their own country, or rather their own countryside, which for the men and women of our race is their true patriotism, which they all feel, but which only their poets can make articulate for them. For our last quotation will you listen to this passion vibrating through the loveliest of all wanderers' laments:

From the lone shieling of the misty island  
Mountains divide us and the waste of seas;  
But still the blood is strong, the hearts are Highland,  
And we in dreams behold the Hebrides.

*(The Canadian Boat Song.)*

## CHAPTER VI

### POETIC FORM

AFTER two chapters of rather lighter entertainment I want to invite you now to make a start on something which involves considerably harder work, the study of poetic form. I am sure that many readers miss a great deal of the full pleasure which poetry can give, just as many listeners miss much in music, by neglecting to study form. Some of us do not know how to set about it and others (I often have to plead guilty myself) are frankly too lazy. We know that the heroic couplet has a particular effect, but we do not trouble to analyse the way in which it produces that effect. We are aware that the heroic couplet as used by Morris or Swinburne is a totally different thing from the heroic couplet as used by Pope, and we suspect that this is not merely because Pope is writing satire and the other two are writing narrative; but we neglect to push our investigation further. We know that a sonnet affects us differently from a song of Burns, and we even know that a Shakespearean sonnet affects us differently from a Petrarchan, but we let it go at that, when we ought to be making our vague feeling of difference precise and trying to clarify a cloudy impression. We are aware that a stanza of a Keats ode is an extremely skilful piece of construction, while we have a suspicion that a stanza of *The Scholar Gipsy*, which appears to have certain resemblances, is yet not so well knit; we probably say that it seems somehow less satisfactory. But we do not take the trouble to discover exactly what the structure of the Keats stanza is;



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we do not stop to inquire whether it has resemblances to other poetic forms, resemblances which might illuminate our inquiry and show us why it is superior to the Matthew Arnold stanza. Later in this chapter I shall be drawing a good deal of material from a book on Keats by that acute and penetrating scholar who some years ago held the Oxford Chair of Poetry, Mr H. W. Garrod.<sup>1</sup> There are many things in that book to which I should not subscribe, but there is nothing in it ill-considered, and the analysis of Keats' odes is a masterpiece of scholarly study. I should like to quote now what Professor Garrod has to say on this subject of the study of poetry. • 'There is a great deal of poetry in the world not worth reading; and to the poetry worth reading not all of us, perhaps, bring that devotion which might make us, when we read it, worthy to do so. We ask of poetry, quite properly, pleasure; but poetry—quite properly also—asks of us pains. I have never believed that with the poetry of our own country we take enough pains. I have never believed that we either come to it after that spiritual preparation which, in other parts of our religion, we recognize as necessary, or that we read it as attentively as we might. By reading it attentively, I mean not only with attention of the mind, but with braced imagination. The one kind of attention, indeed, helps the other; and against the bane of a sprawling imagination—that direst malady of modern criticism—I know no surer prophylactic than genuine mental industry. That we should thus honestly come to grips with it the best poetry, at least, deserves. . . . Let me say, then, quite simply, that I think the Odes of Keats worth *study*, worth, that is, some pains of scholarship. If the Odes of Keats are as perfect as I think them, and as they are accounted, they deserve to call forth in us some better element than our faculty for gush. It is idle

<sup>1</sup> *Keats* (Clarendon Press, 1926).

## POETIC FORM

to suppose ourselves the students of poetry, when we are in fact only its voluptuaries.'

I have quoted that at length, for it is finely said. I am afraid that in the study of the last two chapters, if it can be dignified by the name of study, we have been perhaps too much the voluptuaries. Now for a while let us be students.

Let us begin with the simplest of all forms, the couplet. In English there are two main types, the 8-syllable and the 10-syllable. Here is the 8-syllable:

O how I long to travel back,  
And tread again that ancient track!  
That I might once more reach that plain  
Where first I left my glorious train.

(VAUGHAN, *The Retreat*.)<sup>1</sup>

And here is the 10-syllable:

To my true king I offer 'd free from stain  
Courage and faith; vain faith, and courage vain.  
For him I threw lands, honours, wealth, away,  
And one dear hope, that was more prized than they.  
(MACAULAY, *A Jacobite's Epitaph*.)<sup>2</sup>

The general effect of this particular form of couplet structure is clear. It is somewhat abrupt, pointed, disjointed, line upon line, stroke upon stroke. The 10-syllable couplet therefore—the famous heroic couplet—has been the metre *par excellence* for satire, where continuity was not of the first importance, and pungency and trenchancy were. But even in the heroic couplet as used for purposes of satire there are differences, exemplified by the practice of Dryden and Pope. These are extremely interesting in themselves and an examination of them makes a good introduction to the

<sup>1</sup> G. T. xcviij; O. B. E. V. 362.

<sup>2</sup> O. B. E. V. 657.

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study of form in general, since it makes one realize, I hope, how much that does not at first meet the eye is revealed by even a cursory examination. Compare these two couplets, the first by Dryden and the second by Pope:

Shadwell alone of all my sons is he  
Who stands confirmed in full stupidity,

and

Willing to wound, and yet afraid to strike,  
Just hint a fault, and hesitate dislike.

Now both those are strict heroic couplets, but in actual structure, or at any rate, if one may put it so, in 'thought-structure,' they are different. Pope is making a series of points, planting four small poisoned darts. In any characteristic couplet he plants two, one at the end of each line with the rhymed word, but in the full form of the Pope couplet, as here, he plants an additional one at the break in each line. Dryden, on the other hand, writes a line and a half without letting you know what is going to happen, and then suddenly launches his knock-out blow. If you did not know that Dryden was attacking Shadwell there is no reason why down to the word 'confirmed' he should not be introducing a compliment, and then comes the unexpected and shattering climax. This difference in form is, in fact (as indeed are most differences of form), typical of the difference in temperament and design between the two writers. Dryden is for the most part playing a very hard-hitting and sometimes rather brutal game. Pope is not playing a game at all; he is subtle and venomous, and wants his wounds to rankle.

Now let us see what happens when the couplet structure is made more fluid, and, though the rhymes still come in pairs, the structure (again perhaps one should say the thought-structure) is not strictly by couplets:

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That Orpheus self may heave his head  
From golden slumber on a bed  
Of heapt Elysian flowres, and hear  
Such streins as would have won the ear  
Of Pluto, to have quite set free  
His half regain'd Eurydice.

(MILTON, *L'Allegro*.)

But even here there is not that heavy stop at the end of the first of the two rhymed lines which completely breaks the couplet and so entirely changes the effect. In this form the rhyme no longer enforces the process of the thought. The thought moves independently, not in terms of couplet at all, and the rhyme does little more than produce a kind of continuous musical obbligato accompaniment:

For Robert—both his eyes were dry,  
He could not weep, but gloomily  
He seem'd to watch the rain; yea, too,  
His lips were firm; he tried once more  
To touch her lips; she reach'd out, sore  
And vain desire so tortured them,  
The poor grey lips, and now the hem  
Of his sleeve brush'd them.

With a start  
Up Godmar rose, thrust them apart;  
From Robert's throat he loosed the bands  
Of silk and mail; with empty hands  
Held out, she stood and gazed, and saw,  
The long bright blade without a flaw  
Glide out from Godmar's sheath, his hand  
In Robert's hair; she saw him bend  
Back Robert's head; she saw him send  
The thin steel down; the blow told well,  
Right backward the knight Robert fell,  
And moan'd as dogs do, being half dead,  
Unwitting, as I deem: so then  
Godmar turn'd grinning to his men,

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Who ran, some five or six, and beat  
His head to pieces at their feet.

Then Godmar turn'd again and said:  
'So, Jehane, the first fitte is read!  
Take note, my lady, that your way  
Lies backward to the Chatelet!'  
She shook her head and gazed awhile  
At her cold hands with a rueful smile,  
As though this thing had made her mad.

This was the parting that they had  
Beside the haystack in the floods.

(W. MORRIS, *The Haystack in the Floods.*)

The same modification can be seen in the looser form of the heroic couplet. Morris again is perhaps our greatest master of it. Here are two passages from *The Life and Death of Jason*, and as we are in that poem we may as well select two passages which are noteworthy for something much more than their structure. They are, I suppose, two of the most beautiful that Morris ever wrote, and they illustrate his remarkable power of rising with so little effort or sense of strain from the ordinary quiet level of narration to something very much more poignant. In the first, Medea is speaking to Jason on the night before they leave Colchis with the Golden Fleece:

But when they reached the precinct of the God,  
And on the hallowed turf their feet now trod,  
Medea turned to Jason, and she said:—  
'O love, turn round, and note the goodlihead  
My father's palace shows beneath the stars.  
Bethink thee of the men grown old in wars,  
Who do my bidding; what delights I have,  
How many ladies lie in wait to save  
My life from toil and carefulness, and think  
How sweet a cup I have been used to drink,



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Two further examples are given in the Appendix, one from Matthew Arnold's *The Church of Brou*, one of the loveliest pieces of music that Arnold ever achieved, and the other from Swinburne's *Tristram of Lyonesse*, in which the astonishing 'lyrical' effect illustrates well the varieties of effect that are within the compass of this metre skilfully used.

The next simplest form I suppose is the 4-lined verse rhymed *abab*. It is an occupation both amusing and instructive to see how much variety can be imported into that very simple structure by varieties of accent. Look at Lovelace's *To Lucasta, going to the Wars*.<sup>1</sup> There are twelve lines, the even lines being one foot shorter than the odd. The technical norm of all lines is iambic. But none of the six longer lines repeats another in its beat, and in the shorter lines there is only one repetition, 'the first foe in the field,' and 'as you too shall adore.'

Tell me not, Sweet, I am unkind,  
That from the nunnery  
Of thy chaste breast and quiet mind  
To war and arms I fly.

True, a new mistress now I chase,  
The first foe in the field;  
And with a stronger faith embrace  
A sword, a horse, a shield.

Yet this inconstancy is such  
As you too shall adore;<sup>2</sup>  
I could not love thee, Dear, so much,  
Loved I not Honour more.

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<sup>1</sup> *G. T.* cix; *O. B. E. V.* 343.

<sup>2</sup> It may interest some readers to see, by comparing the versions of this poem in the two anthologies, what happens when editors start emending. The *Golden Treasury* prints the poem as here; and that is how Lovelace wrote it; the *Oxford Book of English Verse* prints 'As thou too shalt adore,' with no discoverable authority, so preserving grammatical consistency at the expense of euphony; and between the two desiderata Lovelace would not have hesitated for a moment!

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I suspect that many readers will not, at any rate at first sight, agree with the statement that none of the six longer lines repeats another. It may amuse some readers, as illustrating the different ways in which different people will feel that the same poem ought to be read, to make up their minds exactly how they think in this poem the natural accent of the voice should fall, and compare their own view with the indication in the Appendix of how I myself think it should be read (p. 144).

Compare the enchanting variety of this with Sedley's song to Chloris,<sup>1</sup> where of the twelve short lines seven are identical with one another, and, what is worse, identical with the norm:

Ah, Chloris! that I now could sit  
As unconcern'd as when  
Your infant beauty could beget  
No pleasure nor no pain!  
When I the dawn used to admire,  
And praised the coming day,  
I little thought the growing fire  
Must take my rest away.

Your charms in harmless childhood lay  
Like metals in the mine;  
Age from no face took more away  
Than youth conceal'd in thine.  
But as your charms insensibly  
To their perfection prest,  
Fond love as unperceived did fly,  
And in my bosom rest.

My passion with your beauty grew,  
And Cupid at my heart,  
Still as his mother favour'd you,  
Threw a new flaming dart:

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<sup>1</sup> G. T. cvi; O. B. E. V. 409.



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Each gloried in their wanton part;  
To make a lover, he  
Employ'd the utmost of his art,  
To make a beauty, she.<sup>1</sup>

While we are considering comparatively simple verse forms, and a comparatively light type of poetry, it is worth while glancing at a poem of Suckling's:

Why so pale and wan, fond lover?  
Prithee, why so pale?  
Will, when looking well can't move her,  
Looking ill prevail?  
Prithee, why so pale?

Why so dull and mute, young sinner?  
Prithee, why so mute?  
Will, when speaking well can't win her,  
Saying nothing do 't?  
Prithee, why so mute?

Quit, quit, for shame! This will not move,  
This cannot take her,  
If of herself she will not love,  
Nothing can make her:  
The devil take her!<sup>2</sup>

That is obviously a delightful piece of light verse, but there is a good deal more skill in construction than at first meets the eye, and the polish and finish of the poem are more keenly appreciated when we see more clearly how they are produced. In the first line of the first verse there are two adjectives, of which the first is repeated in line 2; and the whole of line 2 is repeated as

<sup>1</sup> This is the version as given in the *Oxford Book of English Verse* and corresponds with the edition of 1668. The *Golden Treasury* shows wide differences, for which there appears to be no authority.

<sup>2</sup> G. T. cxxix; O. B. E. V. 327.

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line 5, thus tying the whole verse together. The structure of the second verse is exactly the same with one exception, namely that it is the second adjective of the first line which is repeated in the second line; and I think we may fairly suppose that this was not an accident but was deliberate on Suckling's part, since the adjectives could quite easily in the first line have been transposed. This structure, fascinating though it is, might become monotonous if repeated again. Consequently in the third verse there is no pick-up of line 1 in line 2; and in line 5, instead of the repetition which we are expecting, our ears are delighted by the unexpected 'The devil take her!'

Now let us move on to something more complicated. Here is a verse from Milton's great poem *On the Morning of Christ's Nativity*:<sup>1</sup>

No war, or battle's sound  
Was heard the world around:  
The idle spear and shield were high uphung;  
The hookèd chariot stood  
Unstain'd with hostile blood;  
The trumpet spake not to the armèd throng;  
And kings sat still with awful eye,  
As if they surely knew their sovran lord was by.

I suppose that everybody has at some time stood and watched a moderately calm sea coming in on a gently sloping beach; several waves come in, swell up, and then just die away without breaking, and one gets an odd sense of frustration, until there comes one which has strength enough to gather itself into a full arch and curve over and break. That, or something like it, is, I think, the effect of this stanza form, a sense of incompleteness followed by finality. But I wonder whether our ears are wholly satisfied by that form. It is an

<sup>1</sup> G. T. lxxxv; O. B. E. V. 307.

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almost irreverent suggestion, seeing that Milton is the greatest technical master that ever handled our language, but I know that my own ear would be even more completely satisfied if the last line but one had ten syllables, not eight. Here is another stanza from the same poem:

Ring out, ye crystal spheres!  
Once bless our human ears,  
If ye have power to touch our senses so;  
And let your silver chime  
Move in melodious time;  
And let the bass of heaven's deep organ blow;  
And with your ninefold harmony  
Make up full consort to the angelic symphony.

How would it be if the last two lines ran as follows:

And with your ninefold divine harmony  
Make up full consort to the angelic symphony.<sup>1</sup>

Any reader who agrees that the additional two syllables make a more rounded completeness will find it instructive to discover why that is so. I fancy that in the stanza as Milton wrote it there is a certain sense of retrogression in going back to a four-beat line after the five beats in line 6, and also a sense of too large a gap between the four beats of the 7th line and the six beats of the 8th. Whereas, if line 7 has five beats, we start as it were from the point we have gained in line 6 and move on naturally to the further advance of line 8.

Browning uses much the same form, though a rather simpler type of it, in *Rabbi Ben Ezra*, in which perhaps verse 30 illustrated the quality of the form most clearly.

<sup>1</sup> 'Divine' to be pronounced as Milton would have pronounced it, with the first syllable 'long.' I tried to find another word which would obviate the need for a note. It may amuse some readers to try other words, such as 'solemn,' and see why they are less satisfactory.

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Look not thou down but up!  
To uses of a cup,  
The festal board, lamp's flash and trumpet's peal,  
The new wine's foaming flow,  
The Master's lips a-glow!  
Thou, heaven's consummate cup, what need'st thou  
with earth's wheel?

And it is worth noticing in passing that Browning has a great love for the effect produced by any form whose outstanding characteristic is a marked difference in the length of successive lines.

Where the quiet-coloured end of evening smiles,  
Miles and miles  
On the solitary pastures where our sheep  
Half-asleep  
Tinkle homeward thro' the twilight, stray or stop  
As they crop.

*(Love among the Ruins.)*<sup>1</sup>

Here—here's his place, where meteors shoot, clouds form,  
Lightnings are loosened,  
Stars come and go! Let joy break with the storm,  
Peace let the dew send!  
Lofty designs must close in like effects:  
Loftily lying,  
Leave him—still loftier than the world suspects,  
Living and dying.

*(A Grammarian's Funeral.)*

From the comparatively simple stanza form of the Nativity hymn, let us move on to one of the great poetic forms in English, and indeed in other languages, the sonnet. The sonnet is a self-contained stanza, complete in itself, of fourteen 10-syllable iambic lines. There are many varieties of rhyme scheme, but there are two main

<sup>1</sup> G. T. ccccxvi.

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types, the so-called Shakespearean and the so-called Petrarchan. Those two types have indeed in common the number of lines and the self-containedness, but apart from that they are so totally different in structure, and therefore in effect, that one sometimes wonders whether, supposing either form to be properly called sonnet, the other form has any right to the same label. In the Shakespearean form there are three verses of four lines each; in each verse lines 1 and 3 and lines 2 and 4 rhyme, but there is no rhyme link between verses. The last two lines are a rhymed couplet, also not rhyme-linked to the rest of the poem. The scheme is *abab cdcd efef gg*. This form of sonnet then consists of three verses and a couplet, of four parts. The Petrarchan form consists of two parts only, called an octet and a sestet. The first eight lines are rhyme-linked with only two rhymes, *abbaabba*; the sestet in the strict form has also only two rhymes, occurring alternately, *cdcdcd*. But the sestet has often three rhymes in a variety of arrangements, the only thing which you must not do being to end with a couplet. In the strict form there is a heavy break at the end of the octet. The result of this difference in structure between the two types of sonnet is an entire difference of impression. In the Shakespearean form you can say one thing in verse 1, another more or less related in verse 2, another in verse 3; and then clinch the whole thing with that abrupt pungency of which, as we saw, the heroic couplet is capable. In the Petrarchan form, if the movement of your thought conforms to the movement of the verse, you are in the rhyme-linked octet developing one idea. At line 8 you call a temporary halt. And then in the sestet you develop another idea (you have six lines, remember, not a couplet, to do it in) which must, the sonnet being a unity, have some connection with the octet, but may be comment or amplification or contrast. Here are two examples which illustrate the difference:

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That time of year thou may'st in me behold  
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang  
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold—  
Bare ruin'd choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.<sup>1</sup>

Having described in his first verse the time of year Shakespeare proceeds in his second verse to describe the time of day:

In me thou see'st the twilight of such day  
As after sunset fadeth in the west,  
Which by and by black night doth take away,  
Death's second self that seals up all the rest.

In the third verse he repeats the same idea in another form:

In me thou see'st the glowing of such fire,  
That on the ashes of his youth doth lie  
As the death-bed whereon it must expire,  
Consum'd with that which it was nourished by.

Having now presented his central idea by three different similitudes he clinches it in the final couplet:

This thou perceiv'st, which makes thy love more strong  
To love that well which thou must leave ere long.

Here is the Petrarchan form:

The world is too much with us; late and soon,  
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers:  
Little we see in Nature that is ours;  
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!  
This sea that bares her bosom to the moon;  
The winds that will be howling at all hours,  
And are up-gather'd now like sleeping flowers;  
For this, for everything, we are out of tune;

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<sup>1</sup> G. T. xxxviii; O. B. E. V. 152.

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It moves us not—Great God! I'd rather be  
A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn;  
So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,  
Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;  
Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;  
Or hear old Triton blow his wreathèd horn.

(WORDSWORTH.)<sup>1</sup>

Now I should like to put before you a sonnet which is not only one of the loveliest in English for its thought but is also extremely interesting from the technical point of view:

Remember me when I am gone away,  
Gone far away into the silent land;  
When you can no more hold me by the hand,  
Nor I half turn to go, yet turning stay.  
Remember me when no more day by day  
You tell me of our future that you plann'd:  
Only remember me; you understand  
It will be late to counsel then or pray.  
Yet if you should forget me for a while  
And afterwards remember, do not grieve:  
For if the darkness and corruption leave  
A vestige of the thoughts that once I had,  
Better by far you should forget and smile  
Than that you should remember and be sad.

(C. G. ROSSETTI.)<sup>2</sup>

That sonnet makes, as it were, the best of both worlds. The scheme is Petrarchan with the looser three rhymes, not two, in the sestet. There is the proper Petrarchan break at the end of the octet, but the rhyme and the sense are at conflict in much the same way as we have seen the technical norm in rhythm and the natural sense accent delightfully conflicting. The octet, linked by rhyme, yet falls into two parallel verses. At the end of the octet there is the transition, proper to the Petrar-

<sup>1</sup> G. T. cccxxvi; O. B. E. V. 535.

<sup>2</sup> O. B. E. V. 787.

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chan form, to a contrasting idea, but the last two lines of the sonnet, which are not a couplet in sound, are yet a sort of couplet in sense, bringing together with a sharp contrast the central ideas (remembering and forgetting) of the octet and the sestet.

Milton's handling of the sonnet form is peculiarly interesting. The movement of Milton's verse is always spacious. Even in *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*, where he is writing couplets, you can still feel him straining against the restriction, and running over at the end of his lines, and it is of course a commonplace that in *Paradise Lost* he writes, more than any other English blank verse writer, by the long paragraph, not by the line nor even by the group of a few lines. It is natural therefore to find him adopting the Petrarchan sonnet form rather than the more disjointed Shakespearean. But his love of liberty and freedom of movement is, even so, restive at the restriction imposed by the heavy break at the end of the octet. He wants to be able to write his fourteen lines as a single whole and not as two parts composing a whole. He adopts therefore from an Italian writer a form of the Petrarchan sonnet in which this break between the octet and sestet is abandoned, and secures thereby as much freedom of movement as can within the sonnet's limits be secured.

When I consider how my light is spent,  
Ere half my days, in this dark world and wide,  
And that one talent which is death to hide  
Lodged with me useless, though my soul more bent  
To serve therewith my Maker, and present  
My true account, lest He returning chide,—  
Doth God exact day-labour, light denied?  
I fondly ask: But Patience, to prevent  
That murmur, soon replies; God doth not need  
Either man's work, or His own gifts: who best  
Bear His mild yoke, they serve Him best: His state



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Is kingly; thousands at His bidding speed  
And post o'er land and ocean without rest:  
They also serve who only stand and wait.<sup>1</sup>

Finally, I want to invite your consideration of the stanza form of Keats' odes. As I said at the beginning of the chapter, I am here indebted to a very full and extremely acute analysis by Mr H. W. Garrod in his book on Keats.<sup>2</sup> Keats did not like either form of sonnet altogether. He disliked what he called the 'pouncing' rhymes of one form and the 'too elegiac' character of the other, and he disliked also the final Shakespearean couplet. So what does he do? By a stroke of sheer technical genius he combines the strength and avoids the weaknesses of both forms. The scheme of the odes *To a Nightingale*, *Melancholy*, *Indolence*, and *A Grecian Urn* is that of a Shakespearean quatrain followed by a Petrarchan sestet (variety is introduced in the *Nightingale* by the shortening of one of the lines).

Who are these coming to the sacrifice?  
To what green altar, O mysterious priest,  
Lead'st thou that heifer lowing at the skies,  
And all her silken flanks with garlands drest?  
What little town by river or sea-shore,  
Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel,  
Is emptied of this folk, this pious morn?  
And, little town, thy streets for evermore  
Will silent be; and not a soul, to tell  
Why thou art desolate, can e'er return.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> G. T. xciv; O. B. E. V. 318.

<sup>2</sup> In *Keats' Craftsmanship* I questioned Mr Garrod's interpretation of one sentence in Keats' letter on the subject (and readers who are interested in the technical point will find a full treatment of it there), but that does not affect my opinion of the brilliance of his exposition as a whole.

<sup>3</sup> G. T. cccxxviii; O. B. E. V. 625.

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She dwells with Beauty—Beauty that must die;  
 And Joy, whose hand is ever at his lips  
 Bidding adieu; and aching Pleasure nigh,  
 Turning to Poison while the bee-mouth sips:  
 Ay, in the very temple of Delight  
 Veil'd Melancholy has her sovran shrine,  
 Though seen of none save him whose strenuous  
 tongue  
 Can burst Joy's grape against his palate fine;  
 His soul shall taste the sadness of her might,  
 And be among her cloudy trophies hung.<sup>1</sup>

The achievement represented by those stanzas might seem enough to content any poet, but it did not satisfy Keats, and he went on to surpass himself. In the ode *To Autumn* he produces a delightful suspense; the ear is expecting an ordinary triple-rhymed sestet, and it is first disappointed of its expectation by an intrusive line, and then gains a far more than compensating pleasure when the final rhyme is sounded. This technical skill is not the least of the reasons which make the ode *To Autumn*<sup>2</sup> rivalled perhaps by one poem only as the most flawless—not the most exciting, not the most magical, but the most flawless—in our language. Here is one stanza from it, and if you will read it aloud with your ears open for the extra and unexpected line, which is the last line but one of the stanza, you will feel how much more perfect it is even than the apparent perfections of the stanzas of *To a Nightingale* and *Melancholy*.

Who hath not seen thee oft amid thy store?  
 Sometimes whoever seeks abroad may find  
 Thee sitting careless on a granary floor,  
 Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind;  
 Or on a half-reap'd furrow sound asleep,  
 Drows'd with the fume of poppies, while thy hook  
 Spars the next swath and all its twinèd flowers:

<sup>1</sup> O. B. E. V. 628.

<sup>2</sup> G. T. ccciii; O. B. E. V. 627.

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And sometimes like a gleaner thou dost keep  
Steady thy laden head across a brook;  
Or by a cyder-press, with patient look,  
Thou watchest the last oozings hours by hours.

If you care to see what the inferior technician does when he is trying to do much the same thing, look at *The Scholar Gipsy*.<sup>1</sup> Here is a stanza from it:

Here, where the reaper was at work of late,  
In this high field's dark corner, where he leaves  
His coat, his basket, and his earthen cruise,  
And in the sun all morning binds the sheaves,  
Then here, at noon, comes back his stores to use;  
Here will I sit and wait,  
While to my ear from uplands far away  
The bleating of the folded flocks is borne,  
With distant cries of reapers in the corn—  
All the live murmur of a summer's day.

Opinions will vary about that stanza form, but even a cursory and un-analytic reading will make some readers feel that there is something unsatisfactory and invertebrate about it, and a brief examination will disclose the reason. Matthew Arnold also has sestet and quatrain, but the quatrain is Petrarchan, and the sestet and quatrain are in the reverse order, so that there is no proper culmination, but rather an anticlimax; since the quatrain gives less the impression of drawing to a satisfying close than does the sestet.

<sup>1</sup> G. T. ccclxxxv; O. B. E. V. 751.

## CHAPTER VII

### THE STUDY OF CONTEMPORARY POETRY

IN this last chapter I propose to suggest, necessarily very briefly, some ways in which the general principles which we have been examining may be applied, and should be applied, to the study of modern poetry. If we fail to study modern poetry we both miss a pleasure and fail in a duty. That we miss a pleasure, and for that matter also a profit, is clear enough. All literature should be, and all great literature is, in vital contact with life, and therefore with the life of the age in which it is produced. I do not mean by that that the great poet necessarily *depicts* the life of his own age; the greater and more universal he is the less he does that; but however great he is, and however universal, he cannot escape from his age, and he is bound in some measure to elucidate it, whether because, as is more usual, he reflects its whole attitude towards life, or whether because, as is the case with a few great rebels, he is in violent reaction against it. If you want to understand a past age you may read its history, and, if the historians know their business, and are not merely presenting you with a schedule of dates and facts, but are making men and nations live before your eyes, you will get much from that reading. But, after all, that is only seeing a past age through someone else's eyes, and what you must read is the books which the men of the age themselves wrote. In those books you find inevitably the soul of the age itself revealed by those who lived in it, as you can find it nowhere else at

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all. We indicate this by the way in which we allude to a book. Someone looks at your bookshelves, and his eye is caught by a binding, and he says 'What 's that?' and you reply 'Oh, that 's Milton.' What you mean of course is that that is the published work of Milton; but you have, without thinking of it, enunciated a much deeper truth, because that published work is in a very real sense Milton, or all of Milton that now matters. He himself put this: 'A good book is the precious life blood of a master spirit, embalmed and treasured up on purpose to a life beyond life.'

But however interesting the study of a past age may be, and however incumbent upon us it is, if we are intelligently to enlarge our horizons and extend our sympathies, that we should rightly study past ages, yet it is our own age in which, whether we like it or not, we have to live, and if we are to make anything of our life in the particular environment, intellectual and other, in which we find ourselves, the study of our own age is much more than interesting; it is imperative. Hence both for pleasure and profit we must read contemporary literature, and in that reading include poetry. So much, no doubt, most readers would agree with, but to many it perhaps seemed extravagant to speak of the *duty* of reading modern poetry. The phrase was not intentionally extravagant, it was meant quite plainly. It is a duty for this reason, that good literature is only produced in an atmosphere of intelligent understanding, interest, and criticism. A modern critic has very well said, 'It is of more significance that a poet should be discussed passionately in one intelligent drawing-room than in a dozen mediocre reviews.' And this is peculiarly important in an age when so much of the reviewing is so conventional and so mild, and contemporary writers are given no standard to aim at, nor that salutary apprehension of honest but damning criticism of bad work

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which is so tonic. One sometimes longs for a touch of the astringent of the *Edinburgh* and *Quarterly*, but while we cannot have it, and many reviewers are so tolerantly polite only because they are too apathetic to be rude, it is all the more important that the mass of ordinary readers should criticize for themselves.

I should like at the outset to say a word or two about the right critical approach to a new and unfamiliar piece of work. There are two questions that one may put about any work of art (not only literary) that is submitted to one's examination. First, what is the artist trying to do (and following on that, how far has he succeeded in his aim)? Second, is the artist's target (whether he has hit it or not) worth aiming at at all? Now, put briefly like that, it is perfectly clear that those two questions are entirely independent. But a great deal of muddled criticism results from an unconscious confusion of the two questions. Because the critic does not approve of the artist's aim he says that the artist has failed in it. Let us glance at a concrete illustration. Rupert Brooke's *Grantschester* is one of the best known of modern poems and has a well-justified reputation. The poet starts with twelve lines of lovely but quite conventional nature description, and then there is a violent change of key. Here are the first twenty lines of the poem. Brooke, you will remember, is writing from a café in Berlin.

Just now the lilac is in bloom,  
All before my little room;  
And in my flower-beds, I think,  
Smile the carnation and the pink;  
And down the borders, well I know,  
The poppy and the pansy blow. . . .  
Oh! there the chestnuts, summer through,  
Beside the river make for you  
A tunnel of green gloom, and sleep  
Deeply above; and green and deep

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The stream mysterious glides beneath,  
Green as a dream and deep as death.  
—Oh, damn! I know it! and I know  
How the May fields all golden show,  
And when the day is young and sweet,  
Gild gloriously the bare feet  
That run to bathe. . . .

*Du lieber Gott!*

Here am I, sweating, sick, and hot,  
And there the shadowed waters fresh  
Lean up to embrace the naked flesh.

Now suppose that I, the critic, being properly trained in the older tradition of the lyric, which stays in much the same emotional key throughout, say, 'But look here, you mustn't in the middle of this lovely stuff suddenly say "damn," because it throws me all out of gear and gives me a shock,' the poet may very well turn round and retort, 'My dear good man, that is just precisely what I was trying to do, and it would appear that I have succeeded. I didn't want you to go to sleep over it, I wanted to give you a shock, and so I deliberately made a violent change of key.' After which I do not see that I have anything left to say except either an expression of merely personal taste ('I don't like it'), or some conventional remarks about the 'dignity of art' which mean exactly nothing at all. So then, in any examination of modern poetry let us try to keep these two questions distinct: (1) What is the poet trying to do (how far has he succeeded)? (2) Is what he is trying to do worth while?

Within the limits of a chapter there is no space to give more than a few very brief and disjointed considerations on modern poetry. All I can hope to do is to encourage readers to start on some lines of inquiry for themselves.

I said in an earlier chapter that one can gain insight into a poet by studying his vocabulary. The vocabulary

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of the modern poets is highly illuminating. Many of them at the turn of the century were in revolt against convention, and in vocabulary they threw back to the notions of the Elizabethans. The Elizabethans had no nonsense about poetic vocabulary. They used anything, the plainest prose or the most purple poetry, so long as it came off; and they often put the two in the most violent juxtaposition. To take only one example:

Let Rome in Tiber melt, and the wide arch  
Of the rang'd empire fall! Here is my space;  
Kingdoms are clay: our dungy earth alike  
Feeds beast as man;

(*A. & C. I. i. 33.*)

But from their time on, most of the poets had all sorts of theoretic bees in their bonnets about diction. They were either unnaturally poetic, like Pope sometimes, and the bad imitators of Pope usually, or they said with Wordsworth—though mercifully he was too good a poet to stay fettered by his own theories—that poetry must be in the language of ordinary men. But anyway they all had fixed notions of what might and might not be said in poetry. The moderns at last broke the fetters and got back to freedom. I doubt if there is any poet between Donne and Brooke who would have started a love lyric with that staccato attack of Donne's 'For Godsake hold your tongue, and let me love.' But any of the characteristic moderns would do that without thinking twice about it. Look at three lines from a poem of Flecker's called *The Old Ships*.<sup>1</sup> He is describing Ulysses.

That talkative, bald-headed seaman came  
(Twelve patient comrades sweating at the oar)  
From Troy's doom-crimson shore.

You notice the juxtaposition of the prosaic 'talkative,'

<sup>1</sup> *G. T. cccci.*



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'bald-headed,' and 'sweating' with a hyphenated epithet that Keats would not have been ashamed of.

Here are two more instances. In the first, a passage from E. A. Robinson's *Tristram*, Gawaine is speaking to Isolt of Brittany:

Your hair, if shorn and woven,  
The which may God forbid, would then become  
A nameless cloth of gold whiter than gold,  
Imprisoning light captured from paradise.  
Your small ears are two necessary leaves  
Of living alabaster never of earth,  
Whereof the flower that is your face is made,  
And is a paradisaal triumph also—  
Along with your gray eyes and your gold hair  
That is not gold. Only God knows, who made it,  
What colour it is exactly. I don't know.

The other is a passage from T. S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* where one of the priests is speaking after Becket has been murdered and the knights have gone out:

Go, weak sad men, lost erring souls, homeless in earth or  
heaven.  
Go where the sunset reddens the last grey rock  
Of Brittany, or the gates of Hercules.  
Go venture shipwreck on the sullen coasts  
Where blackamoors make captive Christian men;  
Go to the northern seas confined with ice  
Where the dead breath makes numb the hand, makes dull  
the brain;  
Find an oasis in the desert sun,  
Go seek alliance with the heathen Saracen,  
To share his filthy rites, and try to snatch  
Forgetfulness in his libidinous courts,  
Oblivion in the fountain by the date-tree;  
Or sit and bite your nails in Aquitaine.

A word about *vers libre*. This no doubt is another symptom of revolt. The trouble with modern *vers libre*

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is that while most of it is extremely *libre* very little of it is *vers*. The whole skill in *vers libre* consists in suggesting a metre, and then, before the ear has tired of it, almost before the ear is aware of it, breaking it and substituting another. That is why the only superbly successful practitioner of *vers libre* in English is a man who had gone through the hardest possible discipline in regular forms first, namely Milton, in the choruses of *Samson Agonistes*. To suppose that you are writing *vers libre* because you chop up rather badly rhymed prose into lines, with a capital at the beginning of each, is merely laziness masquerading as emancipation.

But there is another side to this metrical revolt, and a very interesting one. One can observe a new freedom in the handling of a recurrent beat. I suppose that de la Mare is the most successful exponent of this looser metre. Look at his *An Epitaph*. It is hard to reduce this poem to any satisfactory technical scheme depending on feet, but any reader with his ears open will be vividly aware of the triple beat in each line.

Here lies a most beautiful lady,  
Light of step and heart was she;  
I think she was the most beautiful lady  
That ever was in the West Country.  
But beauty vanishes; beauty passes;  
However rare—rare it be;  
And when I crumble, who will remember  
This lady of the West Country?<sup>1</sup>

Or look at his famous poem, *The Listeners*:

‘Is there anybody there?’ said the Traveller,  
Knocking on the moonlit door;  
And his horse in the silence champed the grasses  
Of the forest’s ferny floor.

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<sup>1</sup> I owe to Mr de la Mare the hint that what we really have here is a clash between a four-beat norm, which is only explicit in line 5, and the natural three-beat of the reading voice.

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\*There is another tendency observable in some writers, which may be called a revolt against Romanticism, but which is perhaps no more than a natural reaction on the part of some individual writers towards what is ordinarily called classic, that brevity, concision, clarity of outline and restraint of emotion which are ordinarily described as classic. Please observe, *restraint* of emotion, not *absence* of emotion. The idea that the classic writers are without emotion is one of the silliest and most misleading of critical heresies. Their emotion is fiery, but they ride it savagely on the curb. You find this tendency very strongly in some of Kipling's later work, notably in the War Epitaphs and in a thing like *My Boy Jack*. But you find it most strikingly of all in A. E. Housman. Will you look once more, familiar though no doubt the poem is, at the *Epitaph on an Army of Mercenaries*, and notice not only the compressed vehemence of feeling, but also the perfect balance of structure between the first verse and the second? May I just remind you that it appeared in *The Times* on the anniversary of the first battle of Ypres, and that it was in part stimulated by the ill-advised description as an army of mercenaries of perhaps the finest body of fighting men that ever went into action?

These, in the day when heaven was falling,  
The hour when earth's foundations fled,  
Followed their mercenary calling  
And took their wages and are dead.

Their shoulders held the sky suspended;  
They stood, and earth's foundations stay;  
What God abandoned, these defended,  
And saved the sum of things for pay.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> There is a small but significant point which is worth observing: the real artist's instinct for restraint forbids him to emphasize his point by the comma or dash between 'things' and 'for pay' with which the inferior artist would have indulged himself.

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Now may I venture on a general comment or two? The modern revolt was partly against the so-called Romantics, who were felt to be too vague and mystical, not to say misty, and to have, even more benightedly, certain presuppositions as to what were suitable subjects for poetry. So we find in the moderns an exaggeratedly blunt directness, and, as they took their vocabulary wherever they could find it, so they took their subjects; and we find Brooke writing rather unnecessarily, and not too well, about a Channel Crossing. But part of the revolt, and the more conscious part, was against the Victorians. The quarrel between us and the Victorians is often superficially oversimplified by being regarded as a difference of opinion over a moral code; but it goes deeper than that. The fundamental quarrel between us and the Victorians is that they exalted society at the expense of the individual, and we tend to exalt the individual at the expense of society. The results of this on much modern poetry are both interesting and unfortunate. For one thing many of the poets have been content to develop their peculiar bent exclusively. Too many of them do just one thing extremely well, but other things hardly at all. De la Mare, for example, can write the most entrancing children's poems, and poems of a particular kind of faerie; but he too seldom chooses to do anything else. And for another and more important thing, so many modern poems are wholly individual and in no sense universal. Brooke's *Grantchester*, for example, represents exactly what he, Rupert Brooke, in a particular year of grace, felt, in a particular café in Berlin. Even more significant is his poem *The Great Lover*. He gives a catalogue of things he has loved, and the descriptions of them could hardly be bettered; but the important thing is not that they are what any one might have loved, but that they are what the individual poet did actually happen to love. You

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can see the difference that I am trying to point out if you look at what happens when the poet, under the impact of an overwhelming event, forgets himself, and writes not for the individual but for all men. I think that Brooke's work as a whole, even the last five sonnets, was by his contemporaries almost absurdly, however naturally, overrated. But at least there is no comparison at all between the whole of the rest of Brooke's work and those last sonnets. Let me give you one of them and you will see what I mean. It was written no doubt under the stimulus of a particular war, but it might have been written for any men dying for their country in any great war.

Blow out, you bugles, over the rich Dead!  
There's none of these so lonely and poor of old,  
But, dying, has made us rarer gifts than gold.  
These laid the world away; poured out the red  
Sweet wine of youth; gave up the years to be  
Of work and joy, and that unhopèd serene,  
That men call age; and those who would have been,  
Their sons, they gave, their immortality.

Blow, bugles, blow! They brought us, for our dearth,  
Holiness, lacked so long, and Love, and Pain.  
Honour has come back, as a king, to earth,  
And paid his subjects with a royal wage;  
And Nobleness walks in our ways again;  
And we have come into our heritage.

It will be observed that I have taken almost all my actual instances from poems of the decade immediately preceding the War rather than from the twenty years that have succeeded. In one way this matters little, since the instances are intended to be no more than illustrations of the application of a method, but I should be sorry if it were supposed that I therefore thought the pre-War more important than the post-War poetry. Far from it. I

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think that Brooke was of great significance as a leader of a revolt, that he was a careful workman, and that he wrote a certain amount of very lovely poetry of a comparatively obvious kind. That he was also one of the most delightful personalities among English poets, and like others died before his time, though it affected his contemporary reputation, has nothing to do with his ultimate position as a poet. I think that Flecker was a far greater craftsman, and if he had lived, and the experience of his later life had offered him the material of emotion on which his craft could be exercised, would have been a far greater poet. In the region of hypothesis it is easy to take risks, and I should be prepared to back, particularly by his play of *Hassan*, a view that he would have been one of the great English poets. I am sure at least of this, that there is no work produced by the younger poets between 1900 and the War which is more worthy of study. But it is arguable, and indeed probable, that the work of the post-War poets is more likely to live, and at any rate, for the purpose of understanding our own age, its ideals, its difficulties, its movements of thought, this post-War poetry is obviously more significant. But what its precise significance is I understand so little that I hesitate even to make suggestions. With a great part of it I feel both as helpless and as foolish as the blindfolded man in blind-man's-buff. The subject in any case is far too extensive for the little remaining space at my disposal, and I shall content myself, therefore, with making one general comment and referring to two books. I suggested that one of the weaknesses of pre-War modern poetry was 'individualism.' The individualism of the post-War poets seems to me to be as pronounced, but more esoteric, more egotistic, and therefore even less poetical. Brooke, in the poem to which I alluded, records a number of personal *impressions*; but the impressions themselves,

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whether or not the effects they produced on him are shared by his readers, are as clear as daylight. The post-War poets deal largely, not only with personal impressions, but with personal *associations* which are frequently about as clear as the Cimmerian darkness. I will take one concrete instance which suggests an obvious contrast. Pope, in *The Rape of the Lock*, plays a game of Ombre. That game is unfamiliar to the ordinary reader to-day, but if he takes the trouble to learn the nomenclature and the rules of the game he can play out the game of Ombre as he could solve a Bridge problem in double dummy. T. S. Eliot, in *The Waste Land*, uses several of the names from the Tarot pack of cards, and here are excerpts from the note which he himself considers essential to explain, so far as it can be explained, what he is doing: 'I am not familiar with the exact constitution of the Tarot pack of cards, from which I have obviously departed to suit my own convenience. The Hanged Man, a member of the traditional pack, fits my purpose in two ways: because he is associated in my mind with the Hanged God of Frazer, and because I associate him with the hooded figure in the passage of the disciples to Emmaus in Part V. . . . The Man with Three Staves (an authentic member of the Tarot pack) I associate, quite arbitrarily, with the Fisher King himself.' I should like to draw attention to two phrases in Eliot's note: 'he is associated in *my mind*' and 'I associate, quite *arbitrarily*.' If a passage of poetry required for its proper understanding a research into the peculiarities of the Tarot pack that research might be worth conducting. But when a reader discovers that a passage of poetry requires, for even partial understanding, an elaborate note, and then discovers, on reading the note, that this partial understanding depends upon his being first informed of, and then accepting, certain admittedly arbitrary associations in the poet's own

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mind, he may be forgiven for thinking that the game is not worth the candle, or, to shift the metaphor, that his expenditure on paraffin would be better justified if his midnight oil would illuminate some recognizable meaning. So long as we are moving in this region of 'private symbolism,' we have, so far as I can see, no compass to steer by, and only intermittent appearances through the clouds of a third-magnitude star to help us, as we wallow in the troughs or rise to the disconcerting crests of a very choppy poetic sea.

But the very difficulties by which a reader like myself finds himself disabled are significant of something, and that something is much more important than his own possible or probable obtuseness. Modern poets, when they write in that fashion, write in that fashion just because they belong to their age, and it is our business to understand, not perhaps what they mean (which may by the obtuse critic be undiscoverable), but why they so write, and I propose, therefore, to draw the attention of readers to a book, brief in compass, but packed with matter, namely *A Hope for Poetry*.<sup>1</sup> As a sort of counterblast I would add a book called *The Place of Meaning in Poetry*.<sup>2</sup> The first of these seems to me to follow, far more effectively than I have had time to do, the lines of criticism which I have been advocating, and any one who wishes to understand the trend of modern poetry cannot neglect it. Mr Lewis is not only 'explaining modern poetry' in the abstract. He is doing something far more important; he is trying to explain, and I think succeeding in his attempt, why modern poetry is what it is. Modern poetry to him is not something to be studied *in vacuo*; it is the outcome of the temper of its age,

<sup>1</sup> *A Hope for Poetry* by C. Day Lewis (Basil Blackwell).

<sup>2</sup> *The Place of Meaning in Poetry* by David Daiches (Oliver and Boyd, Edinburgh). I am indebted to Mr Daiches' book for drawing my attention to Mr Eliot's dealings with the Tarot pack.



which we who live in it must try to comprehend. I will give three quotations from it and then leave my readers to secure illumination by reading Mr Lewis for themselves. 'The Great War tore away our youth from its roots. I see in this poem'—Stephen Spender's 'I think continually of those who were truly great'—'a successful attempt to re-establish communication with the past, a minor miracle of healing.' '. . . With post-War verse, the intelligent but untutored reader is apt to admit himself quite baffled at the start: at the same time he is often interested and excited by individual images, and feels that, if only he had one clue, he would be able to make his way quite easily through the labyrinth.' 'I am compelled to say that *The Waste Land* seems to me chiefly important as a social document. It gives an authentic impression of the mentality of educated people in the psychological slump that took place immediately after the War. It makes us aware of the nervous exhaustion, the mental disintegration, the exaggerated self-consciousness, the boredom, the pathetic gropings after the fragments of a shattered faith—all those symptoms of the psychic disease which ravaged Europe as mercilessly as the Spanish influenza.'

And here is another passage, from another quite modern poet, Miss Edith Sitwell, which seems to me most significant:

'In *Père Amelot*, which is a poem about an unawakened being, whose death, sharp and sudden, and inflicted for no purpose, leaves him nodding in his night-cap as he had done through his life—the image of "hen-cackling grass," refers to quaker-grass, and it was suggested by the fact that the colour and dustiness of the pods are like the colour and dustiness of a hen, are dry, and their markings like those of a hen's legs, and, as well, by the fact that the shaking movement resembles, for me at least, the quick dry sound and dipping movement of a

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hen cackling. . . . As for the image in another poem, about "pigeons smelling of ginger-bread," in the summer, when their feathers are hot from the sun, they *do* smell like gingerbread, and I am afraid there is nothing to be done about it.

'I know, however, that this method of intense concentration of an image leads, sometimes, to difficulties, and that the writer must beware of producing an image which is purely personal—since the aim should be to increase the general consciousness. Readers have, I think, a right to complain of the obscurity of the following line from Section XIV of *The Sleeping Beauty*:

Far off, the Martha-coloured scabious,

since it is the result of a personal memory, and is not part of the general experience, and I must not, therefore, feel resentment if the line is not understood. As a child I had a nursery-maid called Martha, who always wore a smocked and honeycombed gown of cashmere exactly the colour of a scabious. These flowers, too, look like cashmere, and they look as if they were smocked and honeycombed. "Emily-coloured primulas," however, in the poem called *Spring*, came into my mind simply because Emily is a very bucolic name and primulas remind me of the bright pink cheeks of country girls.'<sup>1</sup>

Our study of modern poetry is made much more intelligent and more fruitful if we do not just casually take any poetry that comes in our way but rather pursue certain definite lines. The lines may be those already suggested, vocabulary, rhythm, technique (particularly rhythmical), the attempt to discover a common idea or ideal running through a number of different poems by different writers, a comparison of the different treatment of a particular subject by different poets. Few comparisons, for example, are more illuminating of the difference

<sup>1</sup> Preface to *Selected Poems*, 1936.

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between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries than a comparison of the Tristram story as handled by Tennyson, Swinburne, and Matthew Arnold on the one hand, and a modern poet, E. A. Robinson,<sup>1</sup> on the other. Alternatively one may pursue a different line of study by examining the poetic development of a particular writer. For example Masfield, writing first very straightforward and very lovely lyrics, mainly of the sea, following this up by that narrative poetry which caused at its first appearance a scandalized hubbub which seems to us even at the short distance of thirty years so extravagantly absurd, passing thence to a period, about the time of the publication of *Lollingdon Downs*, when he was clearly trying to think some problems out in a way which made his work far less perfect, far less charming, sometimes even crabbed, but potentially far greater; and after that (with the exception of one splendidly vivid, and one less successful, reversion to narrative) almost a cessation of poetry.

And if one is adopting this line of study, the study of an individual poet, I should like to conclude by suggesting that there is no modern poet who more richly repays study than the late Poet Laureate, Robert Bridges, a far greater writer than his own age, at any rate until quite lately when its eyes were suddenly opened by *The Testament of Beauty*, ever discovered. He can no doubt be safely left to the judgment of posterity, but that is no reason why we should leave to posterity all the pleasure of reading him. You will find in his work, quite apart from the power of his imagination, the material for study along almost any line, metrical not the least. I would like to end this book with some verses from a poem which, even among other poems which are always marked by those qualities, stands out I think pre-eminent

<sup>1</sup> Tennyson, *The Last Tournament*; Arnold, *Tristram and Isolt*; Swinburne, *Tristram of Lyonesse*; Robinson, *Tristram*.

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for secure perfection of technique, for sincerity, and for controlled power of imagination. I believe it to be one of the finest of English poems, and one in which each successive reading reveals new beauties, of diverse kinds; and so there is no poem to the leisurely study and enjoyment of which I would, at the end of this attempt to aid the enjoyment by study of English poetry, more readily invite my readers.

### *Elegy on a Lady whom Grief for the Death of her Betrothed Killed*

Assemble, all ye maidens, at the door,  
And all ye loves, assemble; far and wide  
Proclaim the bridal, that proclaimed before  
Has been deferred to this late eventide:  
    For on this night the bride,  
    The days of her betrothal over,  
    Leaves the parental hearth for evermore;  
To-night the bride goes forth to meet her lover.

Let the priests go before, arrayed in white,  
And let the dark-stoled minstrels follow slow,  
Next they that bear her, honoured on this night,  
And then the maidens, in a double row,  
    Each singing soft and low,  
    And each on high a torch upstaying:  
Unto her lover lead her forth with light,  
With music, and with singing, and with praying.

Now to the river bank the priests are come:  
The bark is ready to receive its freight:  
Let some prepare her place therein, and some  
Embark the litter with its slender weight:  
    The rest stand by in state,  
    And sing her a safe passage over;  
While she is oared across to her new home,  
Into the arms of her expectant lover.

POETRY AND THE ORDINARY READER

And thou, O lover, that art on the watch,  
Where, on the banks of the forgetful streams,  
The pale indifferent ghosts wander, and snatch  
The sweeter moments of their broken dreams,—

    Thou, when the torchlight gleams,  
    When thou shalt see the slow procession,  
    And when thine ears the fitful music catch,  
Rejoice, for thou art near to thy possession.

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## APPENDIX

### CHAPTER I

#### *Further passages suggested for analysis*

(a) Isaiah liii. 1-3 (mainly a study in rhythm):

Who hath believed our report? and to whom is the arm of the Lord revealed?

For he shall grow up before him as a tender plant, and as a root out of a dry ground: he hath no form nor comeliness; and when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him.

He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

(b) Isaiah xl. 1, 2 (also largely rhythmical, with a particular change of rhythm at one point):

Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God.

Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned: for she hath received of the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

(c) A very old favourite:

#### *To Celia*

Drink to me only with thine eyes,  
And I will pledge with mine;  
Or leave a kiss but in the cup  
And I'll not look for wine.  
The thirst that from the soul doth rise  
Doth ask a drink divine;  
But might I of Jove's nectar sup,  
I would not change for thine.



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I sent thee late a rosy wreath,  
 Not so much honouring thee  
 As giving it a hope that there  
 It could not wither'd be;  
 But thou thereon didst only breathe,  
 And sent'st it back to me;  
 Since when it grows, and smells, I swear,  
 Not of itself but thee!<sup>1</sup>

(BEN JONSON)

(Here there are all sorts of points, an alliteration on *r* obscured by spelling, two 'hidden *k*'s' and so on.)

(*d*) Gray's *Elegy*:

The curfew tolls the knell of parting day,  
 The lowing herd wind slowly o'er the lea,  
 The plowman homeward plods his weary way,  
 And leaves the world to darkness and to me.

Now fades the glimmering landscape on the sight,<sup>/</sup>  
 And all the air a solemn stillness holds,<sup>^</sup>  
 Save where the beetle wheels his droning flight,<sup>^</sup>  
 And drowsy tinklings lull the distant folds.<sup>^</sup>

*Poets in their workshops* (see p. 11). Here are a few more instances:

1. Let us see how Milton arrived at the famous 'flower' passage in *Lycidas*.<sup>2</sup> He writes first the following, not doing much more than jot down some ideas.

Bring the rathe primrose that unwedded dies  
 colouring the pale cheek of unenjoyed love  
 and that sad flower that strove  
 to write his own woes in the vermeil grain  
 next add Narcissus that still weeps in vain  
 the woodbine and the pansy freaked with jet

<sup>1</sup> G. T. cxvi; O. B. E. V. 185.

<sup>2</sup> G. T. clxxxvii; O. B. E. V. 433.

<sup>3</sup> G. T. lxxxix; O. B. E. V. 317.

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the glowing violet  
the cowslip wan that hangs his pensive head  
and every bud that sorrow's livery wears  
let Daffadillies fill their cups with tears  
bid Amaranthus all his beauty shed.

In his next attempt he first of all discards the rather foolish and laborious conceit which is suggested by 'unwedded,' though he retains 'pale' and applies it quite simply and directly to another flower. He discards also the allusions and learned obscurities of lines 3 and 4 and brings in instead some straightforward and concrete flowers.

Bring the rathe primrose that forsaken dies  
the tufted crow-toe and pale Gessamin  
the white pink and the pansy freaked with jet  
the glowing violet  
the musk rose and the garish columbine  
with cowslips wan that hang the pensive head  
and every flower that sad escutcheon bears  
let Daffadillies fill their cups with tears  
bid Amaranthus all his beauties shed.

Finally he deletes the garish columbine and brings back the woodbine which the pink displaced, now calling it well attired; he writes in 'embroidery' in the margin as an alternative to 'escutcheon,' and alters 'bears' to 'wears'; he also transposes the last two lines, with 'and' for 'let.' So finally we have the passage as we know it.

Bring the rathe primrose that forsaken dies,  
The tufted crow-toe, and pale jessamine,  
The white pink and the pansy freaked with jet,  
The glowing violet,  
The musk-rose, and the well-attired woodbine,  
With cowslips wan that hang the pensive head,  
And every flower that sad embroidery wears:  
Bid amaranthus all his beauty shed,  
And daffadillies fill their cups with tears.

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2. Here are a few more from Keats. In *The Eve of Saint Agnes* he is going to describe Madeline kneeling before a stained-glass window. This is how he sets to work:

A Casement triple arch'd and diamonded  
With many coloured glass fronted the Moon  
In midst whereof a shielded scutcheon shed  
High blushing gules; she kneeled saintly down  
And inly prayed for grace and heavenly boon;  
The blood red gules fell on her silver cross  
And her white hands devout.

There is some of the material in the rough, but it clearly will not do as it stands, if for no more important reason than that 'down' and 'moon' will not do as a rhyme. Besides which there is a certain vagueness about the whole picture, and no poet ever had less use than Keats for the vague. So he sets to work, and, as it were, first takes the whole thing to pieces to have a look at the bits of his material, rather as though he himself were making a stained-glass window out of a number of fragments. The first thing he settles is that both the moon and Madeline must be deferred till the next stanza. The picture will then develop for the reader in the proper order. First there will be the impression of the window; then, when the moon is mentioned, we become aware of a flood of coloured light; and then, in his light, of Madeline. As he has now a whole stanza for the window he can afford space to make it fully and detailedly clear. But in his reconstruction there are certain bits of glass that are much too good to be discarded, though their positions are going to be changed; the triple arch'd casement (though it is now going also to be high), 'diamonded,' the 'shielded scutcheon,' 'blushing' and 'gules' and the 'silver cross' and 'blood red,' and the 'many coloured' is to be magnificently expanded.

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So he starts again:

There was  
A Casement triple arch'd and high  
All garlanded with carven imageries  
Of fruits and flowers and sunny corn ears parch'd,

the third line being presumably to rhyme with the first when the order of the first was transposed. But this does not satisfy him, and he makes yet another start, and we can watch the craftsman with his imagination on fire fitting piece to piece with unerring skill:

A Casement high and triple arch'd there was  
All garlanded with carven imageries  
Of fruits and flowers and bunches of knot grass;  
And diamonded with panes of quaint device  
Innumerable of stains and splendid dyes  
As is the wing of evening tiger moths;  
And in the midst 'mong thousand heraldries  
And twilight saints and dim emblazonings  
A shielded scutcheon blush'd with Blood of Queens  
and Kings.

That is all very well except that the sixth line is hanging unrhymed, so he starts the operation which converts it into one of the richest of even his opulent lines:

As are the tiger moth's deep damasked wings,

and goes on to the description of Madeline where he can bring in the gules and the silver cross.<sup>1</sup>

Watch the same craftsman again in *Hyperion*. He is

<sup>1</sup> In the interests of brevity I have neglected Keats' often amusing and hurried misspellings, and have somewhat compressed and simplified the stages of progress. As one can see from the holograph manuscript, there was a good deal more haggling over some of the single words and even lines than I have indicated.



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Where we plan our dwelling  
Is a graveyard surely!  
Tombstones there which violets drape,  
Name and date moss hides from spelling;  
But though corpses rot obscurely  
Ghosts escape.

Now it is characteristic of Browning to want to pack as much into a given space as it will hold, and sometimes more. And he was not satisfied with this. So he alters as follows. (The precise order of the alterations is not with absolute certainty deducible from the MS., but I think that the following is right.) First he wants to make his picture more detailed than the generic 'tombstones' will secure; so he writes 'Headstone, footstone violets drape.' Then, partly I suppose from his love of being staccato, and partly for the sake of balancing the lack of copula between 'headstone' and 'footstone,' he gets rid of 'and' in the fourth line, and writes 'Name, date mosses hide from spelling.' Finally, since violets, however luxuriant, can hardly be properly said to 'drape' a thing as high as a headstone, though they may hide lettering low down on it, he transposes his moss and his violets, so that the lines run as we have them in print:

Headstone, footstone moss may drape,  
Name, date violets hide from spelling.

4. Here finally is an instance from a quite modern poet, Flecker, who of all the moderns had perhaps the most urgent passion for perfection of technique.

He first wrote one of his poems as follows:

Once a poor song-bird that had lost her way  
Sang down in hell upon a blackened bough,  
Till all the lazy ghosts remembered how  
The forest trees stood up against the day.

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Then suddenly they knew that they had died,  
Hearing this music mock their shadow-land;  
And someone there stole forth a timid hand  
To draw a phantom brother to his side.

Observe what a remarkable gain in strength is achieved by the rigorous pruning to which the poem is subjected, and the other alterations which it undergoes before it reaches this, its final form:

A linnet who had lost her way  
Sang on a blackened bough in Hell,  
Till all the ghosts remembered well  
The trees, the wind, the golden day.

At last they knew that they had died  
When they heard music in that land,  
And someone there stole forth a hand  
To draw a brother to his side.

## CHAPTER II

*The deceiving eye* (see p. 16). Here are some passages which illustrate the traps which the eye lays for the too credulous ear.

(a)

### *Frustra*

Take, O take those lips away  
That so sweetly were forsworn,  
And those eyes, the break of day,  
Lights that do mislead the morn:  
By my kisses bring again,  
Bring again—  
Seals of love, but seal'd in vain,  
Seal'd in vain! <sup>1</sup>

(SHAKESPEARE)

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<sup>1</sup> G. T. xlviii; O. B. E. V. 138.

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(Puzzle, find 9 long *a*'s, in four spellings; 5 long *e*'s, in two spellings; 3 long *i*'s, in three; and 3 short *u*'s, in two.)

(b) *O Crudelis Amor*

When thou must home to shades of underground,  
 And there arrived, a new admirèd guest,  
 The beauteous spirits do engirt thee round,  
 White Iope, blithe Helen, and the rest,  
 To hear the stories of thy finish'd love  
 From that smooth tongue whose music hell can move;

Then wilt thou speak of banqueting delights,  
 Of masques and revels which sweet youth did make,  
 Of tourneys and great challenges of knights,  
 And all these triumphs for thy beauty's sake:  
 When thou hast told these honours done to thee,  
 Then tell, O tell, how thou didst murder me!<sup>1</sup>

(CAMPION)

(Problem, how often do the sounds *ow*, *ew*, *oo*, short *u*, and *é* occur? The answer being, I think, 7, 5, 5, 10, 7 respectively. Short *u* is difficult to estimate, since one never knows the exact value for example of the indeterminate sound of the indefinite article 'a.')

(c) She dwelt among the untrodden ways  
 Beside the springs of Dove;  
 A maid whom there were none to praise,  
 And very few to love.<sup>2</sup>

(WORDSWORTH)

*Passages illustrative of the effects of different rhythms* (see p. 39).

1. The old ballads. These are excellent examples of accentual metre at its farthest remove from quantitative, since they pay no attention to 'feet' at all, but rely upon

<sup>1</sup> G. T. lix; O. B. E. V. 172.      <sup>2</sup> G. T. ccxx; O. B. E. V. 516.



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a repetition, more or less exact, of a given number of stresses in the line. Take a famous verse like:

He's either himsel' a devil frae hell  
Or else his mither a witch maun be;  
I wadna hae ridden that wan water  
For a' the gowd in Christentie.

One can make out a case, I suppose, for its being iambic-anapaestic, though even so the strong trochee 'water' pretty stubbornly refuses to lie on the Procrustean bed. But there is no mistaking the marked beat of four accents to the line. And some study of the ballad metres is an interesting introduction to the practice of some modern poets which is touched on in Chapter VII.

2. How far are the metres of any of the following suitable for their subject?

(a) *The Burial of Sir John Moore*.<sup>1</sup> We expect a somewhat solemn metre, and we get:

Not a drum was heard, not a funeral note,  
As his corse to the rampart we hurried;  
Not a soldier discharged his farewell shot  
O'er the grave where our hero we buried.

This poem is worth study. One's first instinct is to say that only the deep feeling of the poet redeems a wholly unsuitable metre; and then one begins to have doubts whether this metre is not in an odd way suitable for the *buried* burial, particularly when one notices how the poet again and again does slow up the rhythm so far as that rhythm can be slowed, just as though he were aware that what there ought to have been, in both the burial and the poem, was slow dignity and order, and part of what hurts is that they could not have it.

(b) A poem of Moore's, called in the *Golden Treasury* *Pro Patria Mori*:<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> G. T. cclxii; O. B. E. V. 603.

<sup>2</sup> G. T. cclxi.

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When he who adores thee has left but the name  
 Of his fault and his sorrows behind,  
 O! say wilt thou weep, when they darken the fame  
 Of a life that for thee was resign'd!  
 Yes, weep, and however my foes may condemn,  
 Thy tears shall efface their decree;  
 For, Heaven can witness, though guilty to them,  
 I have been but too faithful to thee.

With thee were the dreams of my earliest love,  
 Every thought of my reason was thine:  
 In my last humble prayer to the Spirit above  
 Thy name shall be mingled with mine!  
 Oh! blest are the lovers and friends who shall live  
 The days of thy glory to see;  
 But the next dearest blessing that Heaven can give  
 Is the pride of thus dying for thee.

(c) Two poems of Byron's:

When we two parted  
 In silence and tears,  
 Half broken-hearted  
 To sever for years,  
 Pale grew thy cheek and cold,  
 Colder thy kiss;  
 Truly that hour foretold  
 Sorrow to this.<sup>1</sup>

Oh Fame!—if I e'er took delight in thy praises,  
 'Twas less for the sake of thy high-sounding phrases,  
 Than to see the bright eyes of the dear one discover  
 She thought that I was not unworthy to love her.

*There* chiefly I sought thee, *there* only I found thee;  
 Her glance was the best of the rays that surround thee;  
 When it sparkled o'er aught that was bright in my story,  
 I knew it was love, and I felt it was glory.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> G. T. ccxxxiv; O. B. E. V. 597.

<sup>2</sup> G. T. ccxii.

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(d) *The Flowers of the Forest* (Jane Elliot).

I've heard them liting at our ewe-milking,  
Lasses a' liting before dawn o' day;  
But now they are moaning on ilka green loaning—  
The Flowers of the Forest are a' wede away.<sup>1</sup>

(e) Robert Bridges, *London Snow*.

When men were all asleep the snow came flying,  
In large white flakes falling on the city brown,  
Steathily and perpetually settling and loosely lying,  
Hushing the latest traffic of the drowsy town;  
Deadening, muffling, stifling its murmurs failing;  
Lazily and incessantly floating down and down:  
Silently sifting and veiling road, roof and railing;  
Hiding difference, making unevenness even,  
Into angles and crevices softly drifting and sailing.<sup>2</sup>

(f) Masfield, *Cargoes*.

Quinquireme of Nineveh from distant Ophir,  
Rowing home to haven in sunny Palestine,  
With a cargo of ivory,  
And apes and peacocks,  
Sandalwood, cedarwood, and sweet white wine.

Stately Spanish galleon coming from the Isthmus,  
Dipping through the Tropics by the palm-green shores,  
With a cargo of diamonds,  
Emeralds, amethysts,  
Topazes, and cinnamon, and gold moidores.

Dirty British coaster with a salt-caked smoke-stack,  
Butting through the Channel in the mad March days,  
With a cargo of Tyne coal,  
Road-rails, pig-lead,  
Firewood, iron-ware, and cheap tin trays.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> G. T. cxlii; O. B. E. V. 466.

<sup>2</sup> G. T. cccxcvi.

<sup>3</sup> G. T. cccc.

APPENDIX

*Blank verse passages* (see p. 45).

(a) *Paradise Lost*, II, the opening:

High on a Throne of Royal State, which far  
 Outshon the wealth of *Ormus* and of *Ind*,  
 Or where the gorgeous East with richest hand  
 Showrs on her Kings *Barbaric* Pearl & Gold,  
 Satan exalted sat, by merit rais'd  
 To that bad eminence; and from despair  
 Thus high uplifted beyond hope, aspires  
 Beyond thus high, insatiate to pursue  
 Vain Warr with Heav'n, and by success untaught  
 His proud imaginations thus displaid.

(b) *Antony and Cleopatra*, V. ii. 282-300.

Give me my robe, put on my crown; I have  
 Immortal longings in me; now no more  
 The juice of Egypt's grape shall moist this lip.  
 Yare, yare, good Iras; quick. Methinks I hear  
 Antony call; I see him rouse himself  
 To praise my noble act; I hear him mock  
 The luck of Caesar, which the gods give men  
 To excuse their after wrath: husband, I come:  
 Now to that name my courage prove my title!  
 I am fire, and air; my other elements  
 I give to baser life. So; have you done?  
 Come then, and take the last warmth of my lips.  
 Farewell, kind Charmian; Iras, long farewell.  
 Have I the aspic in my lips? Dost fall?  
 If thou and nature can so gently part,  
 The stroke of death is as a lover's pinch,  
 Which hurts, and is desir'd. Dost thou lie still?  
 If thus thou vanishest, thou tell'st the world  
 It is not worth leave-taking.

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CHAPTER VI

*Further examples of the Heroic Couplet* (see p. 69).

(a) Matthew Arnold, *The Church of Brou*, III. 16-46.

So sleep, for ever sleep, O Marble Pair!  
 Or, if ye wake, let it be then, when fair  
 On the carv'd Western Front a flood of light  
 Streams from the setting sun, and colours bright  
 Prophets, transfigur'd Saints, and Martyrs brave,  
 In the vast western window of the nave;  
 And on the pavement round the Tomb there glints  
 A chequer-work of glowing sapphire tints,  
 And amethyst, and ruby;—then unclose  
 Your eyelids on the stone where ye repose,  
 And from your broider'd pillows lift your heads,  
 And rise upon your cold white marble beds;  
 And looking down on the warm rosy tints  
 That chequer, at your feet, the illumin'd flints,  
 Say—'*What is this? we are in bliss—forgiven—  
 Behold the pavement of the courts of Heaven!*'—  
 Or let it be on autumn nights, when rain  
 Doth rustlingly above your heads complain  
 On the smooth leaden roof, and on the walls  
 Shedding her pensive light at intervals  
 The Moon through the clere-story windows shines,  
 And the wind wails among the mountain pines.  
 Then, gazing up through the dim pillars high,  
 The foliag'd marble forest where ye lie,  
 'Husb'—ye will say—'*it is eternity.  
 This is the glimmering verge of Heaven, and these  
 The columns of the Heavenly Palaces.*'—  
 And in the sweeping of the wind your ear  
 The passage of the Angels' wings will hear,  
 And on the lichen-crust'd leads above  
 The rustle of the eternal rain of Love.

(b) Swinburne, *Tristram of Lyonesse*, Prelude, 1-22.

Love, that is first and last of all things made,  
 The light that has the living world for shade,

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The spirit that for temporal veil has on  
 The souls of all men woven in unison,  
 One fiery raiment with all lives inwrought  
 And lights of sunny and starry deed and thought,  
 And always through new act and passion new  
 Shines the divine same body and beauty through,  
 The body spiritual of fire and light  
 That is to worldly noon as noon to night;  
 Love, that is flesh upon the spirit of man  
 And spirit within the flesh whence breath began;  
 Love, that keeps all the choir and lives in chime;  
 Love, that is blood within the veins of time;  
 That wrought the whole world without croke of hand,  
 Shaping the breadth of sea, the length of land,  
 And with the pulse and motion of his breath  
 Through the great heart of the earth strikes life and death,  
 The sweet twain chords that make the sweet tune live  
 Through day and night of things alternative,  
 Through silence and through sound of stress and strife,  
 And ebb and flow of dying death and life.

A reading of Lovelace's *To Lucasta, going to the Wars*

(see p. 97).

Tēll mē nōt, Sweēt, Ī am ūnkīnd,  
     Thāt frōm thē nūnnērŷ  
 Of thŷ chaste brēast and quīet mīnd,  
     Tō wār and arms Ī flŷ.

True, ā new mīstrēss now Ī chase,  
     Thē frīst foe īn thē fīeld;  
 And wīth ā strōngēr faīth embrāce  
     Ā swōrd, ā hōrse, ā shīeld.

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Yē̄t thī̄s ī̄ncō̄nstā̄ncȳ ī̄s sū̄ch  
    Ā̄s yō̄u tō̄o shā̄ll ā̄dō̄re;  
Ī̄ cō̄uld nō̄t lō̄ve thē̄e, Dē̄ar, sō̄ mū̄ch,  
    Lō̄ved Ī̄ nō̄t Hō̄nō̄ur mō̄re.

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