

POETRY IN EUROPE 1900–1950

Now that the twentieth century has celebrated its fiftieth birthday, it can no longer plead youth and inexperience as excuses to avoid judgments on its achievements, least of all in its poetry, of which one chapter is practically closed and another has at least made its main point. Of course any survey of European poetry in the last fifty years is bound to be very general and superficial, but is perhaps worth attempting not merely as a matter of historical inquiry but because it may throw some light on the immediate present and the prospects for the near future. We may be still too close to recent developments to see them in their right perspective or to gauge them at their final worth, but much that has happened since 1900 already belongs to a past sufficiently remote for an independent judgment to be passed on it, while much else has revealed its main lines of development, with the result that we may perhaps form a clearer and juster estimate of what the poets have done than was possible when their works were too new to be rightly assessed and suffered alike from the ardent hopes of their protagonists and the shocked disapproval of their opponents.

This poetry has been European in a special sense and a high degree. Just

as in the twelfth century a special kind of love song was written all over Western Europe, or in the sixteenth new forms of technique transformed poetry everywhere, so in our own time poetry has presented a unity of character throughout Europe. It is tempting to think that what Provence did for the twelfth century or Italy for the sixteenth has been done by France for the twentieth and to claim this as yet another triumph for the Third Republic. There is truth in this, but it is not the whole truth. Much as modern poetry owes to France, it has been so acclimatised in other countries that it has almost lost traces of its French origin and become at once national and universal, fully conscious both of local ties and of wider issues. In each country it has taken its own form and gone its own way, deriving strength from the contemporary scene in its variety and idiosyncrasies no less than in its common character and shared experiences.

The history of poetry in this first period falls into two main movements, which differ greatly from each other and look like action and reaction, thesis and antithesis. If the first element is Symbolist, the second is anti-Symbolist and may for convenience be called Modernist. The first was already in full bloom at the beginning of the century, reached its heyday in the twenties, and has since declined, partly through the death of its greatest exponents, partly from other causes which have weakened its appeal. The second, the movement of the Modernists, was already perceptible about 1908 and active before 1914 but did not find its full scope until the middle of the twenties, since when it has, on the whole, dominated the scene, though now its energies show signs of slackening. There have of course been poets who do not belong to either movement but have continued with a courageous independence to practise a more traditional art, like Thomas Hardy in England, Jules Supervielle in France, and Antonio Machado in Spain, but great as their achievement has been, it does not fall into the main scheme and cannot be considered in this context. The main picture of poetry since 1900 is formed by the two contrasted patterns of the Symbolists and the Modernists.

For the first quarter of the century the Symbolists held the stage, and even now have not quite left it. They drew on the accumulated spiritual capital of the nineteenth century and put it out to new and rewarding uses. If their pioneers were mostly French or Belgian, they are to be found in most European countries and present an impressive array of remarkable talents turned to high purposes. To name only the greatest, they include Yeats in the British Isles, Valéry in France, George in Germany, Rilke in Austria, Blok in Russia, Ady in Hungary, Unamuno and Jiménez in Spain,

De Castro in Portugal, and Sikelianos in Greece. This noble company is surely comparable to that of the great Romantics a century earlier. If it lacks anyone quite so pre-eminent as Goethe or Wordsworth, its great men are not far below this level, and there are more of them. It certainly eclipses any achievement between the death of Goethe and its own emergence. Good as much of the poetry of the middle and later parts of the nineteenth century is, it lacks this richness and fulness, this sustained achievement, this impressive majesty.

If we ask what is the primary claim of the Symbolists to honour, we may say that it lies in their combination of a firm conception of what poetry is with a remarkable skill in translating it into fact. Unlike some of the great men of the nineteenth century, who saw themselves as publicists and reformers before they were poets, the Symbolists assume that a poet's first task is to write poetry and to write it as well as possible. In this they differ not only from the Romantics, whose uncertain aims and reliance on inspiration too often meant an uneven performance, but from the Parnasians and their kind, who tended to confuse poetry with the description of objects interesting for historical or geographical reasons. The great Symbolists have nearly always written well because they have a clear idea of what poetry ought to be and because they have devoted themselves to it as a single ideal with no distracting reservations that they ought to be doing something else or something more. If in this we see yet another sign of that growing specialisation which has characterised all the arts in our time, it is none the worse for that, since it means that the poetry of the Symbolists maintains a level of performance which is rare in any age and presents a notable contrast to the uncertain touch of the nineteenth century.

This achievement is much more than a mastery of technique or an ability to say correctly what has to be said. It means that the poet works at a truly creative and imaginative level because he knows what poetry is and confines himself to its authentic manifestations. He concentrates his powers on his subject and gives to it every possible enrichment through allusion and association, until he is able to hold his readers with something so fully charged that it seems inexhaustible. This is the first function of poetry, and the Symbolists aim at securing it above everything else. However unusual their ideas may be—and they are often very unusual—they present them not as ideas but as living experience. Whatever Rilke has to say about death or Yeats about the crisis of civilisation or Unamuno about dark chapters of the soul's history comes with a shock of enchanting surprise

not so much to the understanding as to the whole man. We may of course consider it intellectually, criticise it as metaphysics, or work out its practical implications, but that is not the way in which it is given to us. It comes with the impact of a living force and masters our whole sentient natures. Of course all true poetry does this, but the Symbolists do it with a deliberate purpose and a remarkable consistency because they are convinced that it is their chief, indeed their only, task. Much as our age has heard of '*la poésie pure*' and much though it has debated what it is, the answer is clear to the Symbolists. Pure poetry is that which does in the highest possible degree what poetry alone can do.

This poetry derives much of its power from working inside a limited field and not expending its energies on tasks alien to its main purpose. So though it is deep and rich, it may not unjustly be accused of being limited. Not only does much common experience lie outside its range, but even inside its own field it has strong inclinations and predilections. Above all it is guided by a dominating spirit, by a conviction that behind the world of appearance lies another, supernatural, world, and that the poet's task is to pierce through to this and to convey its reality through symbols. In this aim it has much in common with Romanticism, which is no less concerned with a 'beyond', but whereas Wordsworth or Keats or Hölderlin waits for moments of vision when he will apprehend the universe as a whole, the Symbolists tend to construct systems by which the world of appearance is given significance through its dependence on a supernatural order. They are neither mystics nor metaphysicians, but they try to produce schemes in which a mass of apparently disparate phenomena receive a new meaning and a new importance. This is more than is done by the Romantics, who are content with the fact of vision and hardly try to relate it to anything else except in a general, unsystematic way. What Yeats does through an esoteric interpretation of history, Sikelianos through the presence of ancient divinities in a living landscape, or Jiménez through a profound and passionate application of the 'pathetic fallacy' is in each case a reflection of the Symbolist search for a unifying reality, which is reached not by science or philosophy but through inspired insight and a sensibility close to vision. Nor is more orthodox religion excluded from such treatment. Unamuno's noble 'Christ of Velasquez' shows that these methods are quite compatible with a Catholicism which may be independent but is not heretical. In their attention to a superior order of things the Symbolists have found a firm centre for their poetry.

Such an outlook has of course deep social and even political implications. It was in the first place a reaction and a protest against the restrictions on the individual self which seemed to be an inevitable result of the Industrial Revolution, the growth of large towns, and a standard system of education. It is true that Yeats and George cultivated an aristocratic disdain for the crowd and that Rilke achieved an extraordinary detachment from anything connected with public affairs, but Sikelianos and Jiménez are democrats, who have suffered for their convictions, and Blok and Ady were revolutionaries, while Unamuno was an independent who disliked most governments on principle. The later Symbolists have often enough been keenly aware of politics and even taken part in them, but what most concerns them is the fate of the individual. They have felt that the most menacing danger is that man will lose his insight and sensibility and inner life through the mechanisation of his mind. They have sought to remedy this by creating a poetry of the self in its full individuality and even in its idiosyncrasies. They have, for all purposes, denied that there is such a thing as the average man and have tried to encourage the human being who is most himself, who realises his potentialities as fully as possible and tries with passion and courage to enlarge his experience. This poetry is therefore profoundly individualistic and even aristocratic in the sense that it is concerned with what is rare and choice in human beings. Its ideal is not the average sensual man nor the political animal nor the saint nor the thinker but simply and boldly the artist, the man who makes life itself an art by his awareness of unsuspected beauties and his refusal to conform to any mechanical scheme of thought or behaviour.

Since the Symbolists regard the world as a mystery and believe that it is their task to interpret it with regard to its spiritual character, their poetry is like a ritual and has a majestic, hieratic quality. They are priests and prophets of some unseen order of which they speak with grave dignity in inspiring symbols. They see themselves as a dedicated caste, as men privileged to enjoy a special knowledge, who feel strong obligations to display it in its full urgency. Even when they come down to earth, as Yeats and Blok did after the loss of their first visions, they still remain unlike other men and speak with special authority and detachment. They feel that a poet has a peculiar place in society and is called to perform duties which have hitherto been reserved for priests but lost to them through the destructive work of scientific and historical criticism. They are not aesthetes, as the men of the nineties were; they are concerned with much more than what is commonly thought to be beautiful, with a whole

spiritual order which can be conveyed only through symbols because it is a mystery beyond the analytical reason or scientific inquiry or merely descriptive statement.

The Symbolists inherited a rich and ancient tradition of elaborate song, which goes back at least to the revival of vernacular poetry in the twelfth century and has learned much from Greek and Latin. They feel that this tradition is their intimate concern because they are deeply conscious of the past and have sought in different ways to make it live for the present. What Rilke did through his study of masterpieces in painting and sculpture, or Yeats through Irish legends and folklore, or George in the revival of a fundamentally Hellenic outlook, Blok did by his search for an essential and eternal Russia beneath the confused and squalid surface, Valéry by his accommodation of old ideas to modern experience, and Ady by his explanation of the broken state of his country through dark forces in its past. Indeed when the Symbolists wish to give colour and contour to intimate thoughts they often clothe them in something like a historical dress, as De Castro presents a myth of sin and redemption in the story of St. Macarius or Unamuno creates a powerful version of the Christian faith through the character of Velazquez. Their view of the past is not like that of the Parnassians or the Pre-Raphaelites. They do not wish to escape into it; still less are they attracted by any archaic charm or quaintness. They assume rather that the great achievements of the past make the present what it is and that through a proper understanding of it we can begin to understand ourselves. They seek to present those permanent issues of man in the universe which the great men of the past have probed and often mastered but which need a new interpretation in the language of our own age. Such a poetry demands a high degree of culture and education both in its exponents and in their public. It also assumes that even the most obvious events of contemporary life can be understood only if we see them in their full historical setting. With such demands it is not surprising that this poetry is sometimes regarded as the esoteric pastime of select initiates and not as the voice of modern society in its immediate and urgent needs.

The achievement of the Symbolists is one of the glories of Europe in our century. Whatever bleak or blank years the future may hold for us, we can turn with pride to this triumphant manifestation of the creative spirit and the enrichment of life which it has brought. It has emphasised an important element in human life, our awe and delight before the mysteries of creation and of the creative spirit which works unseen and incalculable.

The Symbolists interpreted life as a religious experience, as something which awakes the sense of the holy and makes us wish to share and understand it. They tried to go behind the formal structure of religious belief, behind even its mythology, in their desire to find something more fundamental and more embracing. Their poetry is concerned with this search and its results, with the whole task of trying to relate the seen world to the unseen and the world of facts to the world of values. That is why they are able to exalt some single occasion to a vast, symbolical significance; they see in it powers at work which are far nobler and more majestic than any temporal forces. Behind their remarkable achievement lies the conviction that poetry is in the highest sense a way of life because it alone is able to traffic with the unseen.

The ironic spirit which guides the fortunes of poetry does not allow any great achievement to be repeated or even to thrive beyond its finest hour. Before the Symbolists had reached their zenith, the reaction against them began. It was natural and inevitable, and we cannot complain of it. The Symbolists were too powerful, too exacting, and too limited to be able to extend or even to continue their sway. The movement which I have called Modernist was in its origins anti-Symbolist, and such it has remained in its efforts and achievements. To the Symbolists it owes little more than its belief that poetry should be itself and nothing else, and even to this it has not always been faithful. Otherwise in most of its leading characteristics we can see powerful reaction against a school of poetry which has become so entrenched that it had to be overthrown before anything new could be accomplished. If the Symbolists believed in a transcendental order, the Modernists do not look beyond the common world and make even their religion a business of every day. If the Symbolists exploited a grand manner, the Modernists delight in being colloquial and use even slang when it suits their purpose. If the Symbolists found support and sustenance in a living past, the Modernists confine themselves to the immediate present and the transitory hour. If the Symbolists preferred established forms of verse, the Modernists tend to liberate poetry from its rules and change their rhythms with their tempers. If the Symbolists avoided many moods and themes because they thought them alien to the true dignity of poetry, the Modernists ransack the world for all manner of themes and do not shrink from discordant or acrid moods. If the Symbolists sought, in Pater's phrase, to 'aspire to a condition of music', and made music a model in the

management of words, the Modernists rely more on painting and have exalted the visual image to the position once held by the evocative symbol. If the Symbolists liked majestic, far-reaching subjects, the Modernists are often enough content with brief moments of private excitement. The contrast between the two manners and outlooks is enormous. The thesis of Symbolism has met its antithesis in Modernism, and our age has been swung from one kind of poetry to another which is for many purposes its diametrical opposite.

Just as in its day Symbolism swept Europe, so has Modernism, inspiring remarkable disciples in most European countries. If Germany and Austria have produced no poet in the new manner to rival George and Rilke, that is perhaps because poetry has always been intermittent in German lands and was destined to extinction with the raucous shouts of the Nazis. On the other hand Italy, which produced no Symbolist of any note and seemed to be stifled by the rhetoric of d'Annunzio, revived under Modernist influence, and though its first voice was the crude manifesto of Marinetti's Futurism in 1909, it has developed a delicate and graceful art of which Ungaretti is the pioneer and Montale the most distinguished practitioner. With this slight shift of scene Modernism has followed Symbolism in being a European movement and found distinguished exponents in most countries. If in England the master has been a man of American origin, T. S. Eliot, it has had its indigenous champion in Edith Sitwell. In France, Paul Eluard has led a band of ingenious and vivid poets. In Russia the tumultuous talent of Mayakovsky has been matched by the concentrated power of Pasternak. In Spain, a remarkable school of poets emerged about 1920, of whom the greatest were Lorca and Alberti, and Greece has found a new voice in George Seferis. Behind these leading figures there has been no dearth of followers, some of whom have made their mark and found their place. There is no doubt that Modernism has met a real need and spoken for something deep and important in the contemporary consciousness. We may reasonably ask where its success lies and what it has done that seems likely to be permanent.

In the first place, the Modernists have done much to make the language of poetry clean and precise. In the nature of things the Symbolists suffered from a tendency to be vague. They could hardly be otherwise with an art which deals with transcendental abstractions. But the new art which eschews such abstractions aims at a greater precision and a new kind of effect. The Modernists have found their vocabulary in the speech of every

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day and by their skilful selection from this and their apt application of it have given a new freshness and vigour to poetry, as if they were in happy harmony with ordinary men and interpreted their thoughts for them in refined versions of their own words. Take, for instance, some lines written by Eluard about a hero of the French resistance. It is a plain statement of fact, written in the commonest and most ordinary words:

*La nuit qui précéda sa mort
Fut la plus courte de sa vie
L'idée qu'il existait encore
Lui brûlait le sang aux poignets
Le poids de son corps l'écaürait
Sa force le faisait gémir
C'est tout au fond de cette horreur
Qu'il a commencé à sourire
Il n'avait pas UN camarade
Mais des millions et des millions
Pour le venger il le savait
Et le jour se leva pour lui.¹*

Here the selection from living speech is made with discriminating insight. The whole tone is maintained by the use of the plainest possible words, and the effect is remarkably fresh and clean. Vagueness and imprecision have been eliminated, and each word does its work with the utmost efficiency.

This return to common speech means that the Modernists use many words which the Symbolists would probably have avoided, and thereby gain a greater variety of tone. Since they are concerned not to maintain a single majestic mood but to present things exactly as they see and feel

¹ The night which preceded his death
Was the shortest of his life
The idea that he still existed
made the blood boil in his pulses
The weight of his body disheartened him
His force made him moan
But at the very depth of this horror
he began to smile
He had not ONE comrade
but millions and millions
To avenge him—he knew it
And the day rose for him.

them, they make the utmost use of any words, however familiar, which suit their purpose, and at their best they succeed in producing something which is at once impressive and intimate, as for instance these lines from Eliot's 'Animula':

*Issues from the hand of God the simple soul
Irresolute and selfish, misshapen, lame,
Unable to fare forward or retreat,
Fearing the warm reality of the offered good,
Denying the importunity of the blood,
Shadow of its own shadow, spectre in its own gloom,
Leaving disordered papers in a dusty room,
Living first in the silence after the viaticum.*

This is more elaborate and more metaphorical than the passage just quoted from Eluard, but it, too, illustrates the ability of the Modernists to pick up ordinary words and give them a new flavour and distinction. They use them with exactness, not of course the exactness of the logician or the jurist, but the exactness of the poet which reflects just what he feels and makes it as clear as words can.

A second success of the Modernists lies in their development of a technique for expressing many latent mental states which eluded the sweeping art of the Symbolists. This poetry derives much from self-examination and self-knowledge and insists that every element in an imaginative experience is important and worthy of record. Moreover, it demands that, however unusual a state of mind may be, we should not falsify its representation by making it conform to ideas of what it ought to be. Truth is a first duty, and the poet must express it poetically, giving all the shades and associations which he himself finds in a situation. Of course this may lead to a formidable complexity, which is largely responsible for the reputation of obscurity from which modern poetry so often suffers. Indeed, in the hands of any but a really good poet this technique has more disadvantages than advantages, since we may fail altogether to respond to what is said just because we have no idea what it means. On the other hand when it is managed by a poet who knows both what he wishes to say and how to apply the new technique to it, it gives a subtle and rich delight, since every element is redolent of the poet's special vision and personality and has an unusual individuality of its own. It is hard to

imagine any poet before this century daring to express his feelings at once so carefully and so unusually as Lorca does in such lines as:

*Me he perdido muchas veces por el mar
con el oído lleno de flores recién cortadas,
con la lengua llena de amor y de agonía.
Me he perdido muchas veces por el mar
cómo me pierdo en el corazón de algunos niños.*²

The bold juxtapositions reflect exactly what he feels and would be impossible but for the modern technique of going straight to the point. It is to the credit of the Modernists that they have extended the range of poetry by exploring many obscure corners of experience and discovered a means to make them vivid and dramatic.

This self-exploration has led to a great development of visual imagery. The Modernists, seeing that abstract words are unable to convey the full significance of unfamiliar mental states, resort to images which create an atmosphere and suggest what the essential issue is. What the Symbolists do with symbols for the unseen world, the Modernists do with images for the seen. Such images are much more than metaphors. They have such strength and radiance that for a moment they absorb our attention and give us the whole character and aroma of a situation. Some poets, like Lorca and Pasternak, are such masters of this art that they are able to compose almost complete poems from a series of superficially unrelated images which nonetheless secure a complete unity of effect through their relevance to the central theme. Again and again the choice of an unexpected, entirely apt image conjures up something so vivid that we respond immediately to it and know exactly where we are. It is often presented without explanation, and has to do its work unaided, and that too is right, since explanation in abstract terms may spoil the individual colour of the occasion in question. Such imagery evokes a wide range of associations and shows how the single situation is related to a large number of other issues and contains in itself an incalculable range of experience. The image fastens a subject to a certain point, but at the same time radiates light all round it.

This art needs illustrations if we are to see how difficult and yet how effective it can be. First, let me take some lines from a poem by Edith

² I have lost myself many times in the sea
with my ears full of flowers freshly cut,
with my tongue full of love and of agony.
I have lost myself many times in the sea
as I lose myself in the heart of some children.

Sitwell on the atomic bomb. No subject could in its own way be more familiar, and a great effort is needed to redeem it from the commonplace. The poet must present something entirely new, seen with passion and vision. The Modernist ideal demands that any poem must be true to the poet's creative conception and contain all that he sees in it. So Edith Sitwell begins:

*Under great yellow flags and banners of the ancient cold
Began the huge migrations
From some primaevial disaster in the heart of man.
There were great oscillations
Of temperature . . . You knew there had once been warmth;
But the cold is the highest mathematical idea . . . the Cold is Zero,
The Nothing from which arose
All being and all variation . . . It is the sound too high
for our hearing, the Point that flows
Till it becomes the line of Time . . . an endless positing
Of Nothing, of the Ideal that tries to burgeon
Into Reality through multiplying. Then Time froze
To immobility and changed to Space.
Black flags among the ice, blue rays
And the purple perfume of the polar sun
Freezing the bone to sapphire and to zircon—
These were our days.*

A central image sets the tone for the whole passage and is then developed and elaborated. It is that the heart of man at the time of the atomic bomb has entered an ice age in which all warmth and development and movement are lost. Once the theme of this terrible cold has been stated, the poet proceeds to show what its implications are and what follows from it. This freezing of the heart is like something which comes from a remote, savage past, an abstract condition in which measurement and movement are meaningless because all standards have been destroyed. It is associated in the first stage with yellow flags, emblems of plague; then with black, emblems of death. The sense of an inhuman, ghastly immobility is strengthened by imagery drawn from metallic substances, which are the antithesis and the denial of flesh and blood, and from paradoxical mathematical calculations, in which the whole system of numbers is lost in negatives and infinites. Disparate though the images are, they are all related to a single experience, whose different facets they reflect and

illuminate. If we do not at first see the intellectual structure behind them, that does not mean that it is lacking. On the contrary, it is firmly laid and reveals itself through the images which do all that is required to make the effect powerful and even precise.

Highly intellectual though this technique often is, and much though it may demand of us for its understanding, it is nonetheless alive with feeling and stirs powerful emotions. How straight it may speak to the heart may be seen in the poem 'Uomo del mio tempo' written by the Italian poet, Salvatore Quasimodo, during the recent war:

*Sei ancora quello della pietra e della fionda,
uomo del mio tempo. Eri nella carlinga,
con le ali maligne, le meridiane di morte,
—t'ho visto—dentro il carro di fuoco, alle forche,
alle ruote di tortura. T'ho visto; eri tu,
con la tua scienza esatta persuasa allo sterminio,
senza amore, senza Cristo. Hai ucciso ancora,
come sempre, come uccisero i padri, come uccisero
gli animali che li videro per la prima volta.
E questo sangue odora come al giorno
quando il fratello disse all'altro fratello:
'Andiamo ai campi'. E quell'eco fredda, tenace,
è giunta fino a te, dentro la tua giornata.
Dimenticate, o figli, le nuvole di sangue
salite dalla terra, dimenticate i padri:
le loro tombe affondano nella cenere,
gli uccelli neri, il vento, coprono il loro cuore.³*

³ You are still he of the stone and of the sling,
man of my time. You were in the cockpit,
with the malignant wings, with the meridians of death,
—I have seen you—inside the waggon of flame, at the gallows,
at the wheels of torture. I have seen you; it was you,
with your exact science persuaded to destruction,
without love, without Christ. You have killed again,
as always, as your fathers killed, as they killed
the animals who saw them for the first time.
And the smell of this blood is as on the day
when the brother said to the other brother:
'Let us go to the fields'. And that echo, cold, clinging,
is fastened on you, within your day.
O sons, forget the clouds of blood
risen from the earth, forget your fathers:
their tombs sink in the ashes,
the black birds, the wind cover their heart.

The central idea, that man has always cried for blood, is stated boldly at the start: man is now what he was in the Stone Age. But this idea is elaborated through images drawn from the torture chamber, the destruction of the first animals, the murder of Abel by Cain. Around this sequence are woven other images which make each example more poignant. The habit of bloodshed is like something which haunts the ears or like clouds of blood rising from the earth, while the appeal to abandon the old murderous ways reaches a finale with an appeal against all this futile slaughter as our forefathers disappear into a dishonoured oblivion. Like Edith Sitwell, Quasimodo accumulates images round a central point, and both show how this method enriches a subject which has touched them deeply in the centre of their being.

With such examples before us we cannot deny that the Modernists have evolved a poetry at once intimate and powerful and capable of dealing with any crisis or catastrophe. The escape from the Symbolist manner and outlook has enabled certain poets to speak with a new directness, and the best Modernist work of the last thirty years has been both European and universal, both contemporary in its manners and timeless in its appeal. Its strength lies in its truthfulness, but this would be of little avail if it were not presented with a technique which allows it to appear as the poet really sees it with all the colour of his own thought and feeling on it. If the Symbolists attached a paramount importance to the preservation of the self from the influences of the crowd, the Modernists assume that the self is indispensable to poetry since what matters most is just what the poet feels and sees in his creative hours. They have gone further than the Symbolists in their refusal to reduce individual experience to common shapes. The poet has asserted more strongly his desire to be himself and to say what he really feels without accommodating himself to what may be expected or demanded of him. That this brings considerable advantages to poetry we cannot doubt. It is largely responsible for the intense concentration of power in Alberti and Eluard and for whole new ranges of sensibility exploited by Lorca and Pasternak. But at the same time it creates enormous difficulties and raises new obstacles for a task which is already difficult enough. The Modernist achievement is certainly remarkable, but it has been won at a price which now has to be paid.

Great though this achievement has been and much though it has done to extend the bounds of poetry, it is difficult not to feel that in the last fifteen or so years something has gone wrong or at least that the Modernist impetus has been slowed by obstacles of its own making. The twenties were

a period of great creative activity throughout Europe; the thirties were perhaps less vigorous, but new names appeared and new triumphs were won. But the forties have shown a steep decline in the quality of poetical production. It has of course been a time of war and uneasy peace, but war is not necessarily an obstacle to poetry, as the First World War shows, and since 1945 the situation has deteriorated. The anxieties of peace have found few voices to express them in their full urgency, and too much that is written seems to lack conviction and passion, to be an exercise in a manner which has become so difficult that the poet asks no more than to be able to handle it efficiently. There are still good poets, even good young poets, but they seem to lack something, the major note, the prophetic splendour, the sweep and the onrush which we demand for a world battered by catastrophe and fearful of yet worse to come.

This decline is partly to be explained by external and almost irrelevant causes. The great movement of poetry in Spain came to an abrupt end with the Civil War in 1936, when Lorca was shot in a ditch, Hernandez died in prison, and Machado in a camp for refugees, while every other poet worthy of the name went into exile with its inevitable result of decreased production and declining power, since as the poet moves farther away from his own home and native speech, his art starves and dies. The Spanish disaster is paralleled by the Russian. After 1917, Russian poetry seemed set for a brilliant course. The Revolution released new energies and inspired ardent hopes. Then slowly and mercilessly political power began to control poetical production and in so doing to kill it. How destructive this was can be seen from the shooting of Gumilev in 1921, the suicide of Esenin in 1925 and of Mayakovsky in 1930, and the disappearance into forced labour of Mandelstam in 1937. The Revolution not only destroyed all possible dissidents, but in Mayakovsky devoured its most devoted apostle. Some good poets are still alive, but the best are not allowed to publish, and others may publish only what the authorities approve, which means that they must write on public themes in a flat, outmoded manner—a proceeding as absurd as if T. S. Eliot were ordered to write on the Festival of Britain in the manner of the late Victorians. This attempt to control poetry would be ludicrous if it were not tragic. In practice it means that one of the greatest of living poets, Boris Pasternak, is condemned to silence and that the vast output of verse published in the Soviet Union is almost completely worthless.

Politics may account for the disappearance of poetry in Spain and Russia, but not for its progressive impoverishment elsewhere. It is true

that the older generation still sets a noble example in England and France and Italy, but they are, after all, the older generation, and it is time that others were ready to succeed them. It is no less true that some of the younger generation have remarkable gifts. But in England Dylan Thomas, for all his dionysiac impetus, seems unable to advance beyond memories of childhood, and David Gascoyne seems to be caught in apocalyptic visions which are almost beyond the reach of words; in France the vigour and vitality of poetry inspired by the resistance seem to have ebbed, and though Pierre Emmanuel has a remarkable gift for impressive utterance, there are few others of his calibre; in Italy the newer poets have hardly found an authentic voice or a truly suitable method. Of course the age may be hostile to poetry and discourage the young from writing it, but there is no reason to think that, so far as public opinion is concerned, there is now any such indifference as there was between 1895 and 1914, when the foundations of a truly great poetry were laid. It is more likely that the present decline of poetry is due to its own practice and methods. In attempting to convey with great fulness and precision his consciousness at a given moment the poet faces serious dangers. In 'thinking too precisely on the event', in his conscientious desire to shirk nothing of importance and to convey a very complex mood, he hampers his own movements and tends to miss the unimpeded flight which seems essential to the highest success. Many modern poets seem to be trapped in a magic circle, in which they love and exert themselves to the utmost but from which they cannot escape. They have the gifts and the experience and the technique, but the final outburst is denied to them. By watching themselves too intently they obstruct the full play of their talents and fail to break away from the animating inspiration to the new possibilities which they might realise if they were less concerned with being correct and precise and personal. The greater Modernists have not suffered from this defect. They have been able to combine a remarkable self-revelation with flights of irrepressible song. But too many seem to be caught at the source of their creation and unable to advance from it except slowly and laboriously and with too careful and too cautious a movement. At the moment Modernist poetry is trapped by its own good intentions and by the technique which it has devised for carrying them out.

What is the solution? And is there any chance of one being found? At first we might think that the crisis should be allowed to run its course until a reaction sets in and encourages a more extrovert, less private, and less conscientious poetry. In this there is much truth. The Modernists will not

abandon their Modernism, with all that it means to them, until they are convinced that they have found something better. Yet it is at least clear what the problem is. It is, while keeping the brightness and candour of the Modernist manner, to recapture something which it seems to have lost—

The roll, the rise, the carol, the creation.

Cannot our poets somehow let themselves go, respond less cautiously and less elaborately to events, even say the first thing that comes into their minds, provided that they prune and correct it as good poets have always done? Can they not adapt themselves a little more to the common experience of men without losing any of their truth and sincerity? The complexity and elaboration of Modernist poetry has come near to killing the spirit of song, and yet song is as necessary as it ever was and is surely not ultimately alien to modern man. It looks as if the time had come for the thesis of Symbolism and the antithesis of Modernism to be merged into a synthesis, for a poetry to emerge which has the major key and the impetus of the one and the truth and intimacy of the other, which combines a sense of the grandeur of life with a real knowledge of what it is, which is able to see both the mysteries behind it and what actual relation they have to it, which both grasps wide issues and presents them in vivid, concrete forms, which practises all kinds of rhythm and melody from majestic stanzas to rippling variations of the spoken vernacular. The Modernists have done much for poetry, but it is time that their great contribution was put to a new purpose—the sensitive and sincere presentation of man's fate and fortune and the vast issues which confront him. Perhaps the next great poet will do this. He may already be at work.