

## SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF MODERN POETRY

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Resistance to contemporary literature is a fairly modern phenomenon. In Shakespeare's lifetime it is probable that no one except Ben Jonson knew how great he was, but no one accused the author of King Lear of being insane or a fraud; and however much personal animosity Alexander Pope may have aroused, his poetry was accepted at once as sound and credited. It is not until the beginnings of the industrial revolution that we hear the *Lyrical Ballads* greeted with shouts of derision as "the baby-talk school of poetry" and see people rioting in the Paris theatres at performances of Hugo's *Ruy Blas* when the "unpoetic" word *mouchoir* is spoken. It is customary to attribute this growing estrangement between the artist and the public to the rise of the *bourgeoisie* and the fact that the rich people were no longer the cultured people. But there is more to it than that. To go from the poetry of Pope to that of Wordsworth, from the poetry of Hugo to that of Baudelaire, is after all to go from one room to another in the same house. But to go from the poetry of Tennyson to *The Waste Land*, *The Cantos*, *Tender Buttons*, and *Finnegans Wake*, is to go into another country, where the landscape presents no familiar feature, and where the inhabitants speak an unknown language.

Anthropologists tell us that the human race, rather wistfully called *homo sapiens*, has been on this planet for about fifty thousand years. In every respect except the spiritual, the world has changed more in the past hundred years than it had changed in the previous fifty thousand. It is impossible that the poet, that delicately attuned seismograph, should change less than the rest of the world. He cannot express the eternal verities in a vacuum, he must present them within the context of his own time. It was the enemies of poetry who invented the ivory tower. No real poet would be found dead in one.

I am going to mention certain aspects of modern life which are related to the "difficulties" of modern poetry. There are many more.

Modern poetry is based on a new concept of time, derived

from the post-Euclidean geometry and the post-Newtonian physics of Einstein. Time is no longer an absolute, but a dimension of matter. For example, it is no longer possible to say, "What existed before matter?" because, time being inseparable from matter, where there is no matter, "before" has no meaning. In the same way, it is impossible to ask, "What lies beyond matter?" for space, being a part of the space-time continuum, cannot be thought of apart from matter, and therefore where there is no matter "beyond" is meaningless. We are thus compelled to abandon the idea of time as an enormously long yard-stick, and to think of it as a simultaneity rather than a sequence. Einstein has even adumbrated a fifth dimension of causality, in which effects may transpire before their causes.

This revolution in our thinking has had two results in modern writing: (1) an obsession with time, and (2) the adoption of simultaneity as a literary device. But in poetry, which exists in time, simultaneity can only be expressed by juxtaposition. It is in painting, which exists in space, that simultaneity can be actually achieved, and if we turn for a moment to the painters I think the whole thing becomes easy. When Picasso paints one of his "double profiles" he is simply showing us a face as we see it at two moments of time, in profile and in full face, simultaneously. Modern Art was introduced to America in 1913 at the famous Armory Show, and I can still remember the gales of laughter which greeted Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase*, which was the hit of the show. One witty critic described it as "an explosion in a shingle factory." But it was quite simple. It did show a nude woman coming down a stairway, but instead of showing one moment of her descent, it showed several moments simultaneously. A few years ago this painting was shown again in New York, and crowds came to see it, in much the same spirit in which they would have come to see the *Mona Lisa*. Duchamp is now an Old Master. But he had been influenced by the Futurists, and it was one of them, Giacomo Balla, who painted the famous picture of a little dog running. This canvas shows the lower part of a woman's skirt, the end of a leash, and a little dog pattering along beside its mistress. But, instead of having four paws, it has many. It is shown at several moments of its pattering. And that is what

modern poetry does. It shows the pattering, not the paws.

The tremendous changes in modern life have brought about a great preoccupation with history. This is doubtless to some extent a form of escapism, and it is quite natural that in the unparalleled complexity of the present there should be a certain amount of nostalgic turning to a simpler age; but it has its more positive side. An understanding of previous civilizations may help us better to understand our own. This comparison of the past and the present, which is the theme of practically all of the important poetry of our time, has found its inevitable expression in the method of juxtaposition which made its appearance in 1917 when the first *Cantos* of Ezra Pound were published in *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*. Pound has described his method as counterpoint. This is of course a musical term, but there is a difference in its application to poetry. Although music, like poetry and unlike painting, does exist in time, it can have a certain simultaneity which poetry cannot have. Two notes can be played at once, producing a chord. But two words cannot be read, or heard, at once. A fugue consists of two melodies played in juxtaposition. The melodies are not simultaneous, for only the notes of a single chord can be that. Pound calls his *Cantos* a fugue. Poetry can have melody, it can have counterpoint, but it cannot have harmony.

There is nothing confusing about *The Cantos* or *The Waste Land* if we remember that the time in them does not, as it were, go from left to right, but is juxtaposed in sections formally, like the pieces of a mosaic. In William Carlos Williams' poem *Patterson* he has written an epic of the New Jersey town in which he has passed all his life. Instead of doing it in the traditional manner, beginning with the Indians and ending with his own time, he has, so to speak, disintegrated time and reassembled it according to a formal pattern. This is certainly a natural way of writing in a world where time and space have lost all objective existence, where the speed of a moving object determines its mass, and where parallel lines, if extended far enough, do meet.

The preoccupation with time has had its profoundest expression in modern writing in the work of Gertrude Stein. While studying with William James at Radcliffe, her first writings, dealing with motor automatisms, were published in *The Psychological*

*Review.* An examination of these articles sheds much light on her later books. Then, after specializing at Johns Hopkins in the anatomy of the brain tract, she came under the influence of Bergson, particularly his time concept, and devoted her life thereafter to achieving in literature a "continuous present." Daring beyond any of her contemporaries, she rejected sequence entirely, and in her most important book, *Tender Buttons*, the objective has completely disappeared. The words have no logical connection because they no longer have any spacial or temporal elongations, they exist simply in and for and as themselves. And yet the whole thing is ordered with the skill of a great artist. It is absurd to say that such a book "does not mean anything." It means what it is.

James Joyce, in *Finnegans Wake*, has employed the opposite method in attempting to achieve simultaneity. While Stein attempted to rid the present entirely of the past, Joyce attempted to get all of the past into the present. These are simply two ways of trying to do the same thing: to destroy the conception of time as a sequence. In his last book the hero is Humphrey Chimpden Earwicker, whose initials also stand for Here Comes Everybody. He is "All Men." His wife, Anna Livia Plurabelle, is all women. They are Adam and Eve, and they are a Norwegian who runs a pub in Dublin, and his wife, and innumerable people in between. Joyce had adumbrated this method in his previous novel, where Bloom is Ulysses, Stephen is Telemachus, Gerty MacDowell is Nausicaa, and so on.

This obsession with time is ubiquitous in modern writing. In Proust's epic, *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, the protagonist is time. In her finest book, *The Waves*, Virginia Woolf has written a tragedy about time, and in her delightful *Orlando* she has written a comedy about time. As for William Butler Yeats, one does not at first associate him with "modern" writers, but "Yeats" is the name of two poets: the poet of the nineties who died at the age of 54 to reincarnate immediately as the major poet of *The Wild Swans at Coole* (a poem about time) and whose greatest poems are called *Byzantium* and *Sailing to Byzantium*—again the juxtaposition of past and present!

Modern Poetry takes the unconscious mind, no less than the

conscious, as its province. No one has had a greater influence on modern literature and art than Sigmund Freud. His findings may have been no secret to Shakespeare and Ibsen, to say nothing of the Greek tragic poets—*The Lady from the Sea* is a completely Freudian play written before Freud, *Lady Macbeth* is a perfect Freudian case-history, and, as everyone knows, the names of all the classic complexes have been taken from the characters of Greek tragedy—but it is Freud and his followers, particularly Jung and Adler, who have made this knowledge accessible, by basing it solidly on observation and experiment, and who have given it the respectability of a science, through a wise combination of codification and fluidity. It is now common knowledge that the human mind, like an iceberg, lies seven eighths below the surface. And it is now common knowledge how terribly destructive an obstruction or a schism in the unconscious seven eighths can become. The therapeutic use of dream analysis, intended as a contribution to the science of healing, has had an extremely important by-product: it has opened up the whole field of dream, fantasy and free association to be exploited by the artist and the writer.

It will be seen at once how closely this is related to the other characteristic of modern poetry that I have already mentioned. For, if Einstein has freed us intellectually from time and space, in the world of dreams we are freed actually from them. Dream consciousness has its own logical connectives which are, judged by the standards of the conscious mind, completely illogical. In describing a dream we may say, "Wasn't that ridiculous?" but we never say it while we are in the dream. For the logic of the dream is autonomous. It is true that the concatenation of associations that creates this logic can be uncovered in psychoanalysis, but this is only necessary—indeed only permissible—in the case of a person who is sick. The artist uses it simply as an extension of the area in which he can work, as an enlargement of his world, and an inevitable one in an age when the line between phenomena and noumenon is wearing thin.

Again this can be seen most clearly in the work of modern painters, particularly the group that are called surrealists. This school of art, which began in 1922 as an outgrowth of dadaism (an even more profoundly anti-logical movement) has lasted longer

than any other artistic movement of the twentieth century, and the reasons are obvious. It is based on the exploration of the unconscious mind and on the rejection of time and space as absolutes. It replaces sequence with simultaneity. How closely these two characteristics of modern poetry (the new time concept and the use of the unconscious) are related can be seen by returning to *Tender Buttons* and *Finnegans Wake*. The latter is, I am sure, the only novel in world literature in which the hero is asleep throughout the entire book (in the past this might happen to the reader, but not to the hero). The action (if it may so be called) of the book (628 large pages) takes place in the dream consciousness of one night's sleep of Humphrey Chimpden Earwicker. But remember that his name is also Here Comes Everybody. The narrative takes place in all ages and in all places. Here we have an obvious combination of Freud's dream analysis and Einstein's space-time continuum. As for *Tender Buttons*, it is not only an attempt to rid literature of what Malevich called "the ballast of the objective." To understand her method of writing it we must go back to her early experiments in motor automatism carried out while studying psychology under Hugo Münsterberg. This does not mean that *Tender Buttons* was written "automatically." We know it was not. The mark of the conscious artist is on every page. But in forming her style she was obviously influenced by the cadences of spontaneous association that she discovered during her early experiments. Again in this book we can see its obvious relationship to modern physics and modern psychology. Her mind, brilliant as it was, did not have the enormous scope and power of Joyce's. But it was more subtle.

Less portentous than dream analysis, there remains the related device of free association. This can be, at its most casual, no more than an amusing, although slightly incriminating, parlor game. But it has become an almost universal practice with modern poets. To put the difficulty of modern poetry as simply as possible, it is this: one often does not know what connection exists between line 1 and line 2, or between the first stanza and the second. As there is often no logical connection (I am not referring to really difficult poetry, where the connection is there, but hard to find) there is nothing to do but to accept the fact that the poet has

juxtaposed these lines or stanzas because to him there is a connection. This would of course completely invalidate such poetry, if the poet's job were to communicate information. But it is not. His job is to communicate experience, by any means that he thinks will work. Most modern poetry does not communicate experience, because most of it is not very good. But when a poem which does not "make sense" has given pleasure to a considerable number of trained and sensitive people over a period of years, the chances are that the poet has been successful. Several modern critics have attempted to discredit Shelly by proving that certain stanzas of *The Skylark* do not make sense. As a matter of fact, they don't. They are still good poetry.

The modern poet and the modern artist are exposed to the impact of all the cultures of the world, past and present. This is obviously the result of the enormously increased facility of travel and communication, and the great advances made by archaeology and anthropology.

A hundred years ago the the lineage of a poet writing in English was direct and clear. It went back to Tudor England, the French Pléiade, the Italian renaissance, and the Latin and Greek poets beginning with Homer. The Bible, however much it influenced his thinking and provided him with subject matter, had no influence on his craft as a poet. When Milton wrote about Samson he made him the protagonist of a Greek tragedy. The painter went back to the artists of the High Renaissance; it was only towards the end of the century that the line was extended backwards to the painters before Raphael, to Giotto and Cimabue. As for sculpture, the dominance of Greece was absolute, although its influence came filtered through Roman imitation. In music, Handel was the beginning (although he was born a few months before Bach, he is much more modern). Later on, after Mendelssohn started the cult of Bach, the line was carried a little further back, but it never went beyond the sixteenth century.

The first sign of a change was the influence of *Shakuntala* on the prologue of Goethe's *Faust*. After that, the deluge. A century later we see William Butler Yeats writing Noh Dramas, Amy Lowell writing *haiku*, Ezra Pound devoting forty years to the *Shih-ching*, Debussy borrowing the tonality of Java and Bali,

Archipenko making sculpture under the influence of prehistoric art, Picasso painting under the influence of Negro sculpture, and Mary Austin insisting that American literature should abandon the Graeco-Roman tradition altogether and base itself on American Indian culture which, she claimed, was the true classic tradition of America.

Let us see, in a little more detail, just what has happened. About 1905, Maurice de Vlaminck went into a saloon and, behind the bar, saw a piece of African sculpture. At that time all sculpture that was not in the tradition of the Greek was put in "natural history" museums. It would have occurred to nobody to put it in an "art" museum, as it was thought to have only archaeological or anthropological interest. But Vlaminck was an artist and he was struck by the extraordinary beauty of this piece. The bartender told him that he had accepted it from a sailor in exchange for a drink. Vlaminck bought it from him, for the price of a drink, and took it home to show to Derain, with whom he was then living. It was thus that it came to the attention of Picasso. And now look at Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger*, which he finished in 1907. Examine the five figures, from left to right, and see how they change. It is not too much to say that during the two years that Picasso worked on this painting modern art was born. As he continued to paint on it the influence of African sculpture became stronger and stronger until, when he painted the two figures on the right, he had created cubism. Modern art comes from cubism, and this painting shows that cubism itself came from African sculpture.

Although the first work of art by prehistoric man was discovered in 1833 by François Mayor at Le Veyrier, France, it was many years before its great age was realized. The real beginning of our acquaintance with Stone Age culture was in 1879. In that year, Sautuola was exploring a cavern at Altamira, Spain. His little daughter, who was with him, had wandered into an adjoining cave and suddenly he heard her scream, "Toros! Toros!" [Bulls! Bulls!] He rushed to her and found her staring at the now famous Bison of Altamira, those superb polychrome frescoes which have remained the masterpieces of prehistoric art in spite of all that has been discovered since. Authorities differ as to the date of



these paintings, but no one has ever claimed that they were less than ten thousand years old. This art is not primitive. It is sensitive and skilfully wrought, and its influence on modern art has been great. This painting comes from the Magdalenian period of the Palaeolithic age, but from a still earlier period, the Aurignacian, many exquisite works of sculpture have been found, the most famous of which is the so called Venus of Willendorf. Archipenko, the Russian sculptor, has done work that seems almost indistinguishable from this prehistoric sculpture until one notices a slight sophistication to the finish; and the greatest of modern sculptors, Constantin Brancusi, has done much of his work under the same influence.

When Debussy won the *prix de Rome* he was writing watered-down Franck and Fauré. Then, at the Paris Exposition, he heard the *gamelan* music of Java. Fascinated by this unfamiliar tonality, he began to compose in the whole-tone scale, and he is the beginning of modern music. Recently, while listening to *Gagaku*, I was startled to hear a phrase that sounded exactly as if it had been written by Debussy. It was in the idiom of *Pelléas et Mélisande*. There is nothing in *Gagaku* that could possibly remind one of any earlier European composer.

All this has of course had an extremely unsettling effect on the modern poet. For hundreds of years all poetry had been written in metre. But metre seems to have been an invention of the Indo-European peoples. Sanskrit poetry is metrical, but the poetry of non-Aryan peoples is not, and Sanskrit is of course closely related to Greek. Hebrew and Egyptian poetry is based on parallelism. Chinese and Japanese poetry is syllabic. (French poetry, due to the lack of stress, is syllabic, but it is also metrical.) American Indian poetry, which employs none of these devices, is based on the natural rhythms of communal ritual. The modern poet is suffering from an embarrassment of riches. Li T'ai Po [Rihaku] is as familiar as Sappho, *Hagoromo* is performed at Columbia University, the Bible is printed as poetry (which it always was, of course), the Pyramid Texts are translated into English, the riches of American Indian poetry are discovered, the unwritten epics of the Polynesians and the Bantus are written down, even the chants of the Andaman Islanders are published by

anthropologists. The domination of metre, from Homer to Housman, has simply broken down under the strain.

But poetry must have form, for there is no art without form. And so we see the modern poets experimenting with form to an unheard of extent. There has never been a period of English (or any) poetry with such a diversity of style. Marianne Moore writes syllabic verse, Carl Sandburg and Robinson Jeffers both use long unmetrical lines, with diametrically opposite results, for Jeffers is influenced by Greek tragedy and writes a taut, carefully chiselled, austere verse, while Sandburg is influenced by Whitman and writes a loose, fluid, undisciplined verse. Pound and Eliot, influenced by the French symbolists and by the aesthetic of T. E. Hulme, have evolved a meticulous, spare idiom, with extremely subtle musical effect. Auden has gone back to Anglo-Saxon poetry for alliteration and to Skelton for his rugged conversational manner. Thomas went to the Welsh bards for inspiration in his apocalyptic outpourings. William Carlos Williams takes perfectly simple prose phrases and, by his exquisite sense of balance and cadence, makes them into a poetry at once delicate and virile. In fact, I cannot think of two important poets today (with the exception of Pound and Eliot) who are writing as if they belonged to the same period. What will the critic of the future make of the poetry of this half-century when he finds, side by side in our anthologies, the poetry of Edgar Lee Masters and Wallace Stevens, of Stephen Spender and Gertrude Stein, of Edna St. Vincent Millay and Mina Loy? If you will think for a moment of the Oxford Books of 15th century verse, of 16th century verse, and of 17th century verse, and of the almost uniform texture of the poetry in each volume, you will realize what a completely heterogeneous thing modern poetry is.

But it is not only in form that contemporary poetry has been affected by this opening up of previously unfamiliar cultures. The field of reference has also been extended immeasurably. Until this century it was enough to be conversant with Greek and Roman mythology and history, in order to understand the most obscure allusions of a poet. But to understand Pound and Eliot you must also be prepared to catch the allusions to Hindu, Chinese and Japanese culture, and to understand Joyce one's field of reference

must extend in every direction, and should include a working knowledge of a score or more of languages. This is not an affectation of learning on the part of these writers. A poet writes about what interests him, and he has a right to. These poets write about all the cultures of the world because they are interested in all the cultures of the world.

This is not the first time that the literature of a people has been disturbed and unsettled by the impact of a foreign culture. But it is the first time that a literature has been subjected to the impact of *all* foreign cultures at once. The whole world has been opened up for examination, for the first time in history, and it is natural that the effect on writing and the other arts should be cataclysmic.

In the past each nation and ethnic group has evolved its own artistic idioms. With the inevitable spread of an international style this is no longer possible. But it is equally impossible that the art and literature of Finland should ever become indistinguishable from that of Brazil. Some sort of synthesis of ethnic elements and the international style will have to be worked out. In the mean time, the poets find themselves without an accepted idiom, and they are compelled to form their own, using whatever aspect of world culture appeals to them. The artist, more than anyone, needs roots. He has been transplanted from a garden plot to a wide field and, at the present moment, the sun is not shining on that field.

The distinction between poetry and prose seems to be disappearing. Now here, at the outset, we are confronted by a real difficulty in the English language, for this usually copious tongue has three words—poetry, verse, prose—where it obviously needs four. If, as anyone will admit, poetry and verse are not synonymous, then “poetry—prose” and “verse—prose” cannot both be correct dichotomies. Poetry is a kind of writing. Verse is a way of writing. In the past, poets have written their poetry in verse, but this is no longer necessarily so. Baudelaire was the first important writer to compose “poems in prose.” Now you cannot write verse in prose. It is either verse or it is prose. “Verse—prose” is therefore a dichotomy. But poetry can be prose and prose can be poetry. However, there is another connotation to

the word "prose" which complicates matters. When a thing is devoid of imagination we call it "prosy." What we need therefore is another word for a kind of writing that is not poetry. Coleridge said that the opposite of poetry is not prose, but science, which I think shows a pretty poor understanding of science. I would suggest that the opposite of poetry would be the telephone directory, because it contains nothing but utilitarian information. It contains useful facts, but no stimulating or exciting facts.

That is why I said that the distinction between poetry and prose "seems" to be disappearing. Of course, poetry and prose are as distinct as they ever were. But in the past poetry and verse were considered synonymous, or at least inseparable, and that is no longer so. The greatest imaginative works of our time, the epics of Joyce and Proust, are written in prose. The greatest imaginative works of the last century—*Faust*, *Peer Gynt*, *The Prelude*, *Les Fleurs du Mal*—were written in verse.

The breakdown of the verse tradition began, as a matter of fact, early in the nineteenth century. Ezra Pound, in his *How To Read*, traces it back to Stendhal. "At that moment," he says, "the serious art of writing went over to prose," and although his own poetry should keep us from taking him too literally, an examination of the relative importance of poets and prose writers during the past century and a half will show an amazing shift of emphasis, not only in public appreciation but in actual significance. The most telling example is Henrik Ibsen, that universal genius whose work is an epitome of the European tradition. His early plays were written in verse or in the measured prose of the Sagas. When he was thirty nine he wrote *Peer Gynt*. Like its predecessor, *Brand*, it was not only in verse but was the work of a major poet. At that time he was probably the best poet in Europe. And then, at forty, he stopped. He never wrote another line of verse. "Pegasus," he said, "Has been shot out from under me." But it was only then that his real career began. Evolving a spare, lean prose he started to write his great modern dramas. He was fifty three when *Ghosts* appeared. From a distinguished European poet he had become one of the great writers of the world, and he had become a prose writer. He had sensed the genius of his own time more securely than anyone else, and in turn he helped to create

the genius of the coming time.

The result of all this is that poets no longer invariably write their poems in verse. And yet to say that they write them in prose would be misleading. The modern poet is as concerned with form as any poets have ever been. No one can be a poet who is not in love with form. But the old forms simply do not function any longer. He is obliged to create his own, using his ear, his taste, his sensitiveness and his sensibility, as his guides. In a world of vanishing landmarks, he has no other.

The modern poet, like the modern painter, has a completely new relationship with his subject matter. This is due, in the case of the painter, to the invention of the camera, and, in the case of the poet, to a series of inventions: the linotype, the movies, radio, television, and other means of mass production of entertainment. Take the painter first, because his case is simpler than the poet's. Until the invention of photography the painter had two functions in society. He was an artist, of course, but he also had a utilitarian function: to reproduce an exact likeness of people, places and things. First of all, he painted portraits. It is a universal trait to wish to preserve the likeness of a loved person, and until the invention of the camera only a painter could do this. The "catching" of a likeness has nothing to do with art. It is a technical skill, like plumbing. But until the present century it was a part of the painter's job. This brought about an anomalous situation, for the greatest painters, from Rembrandt down, made portraits, while at the same time there was a whole profession of portrait painters who were not artists at all, being simply craftsmen skilled at getting a likeness. These two groups were confused in the public mind, so that getting a likeness was considered a sign of artistic worth. This did not happen in the Orient, where an exact likeness was never expected of the artist. But in the west it took the camera to free the artist from this obligation, because obviously if you want to know exactly what someone or something looks like the best way is to have a photograph. And so this whole field of usefulness has been taken away from the painter, leaving him with nothing to do except to be an artist. In the nineteenth century a book of travel would be illustrated with drawings. Today, naturally, all travel books have photo-

graphs. Even novels and stories in magazines were formerly illustrated with drawings, but now, with an increasingly sophisticated public, the custom has been abandoned, and although it still survives on the lowest cultural level—in the magazines devoted to tawdry stories of sex and crime—the drawing has even there been replaced by the photograph.

However, the public in the west, although they would never think of preferring a painting to a photograph, have not yet rid themselves of the idea that the first purpose of a painting is to look like something. And so the usual question asked about a modern abstract painting, or for that matter even one that is not abstract, is, "What is that supposed to be?" Meaning, of course, "What does it look like?" The only possible answer is, "It is a painting, and is supposed to look like a painting; that is, it communicates the artist's experience by means of color, line, form, and rhythm. This is what all artists have always done, and the resemblance of their paintings to any actual object, while made necessary by the secondary function of the painter, was always of secondary importance."

But let us leave the painter to face his problems while we return to the poet. He too had a secondary function: to tell a story. The desire to be entertained by a narrative is as universal as the desire to possess the likeness of a loved place or person. From Homer down, the poet told a story. Even if he did not write epics or dramas, there was a narrative element in every poem, even if the story was as simple as "I love you" or "The world is beautiful" or "Death is inevitable." These, after all, are stories, and they are basic ones that people never tire of retelling or of hearing retold. But with the rise of the novel and the mass production of books, this function was taken away from the poet and given to the novelist and the story writer. The day when Byron could wake up in the morning and find himself famous as the result of having written a verse narrative had passed. George Eliot, in her letters, comments ruefully on the meagre sales of *The Spanish Gypsy* compared to the sales of her prose novels. But today no one would think of writing such a poem. With the spread of lending libraries, the enormous output of machine-made novels, the large public who read a murder mystery every night

before retiring (this is perhaps less harmful than sleeping pills) and the incredible number of magazines containing "stories" of every kind—romance, sex, crime, cowboys, sports, something for every taste—the poet has become the last person who is expected to tell a story. If he told one, nobody would listen. Even the printed word is being superseded. It is easier to sit and watch a movie than to read a magazine, and now, with the radio and television, it is not even necessary to go out of the house. In the meantime the poet, no less than the painter, is left free to do nothing but create works of art.

But the poet has another difficulty to overcome, which the painter does not, and this is due to the dual nature of words themselves. The medium of painting is color and line, the medium of sculpture is form, and the medium of music is abstract sound. We do not use color or form or abstract sound as our ordinary means of communication. But we *do* use words, and this is why people who can accept abstract painting are still troubled by modern poetry because they do not know "what it means." The conviction persists that it must convey information. But the modern poet refuses to submit to this compulsion. He is an artist who uses words, and he does with them what any other kind of artist does. He attempts, by means of words, to recreate his experience of life by creating a work of art that will communicate to the reader through its effect on the aesthetic sense.

This does not for a moment mean that the modern poet is obliged to be "unintelligible." The poet lives in his thoughts as well as in his emotions. Much modern poetry has a disciplined clarity that puts to shame the diffuse romantic poetry of the nineteenth century. But there are certain areas of experience which cannot be intellectually clarified or defined. They can only be experienced and communicated indirectly. In the past this was done by the composer, whose medium is abstract in any case. But today, for the reasons given above, the painter and the poet claim the right to do the same thing. It is symptomatic of the confusion regarding modern poetry that two of the most frequently heard complaints are that it is "too intellectual" and that it "doesn't make sense." These critics should make up their minds. They can't have it both ways.

In an age of unparalleled chaos the artist has two alternatives: to express this chaos or to make a counterstatement of order and symmetry. This again can be seen most simply in the case of the painters, by comparing Picasso's *Guernica* with one of Mondrian's Compositions. In *Guernica* we see the very face of our time: the horror, the terror, the cruelty and the madness have found their definitive expression in this terrible painting, with its distorted forms, its mangled bodies and twisted faces, the frightful figures of animals, the swords piercing the mouths, and over it all the ghastly sterile greys of the paint. No further expression could be given to our age. And now look at one of Mondrian's compositions with their absolute geometric purity, their serenity, their tranquillity. He would work for two years on such a painting, simply dividing the canvas into a few delicately balanced rectangles, using only black, white and primary colors. There have never been paintings of such complete purity, except for the even more austere work of Malevich, who merely drew the simplest geometrical forms in pencil on white paper, and whose work culminates in his famous *White on White*, now in the Museum of Modern Art in New York, in which, on a background of warm white, is painted a square of cool white on a diagonal axis. These men were enormously gifted painters. They could even "get a likeness" if they wanted to. There can only be a profound spiritual cause for such an unexampled development of painting. It is obvious that these pure geometrical forms are a counterstatement against chaos.

This movement has gone even further and has become a mystical attempt to get beyond phenomena altogether. And here the artist really comes to the end of his tether, for a mystic can go beyond form, but an artist cannot do so and remain an artist. Mallarmé, in his quest of absolute purity, said that the ideal work of literature would be a sheet of white paper. But this is a compromise, a clinging to form. The real mystic would say, "Throw away the paper too." The painter Arthur Craven attempted the same thing by hanging an empty frame in an exhibition at the *Salon des Independents* in Paris. But again the mystic would say, "Throw away the frame too." And so the artist who is attempting to reach the noumenon discovers that he cannot succeed



without ceasing to be an artist. Some great artists, and Rimbaud was the greatest of them, have chosen to do just that.

In literature these two tendencies, towards the utmost possible complexity and the utmost possible simplicity, are again exemplified by those two key works, *Finnegans Wake* and *Tender Buttons*. Only in the present age could either book have been written, because only in this age has there been so complex a civilization to express, and at the same time so complex a civilization to react against. In the former book we have the most heroic attempt to include as many phenomena as possible, and in the latter we have an equally heroic attempt to exclude all phenomena. *Finnegans Wake* is difficult reading because it means so much. *Tender Buttons* is difficult reading for many people because it means so little. But these are two very different kinds of difficulty. To read *Finnegans Wake* understandingly requires colossal erudition. To read *Tender Buttons* with pleasure requires no learning at all, only sensitiveness and imagination. So perhaps it is the more "difficult" of the two, after all.

That many-sided genius, Gertrude Stein, is the only writer in whom both of these opposite tendencies have found expression. After writing her thousand page novel, *The Making of Americans*, she started an even longer book, which she called *A Long Gay Book*. This book, as she tells us in her *Lectures in America*, "was to describe not only every possible kind of a human being, but every possible kind of pairs of human beings and every possible threes and fours and fives of human beings and every possible kind of crowds of human beings." She wrote several hundred pages of this formidable enterprise. Then she stopped and wrote *Tender Buttons*. She had given up the accumulation of innumerable phenomena and for the next twenty years she devoted herself to the opposite task, to the ridding literature of "the ballast of the objective." These two ways of writing are found throughout modern poetry; for example, in the encyclopaedic *Cantos* of Ezra Pound, and in the Valery-like abstraction of Wallace Stevens' *Auroras of Autumn*.

Another distinction that has broken down in our time is that between classicism and romanticism. It is true that Mr. Eliot, the most influential poet now living, has defined himself as a classicist,

but the evidence is against him. His lineage can be traced back to the French symbolist poets who, as Edmund Wilson has pointed out in *Axel's Castle*, represent the last wave of romanticism, reacting against naturalism as their predecessors, the real romantics, reacted against neo-classicism. His cult of the past, his religious medievalism, and the meticulously non-logical sequence of his poetry, are certainly not classical. The present age is superficially classical for two reasons. It is in a natural state of rebellion against the preceding century, which was romantic. And it has exalted bareness and austerity of form to a point never before heard of. This second factor really seems classical. But the bareness of form, the absence of ornament, reaching its culmination in the United Nations Building in New York, which is simply a hexagon, is not classic in its inspiration. It is a product of functionalism, which is in turn a product of the machine age. As industrial design advanced it became evident that ornament was not only unnecessary and irrelevant but in many cases actually lessened the efficiency of the manufactured article. In this way a new style, based on efficiency alone and completely without ornament, came into being. The fact that these bare objects have an austere beauty of their own that is attractive to artists and that they have determined the aesthetic of our day had no part in their inception.

A Greek temple is less luxuriant than a Gothic cathedral, but it is certainly not without ornament. We must remember that the figures on the pediment of the Parthenon were brightly colored, and even the figures themselves were not necessary to the structure. Plato may have admired Egyptian architecture for its severity, but he would have made nothing of the unadorned hexagon of the United Nations Building. When he says, in the *Philebus*, that only geometric forms are beautiful, he means that they are absolutely beautiful. Le Corbusier has said that a house is "a machine for living." It would never have occurred to a Greek that a machine was something to live in.

But although the machine age aesthetic is not classic in derivation, although the most influential movement in modern art, surrealism, is an anti-intellectual one, this is certainly not a romantic period. The preoccupation with form would prove this,

if nothing else did.

When you think of Pope you think of his style. When you think of Wordsworth you are more likely to think of daffodils or clouds. This does not mean that Pope had nothing to say, nor that Wordsworth did not write well. But the restraint which Pope exercised on his poetry, the severity with which he confined himself to the strictest kind of couplet for tens of thousands of lines, is very different from Wordsworth's simple lyrics or from his long and diffuse autobiographical poems. Now the modern poet is in neither case. He is intensely concerned with form, but while Pope had a form already prepared for him by a long line of master craftsmen extending back to Waller, the modern poet has had the whole foundation of his craft knocked out from under him, and he must find out a form for himself. It is of course a *cliché* to say that in classicism the form has a restraining influence on the content and in romanticism the content dictates the form. But the modern poet, in choosing his form, is guided by his content, to an extent not experienced by the poets of the tradition. Once chosen, however, it is worked at meticulously. But it has been chosen, and is adapted, for the purpose of conveying a sequence of experience that is not logical in the old pre-Einsteinian sense. One could almost say that the modern poet is classic in form and romantic in content. As, however, this is a ridiculous thing to say, it is better simply to say that the dichotomy, classic-romantic, has, like so many other distinctions, ceased to have any meaning.

One of the most frequent complaints about modern poetry is that it is "intellectual." This is a curious accusation (assuming that there is something vaguely iniquitous about being intellectual). The use of the space-time continuum; the exploitation of dream logic and free association; the preoccupation with the art of primitive people, of children, and the insane; the complete abandonment of tradition on one hand and a glorification of the past on the other; the disinclination to communicate factual information; the mystical quest of an absolute purity; these are not intellectual things. It is discouraging to reflect that to many people "intellectual" simply means "difficult."

In relation to poetry I have said much about painters and

little about composers. Although poetry and music are for the ear, and painting for the eye, the poet and the painter have the same problems, which the musician does not share. This is because music is always abstract. (Without the written word, program music would be just as abstract as any other music.) But the poet and the painter have to preserve a delicate balance between the abstraction of the composer and the factualness of the writer of scientific prose. The composer is not expected to tell us exactly what he is saying. To do so he would have to resort to the use of words, or he could draw a picture. When someone asked Beethoven what one of his sonatas meant, he answered, "If I could tell you, do you think I would have taken the trouble to compose this?" The poet and the painter have just as much right to make this reply. They too are trying to communicate something that is incommunicable, because art is always an attempt to communicate the sense of life, which can never be wholly realized within the limits of the human personality. They may, in the process of trying to do this, furnish us with a greater or lesser amount of information. But if we ask them what it "means," they can only answer, "If I could tell you, do you think I would have needed to paint this picture? Would I have needed to write this poem?"