THE SCHOOL OF BAUDELMRE

. . . ce siècle hystérique où l'homme a tant douté.
—Jules **Laforgue.**

TRANSITION and decadence are terms that are often applied to the literature of our time. It all depends on the sense in which we use them. Properly understood both, I think, can fairly be used to describe certain tendencies that belong to modern literature in general and to our own age in particular. There is a widespread feeling that we are in the process of changing from one age to another, that we are in fact on the threshold of a New Age. This may be true, but that the signs of the coming spiritual revival are to be found in the works of contemporary writers is an assumption that we are scarcely justified in making. On the contrary, there is abundant evidence to show that contemporary art belongs not to the beginning of a new age but to the end of an old one. That we seem to be on the verge of spiritual collapse is certainly no guarantee that immediate regeneration will follow.

It is in art that the temper of an age is first revealed. The present paper is not literary criticism in a technical sense but an attempt to show the connection between modern poetry—and by modern poetry I mean poetry since 1600—and the mind that produced it. A change of poetic style is always conditioned by a change of outlook in a people; and it is generally some time before the results of such a change become visible. I shall try to show that the present state of poetry can be traced back to the decay of intellectualism, the loss of confidence in the mind's ability to know truth, at the close of the middle ages—though the effects do not appear in European literature till the middle of the eighteenth century. Since then poetry has flowed in two main streams, and though they are in a sense opposed the difference is primarily one of method. Poetry has ceased to be an intellectual activity properly speaking. It no longer consists in the *intellectual apprehensions of things,*

in the exploration of the universe and the discovery of the hidden significances of things and their relations to one another. Its aim is now to create an *emotional state* in the reader, to procure emotions for those who have none or to provide a convenient outlet for those who have too many, which means that art is defined in terms of the *perceiving subject* instead of the *thing perceived.* There is, of course, nothing wrong with emotion as such. But it is important to remember that emotion is only a part. We can put it in this way. *Poetry is primarily an intellectual activity. Emotion is something which supervenes upon the intellectual activity and completes it.* I suggest that the cardinal fault of modern poetry might be described as the misuse of mind.

II.

There are two main movements in nineteenth century poetry. The first is romantic and can be traced directly back to Rousseau. The other is anti-romaiitic and can be traced no less clearly to Baudelaire. It is from the impulse that gave Europe the school of Baudelaire' that all modern poetry, all modern movements in art, are descended. The use of the word 'modern' is a little ambiguous because it is sometimes taken to imply that there is a break with the post-Renaissance tradition, a change of direction. Now Baudelaire is ' modern ' in the sense that he is the first great European poet to accept all the implications of the post-Renaissance world. He is the first laureate of ' the modern chaos,' the supreme symbol of contemporary spiritual and moral disintegration. He does not show the way to the spiritual life, he simply asserts its necessity—to borrow T. S. Eliot's convenient expression.[2] That, I think, is the essence of modern poetry—an overwhelming

[1] ' The School **of** Baudelaire ' is used to designate poets like Laforgue, Corbière, Rimbaud and the early Mallarmé (e.g. ***Les Fenêtres***) in preference to the word ' symbolists ' as this term is susceptible in France to widely differing interpretations.

[2] ***Selected Essays,*** **p.** 372. (London, 1932).

sense of the necessity of:the spiritual life combined with an Utter inability to attain it. This sense of spiritual frustration is what critics of the advanced school mean when they speak of ' the contemporary situation.'

We shall be concerned principally with the differences between the schools of Kousseau and Baudelaire, but this must not blind us to the fact that spiritually they belong to the same period, and that their differences are, as **I** have already said, primarily differences of method. **A** feature common to both schools is their subjectivity, though they are subjective in different ways. The literature of the past hundred and fifty years has been for the most part highly personal. I think that this must be attributed to two main causes: (1) to the false antithesis between Idea and Reality in the writings of the late scholastics, and (2) to the breakdown of the European tradition at the Renaissance. It would hardly be possible to over-estimate the significance for the modern world of the supposed antithesis between Idea and Reality. It leads necessarily to the conclusion that we can have no conceptual knowledge of the real and that personal experience is therefore the sole reality. This theory probably did more than anything else to undermine mediaeval unity and to divide culture into **an** immense number of tiny independent cells.

The influence of subjective philosophy on poetry is important, for the poetry of a period is usually determined **by** prevailing conceptions of Reality. Consider the position **of the** mediaeval poet as compared with that of the modern. The mediaeval poet belonged to a society united by a common faith. The materials of his art were the things he had in common with his fellow men—the Faith, and the outer world as given in sense-experience. The importance of the outer world must be emphasized. No one denies that the invisible world played a large part in mediaeval art, but the basis was the visible world. The poet proceeded from nature to the supernatural. The data of his experience **was** furnished by the visible concrete world. The modern

poet, on the contrary, is an inhabitant of a world where there are no common intellectual principles, no common spiritual background and—perhaps the most important of all—no great measure of agreement about the nature of the external world. The poet is left to interpret everything for himself. The outcome has been the shifting of the poet's vision from the outer world to 'the world within.' Man has become the centre of the universe, and modern art has for the most part been concerned not with what is *seen* but with what is *felt*. Instead of a common we get a purely personal vision. In such a world it is naturally difficult to control or to test the artist's experience, to decide whether one interpretation of the universe is truer or more valuable than another.

The modern poet then is faced with the problem of finding a new common basis of experience. In general poets have chosen one of two alternatives. They have either abandoned the attempt altogether or they have accepted for better or for worse the world as it *appears* to them. Thus we get on the one hand the poetry of .flight, on the other a new realism—a compromise between romanticism and naturalism.

Escape was the 'solution' of the romantics. They turned away from the visible world and constructed *a* dream-world, or 'returned to nature.' This fictitious world possessed the unity which was sadly lacking in the actual world. It had another advantage too. The Romantic Movement was contemporary with the rise of Industrialism. Now one of the most perplexing and difficult problems tor the modern poet has been the rapid transformation of nature through the growth of the great manufacturing centres. The dream-world of the romantics provided something stable and unchanging in the midst of change. The inevitable result of such an outlook is that the poet gets completely out of touch with the living world. He is deprived of the normative influence of society and he comes finally to express only those feelings that make him different from other men. His work is therefore nothing

but a record of abnormal states of mind which must remain incomprehensible to the world at large.

Baudelaire found himself in the same position as the romantic poets, but his solution is very different from theirs. His significance for the development of modern art is due to the invention of a new realism. Contemporary writers like Eliot and Valéry are right in stressing his opposition to the romantics—Eliot calls him the first 'counter-romantic'[3]—for his poetry is pre-eminently a criticism of their 'unrealism,' their readiness to escape like the wretched Musset into a world of sunsets and tears. Baudelaire's originality is twofold. He revolutionized existing conceptions of the subject-matter of poetry and he revolutionized conventional methods of handling it.

1. The romantic dream-world depended for its existence on the exclusion from poetry of everything but natural scenery with the appropriate poetic trappings. It depended also on the exclusion of large tracts of the mind, for melancholy exiles in such regions were strictly confined to the conventional 'poetic feelings.' Baudelaire and his disciples increase the scope of poetry by introducing subjects that could not possibly be reconciled with the conventional theories of the 'beautiful' and the 'poetic.' Their appearance marks a definite change in European sensibilty. We can apply to this school words used by T. S. Eliot of the English Metaphysical Poets: 'They possessed a mechanism of sensibility which could devour any kind of experience.'[4] A new awareness of self is combined with a wholly new awareness of things like rotting corpses, the nostalgia of Paris streets, prostitution and sex in its most alluring, its most disturbing aspects. Corbière is the poet of night-life in provincial sea-ports, and Rimbaud, as a distinguished French critic has pointed out,[5] specializes in the latrines. In future everything, the whole gamut of experience, is fit material for poetry. When

[3] *Selected Essays*, p. 372. (London, 1932).

[4] *Op. cit.*, p. 273.

[5] Jacques Rivière, *Rimbaud*, p. 59 (Paris, 1930).

Gérard de Nerval wrote: *Je me suis à traduire tous mes rêves, toutes mes émotions,* he spoke not only for his contemporaries but for those who came after, for the authorc of *The WasfeLand,* of *Ulysses,* and of *A Draft of XXX Cantos.*

It would, however, be a mistake to call Baudelaire an objective poet. The things just mentioned are not desscribed from *without* as any eighteenth century poet might have described them, or as the naturalistic poet François Coppeé later did describe them — but from *within.* They are for the first time a part of the poet's being. The external world is no longer distinct from the men who move **in** it, it has become merged in their experiences. The more we read their work the more apparent it becomes that their primary interest was neither in the real world nor even in the world of appearances, but in the happenings in their own minds. Baudelaire, for instance, seldom brings his mind to bear *directly* on a concrete thing. He is concerned with it in relation to himself, with its *impact* on his own sensibility instead of its place in a general scheme. He sees things not as they are, but in terms of his reactions to them. His attitude towards the external world reveals what is perhaps the most striking characteristic of the modern mind — the complete loss of confidence in the world, a loss of faith in its ultimate rationality. The mediaeval artist loved concrete things, whereas the modern views them with a mixture of fascination and disgust. The modern poet's attitude towards the real may fairly be described as subjective in that he faces it only because it will procure for him new sensations. It is also a fresh means of self-revelation. *One of Baudelaire's triumphs was that he managed by establishing new contacts with the outer world to turn other facets* of *his own personality to the light.*

2. This brings us to Baudelaire's other innovation. I have said that his chief interest was in the workings of his own mind. His psychological realism is at once his most significant contribution to poetry and his most effective

criticism of the romantic aberration. His experiment of making the outer world a means to an end was brilliantly successful; it enabled him not simply to lay bare fresh ranges of feeling but to reveal the modern mind to itself in a new way. *Instead* of *seeking a common basis* for *experience in the world as presented to the senses he tries by delving into himself to come to fresh common ground within.* That is the modern poet's solution of the problem before him. Thus the central point of Baudelaire's work consists in a certain movement of the mind turned in upon itself, and its end would seem to be the discovery of an absolute self that is hidden beneath the different layers of mind. We find in the poets of this school a complete fidelity to all the complications of ' the modern consciousness.' Their work is, with the exception of the English Metaphysical Poets, the first attempt to express the whole content of the mind—and not only of the mind but also of the nerves—in poetry. I do not think that it is unduly fanciful to see in their technique the beginnings of the 'silent monologue.' In fact, it seems in Laforgue's *Derniers Vers*[6] to be already in an advanced state of development. The opening lines of *L'Hiver qui vient,* one of his finest poems, is a good instance:

Blocus sentimental! Messageries du Levant! . . .
Oh, tombte de la pluie ! Oh ! tombe'e de la nuit,
Oh! le vent! . . .
La Toussaint, la Noël et la Nouvelle Annte,
Oh, dans les bruines, toutes mes cheminées ! . . .
D'usines . . .
On ne peut plus s'asseoir, tous les bancs sont mouillés ;
Crois-moi, c'est bien fini jusqu'à l'année prochaine,
Tous les bancs sont mouillts, tant les bois sont rouillés.

[6] It is worth noting that Eduard Dujardin, the acknowledged master of James Joyce, who was the first writer to use the 'silent monologue' in his masterly novel, *Les Lauriers sont coupés,* was also the editor of Laforgue's *Derniers Vers.* The novel mas published in 1887 and Laforgue's poems (a posthumous work) three years later. But it is certain that M. Dujardin was acquainted with the poems before he wrote his novel.

In this and similar poems it seems that the broken rhythms, the deliberately omitted verbs, are an attempt to represent 'the stream of consciousness.' No one who is acquainted with Laforgue's poetry would deny chat we find in it 'the dialogue of the mind with itself,' that perplexed and divided self, which finds expression in so much contemporary art.

An important difference between the schools of Rousseau and Baudelaire is the place of intellect in their work. The romantics usually obtained their effects by a form of sensuous evocation. Poetry was a reverie in which intellect had no place. Instead of being active and creative and shaping the raw materials of his art, the poet was completely passive in face of the data of experience. In his criticism Baudelairk always insisted on the importance of intellect in art and indeed it is of capital importance in his own poetry. Now Baudelaire's use of intellect differs absolutely from that of Dante or any other writer of the Christian renaissance. *For the middle ages the intellect was creative, for the moderns it is the agent of destruction.* It is no longer the faculty of vision and synthesis; it is almost purely analytic; it is turned inwards and used to analyse the sensations of the poet. The dialectical movement of the mind which seems to me the centre of Baudelaire's work is intellectual. ***He** pushes his analysis of sensation to the point at which sensation is destroyed.* 'He decomposes sensation,' wrote Paul Bourget,[7] 'as a prism decomposes light.' That is what has happened to nearly all the writers descended from him. In the case of romantic poets like Shelley or Lainartine and to some extent Wordsworth, the personality of the poet is *dissolved* and becomes one with the 'infinite' or is absorbed into a pantheistic nature: in the case of the others it is *demolished* by the destructive action of the mind. I think that we are fully justified in describing the cardinal fault of modern poetry as the misuse of mind.

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[7] *Essais de psychologie contemporaine* I, p. *8* (Paris, 1887).

III.

It is now possible to reconsider our use of the counters Transition and Decadence. We have seen that modern poetry is the logical culmination of a process inaugurated by a change of outlook on Reality at the Renaissance. It is, I think, apparent that the work of living poets shows at present no real sign of a change of direction, no spiritual break with the Renaissance tradition (in spite of what T. E. Hulme has said in his brilliant essay on Modern Art[8]). The belief that change is coming is due simply to the fact that the destruction of personality which is so striking in futurist painting and free verse seems to have reached its limit. We assume that because art can advance no further in this direction that a complete change of direction—involving a return to a formal art and the rehabilitation of the human form—must necessarily follow. The formalism of contemporary art is not surely, as Hulme believed, a Byzantine revival. Its curves do not like Byzantine art symbolize moral qualities, they are a reflection of the new forms and patterns introduced by machinery. Their presence means simply that man, after being completely dismembered by Picasso and the futurists, has been driren out altogether to make room for machinery.

Transition, in the sense of change, is at least four hundred years old. Since the Renaissance there has been no stable culture but a series of changes. One might almost call it a state of change. During the last hundred years the process has been speeded up, and we are able for the first time to grasp its full cpiritual implications. We are able to see that there has been a steady progress in the same direction. The Renaissance did, of course, mean a short and glorious period of renewal for the arts. But once the energy released by that movement had been exhausted—

[8] *Speculations* (London, 1924). *See* also N. Berdiaeff, *The End of Our* Time (London, 1933).

Milton can fairly be reckoned the last Renaissance poet—the true character of the world that emerged from it began to show.

This brings us to the term Decadence. As I understand it Decadence means the corruption of sensibility which is the modern world's gift to her artists. Here, too, the turning away from the outer world already described is to blame. Instead of being founded on direct *perception* a great deal of modern poetry consists of artificially manufactured emotions and necessarily lacks that *immediacy* which we get in pre-Renaissance poetry and also in the greatest work of the Elizabethans. It is a collection of new and strange combinations certainly, but they are for the most part artificially contrived in the laboratory.[9] Here lies the significance of the different romantic revivals that have taken place in modern times. Whether they were headed by Wordsworth or the late D. H. Lawrence they had this in common—they all proclaimed a 'return to nature.' That the romantic poet's sensibility was already too warped, his cast of mind too introspective, to derive much help from nature does not alter the fact that such movements started as genuine protests against the artificiality of sentiment and the sophistication of the previous generation. There is another point. The genesis of every romantic revival is spiritual. It is the outcome—perhaps the unconscious outcome—of man's hunger for God. This accounts for Wordsworth's pantheism and Lawrence's religion of the blood. It is a tragedy that they should all have been ruined by the same thing. Romantics are by definition revolutionaries; but instead of destroying only what was dead in existing tradition they have always tried to break completely with the past, to make a new start, rejecting alike what is good and what is bad. With the result that they have dwindled into blind attacks on intellect, and, indeed, on authority in any form. and they have ended, not alto-

[9] Baudelaire's interest in exotic perfumes is important,

getlicr surprisingly. by accepting emotion—the crude life of the senses—as a substitute for spirituality.

Jt is significant that Baudelaire never proclaimed a return to nature. The failure of the European Romantic Revival was sufficient to discourage people from returning to nature for sonic time. Besides, no one believed in nature any more in the old sense. The poetry of Baudelaire himself, of Jules Laforgue his closest follower, and of their modern disciple, Mr. T. S. Eliot, is pre-eminently the poetry of the town. They do not yearn for the open spaces. Tlicy accept with complete resignation rhc closed-in life of the city, its industrialism, its factories, its endless rows of tenements. All in fact that has most contributed to the corruption. the defilement of sensibility. Laforgue only describes nature in autumn or winter, showing that it is a symbol not of life and joy but of death and decay. The favouritc themes of these writers arc exhaustion, impotence, sterility, physical decay (a symbol of spiritual decay). Thus Laforgue:

La Terre a fait son temps; ses reins n'cn peuvent plus.
Et ses pauvres enfants, grêles, chauves et blêmes
D'avoir trop médité les éternels problèmes,
Grelottants et voûtés sous le poids des foulards
Au gaz jaune et mourant des brumeux boulevards
D'un oril vide et muet contemplent leurs absinthes . . .

A study of their vocabulary emphasizes the point. (Think of Baudelaire's predilection for the word *languissant*). *Le français moderne*, as a Frenchwoman once said to me, *est riche en mots qui expriment l'épuisement de l'homme.* Not less intcrcsting and important is Baudelaire's preoccupation with Lesbianism. It is not due, as someone—a French priest, I think—unkindly said, to the fact that it was the only sin he could not commit. It is a symbol. a purely artistic symbol, of sterility. Nothing after all could bc more 'moral' than the end of *Les Femmes damnées*!

Since we must have labels, divide everything into movements and schools. Transition and Decadence are as good

labels as any for the post-Renaissance period. At bottom the twentieth century is nothing but a continuation of the nineteenth. Paul Bourget described Baudelaire's poetry as the expression of *une civilisation vieillissante*—let us translate it 'the art of a dying world'—and the time has not yet come for **us** to need a more flattering account of our own.

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