

WHAT IS POETRY ?

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A WRITER in the *New Statesman*, reviewing Mr. Herbert Read's book *English Prose Style*, said: "Mr. Herbert Read begins his essay with an effort to distinguish between prose and poetry; and his effort will not satisfy, any more than the efforts of his predecessors who have not been contented with the old plain distinction. It would save a great deal of trouble and many words if we agreed to use poetry to mean words that are arranged in metrical as well as in rhythmical order, and prose to mean words that are subject only to rhythm." That is my case in a nutshell; this paper is simply a plea for the maintenance of the old plain distinction, but the ground on which I rest my plea is that it is not only plain and convenient, but is a real and essential distinction, *because* it is based on a formal difference.

The reason why the old, plain distinction has come to be questioned can be traced ultimately, I believe, to the loose way in which the word "poetry" is used in popular speech and popular thought. In the first place, there is a tendency to use "poetry" loosely in the sense of good or successful poetry. We say of a poem "That is not poetry," meaning that it does not produce in us the effect that good poetry does, just as we say of some light or commonplace piece of music "That is not music." Of course it is music, otherwise we should not point out that it isn't; all that we mean is that to our ears it sounds like an unworthy specimen of the art. The art of poetry can be put to banal use, or can be practised by banal minds; but the thing so produced is undoubtedly a poem, albeit a very bad one.

Then again, there is the confusion caused by the metaphorical use of the word. This is perhaps the main source of our doubtfulness. For it is our nature to be fooled by the illusion that an idea which the mind isolates as a concept has a kind of independent existence. Though, of course, everyone would deny it when put thus crudely, we have a habit of "visualizing" our mental concepts as self-existent entities. And so, because the word "poetry" exists as an abstract noun, there is a natural tendency, difficult to resist, to think of a thing *Poetry* as really existing in abstraction from its actual manifestations. What can one, then, say that it is?

This abstract use of the term originally stood, loosely and conveniently, for the effect of a certain mode of expression, and the attempt to define it is an attempt to form a mental picture, as it were, of the unique quality imparted to an idea by its being expressed in verse, apart from that which produces it. We tend, in consequence, to become confused, and think of poetry as in some way the cause, instead of the result, of the mode of expression. The first step towards chaos is the comfortably vague notion that poetry is *something that is put into* verse. The difficulty comes in attempting to define what that something is, and in explaining why it cannot be put into something else; and what happens is that this or that individual fixes on one of the many things that poetry does as the thing that poetry essentially is, and "projects" and externalizes that as a kind of active agent; and so the old vulgar notion of its being metrical seems to have become immaterial. In other words, once you transfer the name from the cause to the effect alone, you inevitably make it a source of confusion, because the effect can be either generalized until it becomes something so vague that it can be referred to a number of different causes, or so specialized that the classification it calls for is patently artificial and unstable. This second case we need not trouble with, as it is comparatively harmless; it is true that it is largely responsible for the plain man's contempt for poetry, because he thinks that poetry is the kind of thing that is put into the verse he reads, but I have no time to dwell upon that now. The first case is the important one for my purpose. For, though this transference of the name from the cause to the effect is originally, as I say, pure metaphor, and as such perfectly legitimate, the mischief has been caused through the metaphorical use of the word being taken as its real, proper use, and therefore its original application as an unjustifiable, traditional limitation. We try to define the word in such a way as to include all its enlarged metaphorical meaning, and then point out that that which has been specifically called poetry is too narrow to contain it. John Stuart Mill, in protesting against metre being regarded as the hall-mark of poetry, asserts that poetry may exist not only in prose, but may do without words and can speak through musical sounds, through sculpture, painting and architecture. This is logical, but most of us are conscious of the metaphor when we apply the word to music, painting, and such arts as use entirely different mediums. But in the case of prose, because it uses the same medium as poetry, the metaphorical extension of the word tends to cause a real confusion. They are so much alike that the sense of metaphor becomes obscured, so that when we are really just justi-

ying our metaphor, we seem, even to ourselves, to be proving that poetry can be written in prose. Suppose there were one colour—red, for instance—which somehow by its vividness so impressed us that we got into the habit of using the word *red* as a metaphor for colour generally; would that justify us in maintaining that the specific colour, *red*, was essentially indistinguishable from blue, because blue was (metaphorically) red too? That is what we have done with the words poetry and prose.

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Now, what is the quality in poetry which has given rise to the metaphorical extension of its name? No doubt, its precise colour varies, as I have said, with the individual, but I believe Professor Bradley has come pretty near to a satisfactory general description in the following paragraph of his lecture "Poetry for Poetry's Sake":

And yet, when all is said, the question will still recur, What does poetry mean? This unique expression, which cannot be replaced by any other, still seems to be saying something beyond itself; and this, we feel, is also what the other arts, and religion, and philosophy, are trying to express. About the best poetry, and not only the best, there floats an atmosphere of infinite suggestion. The poet speaks to us of one thing, but in this one thing there seems to lurk the secret of all. He said what he meant, but his meaning seems to beckon away beyond itself, or rather to expand into something boundless which is only focussed in it; something also which, we feel, would satisfy not only the imagination, but the whole of us.

That puts with sufficient clearness and sufficient vagueness the characteristic of poetry which the metaphorical use of the word, as I understand it, aims at grasping, viz., that suggestion of something beyond itself, that atmosphere of infinite suggestion. I know that Professor Bradley does not assert that it is a *sine qua non* of poetry; he wisely says that it is a characteristic of some poetry. But I believe it is just that, or something like that, which a great many people mean by the word (and it is to the absence of that quality that they refer when they say of a poem "That is not poetry"; for it is one of the necessary corollaries of all definitions of a poetic essence that all poetry is not poetry); and because this is "what we feel all the arts, and (perhaps) religion, and philosophy are trying to express," we become doubtful whether that art which has been called poetry has any specific right to the name; indeed its right to exist as a distinct art becomes questionable. Has Mill, after all, gone far enough? Ought we not rather to agree with Samuel Butler that "the greatest poets never write poetry—for the

highest poetry is ineffable"? If this is what poetry is, if it is really not what is expressed, but what is not, and cannot be, expressed, then obviously it is the mute Miltons who are the most glorious.

Of course, I admit that poetry is only a word, manufactured and applied by man for his convenience, and therefore he has every right, if he wishes, to enlarge and alter its connotation. But it is not just a question of names. I admit also there is only one difference between poetry (in the traditional sense) and prose, and that is just the difference of technique; but that difference makes all the difference, and, should the day ever come when that superficial difference is discarded, though we may still talk about poetry and try to maintain a distinction, there will be an art the less in the world, with all the loss that that fact entails. It is a "unique expression, which cannot be replaced by any other". For the soul of any particular art is to be found, I believe, in its technique, i.e., a specific art means simply and solely a specific technique. Man's spiritual reaction, of whatever quality, to his environment is its matter, its material. Poetry is the product obtained by subjecting that material to the discipline of a distinct technique. Its technique is as much the essential of poetry as it is of music. Or, to put it another way, there is the same kind of difference between poetry and prose as between poetry and music, and that is the mode of expression. The thing that the poet or the prose-writer or the musician wanted to express might conceivably be the same, but because the method of interpretation, of communication, is different, the product is different, the effect is different, and this is why I say that the soul, the essence, of an art lies in its technique; and if we allow that verse is a distinct technique in the use of language, then we are admitting that there are two essentially different arts which use language as their medium.

I can imagine the reader protesting at this point that I am here begging the whole question, that I am simply assuming the identification of verse and poetry, and asserting what nobody denies, that verse and prose are not the same. Of course that is true, as I admitted at the outset; it is an assertion I am making, and all I can do is to justify it. I cannot *prove* that poetry alone is poetry, no matter what meaning you attach to the word; but I do say that in the one case you have a real classification based on a real and essential difference, and in the other a sham classification, which confuses two things essentially distinct. Poetry is either the name of an art, or it is a word that stands in a general way for the effect of any art; and in that case prose has no more right to the name

than has music or painting or architecture. The word becomes an unnecessary and misleading substitute for artistic effect.

What I have to show, as it seems to me, is that the technique of verse produces by the necessity of its nature an effect that prose cannot produce, except in so far as it may occasionally borrow or suggest or imitate the methods of verse, and that this effect is not incidental, but is inherent in the technique, is not just an additional ornament, but gives a power to words which they cannot otherwise have, enables them to do something that cannot be done in any other way (at least so certainly and effectually), and this something that is well worth doing—"a unique expression that cannot be replaced by any other."

But why should poetry particularly have been singled out among the arts to give up its name and sink its identity in the common cause? It may be said that its distinction in this respect is natural and deserved, because, inasmuch as it uses as its medium the peculiar instrument of thought, language, its success in attaining to what may be called the essential failure which is *ex hypothesi* poetry, its power of expressing inadequacy of expression, is more immediately and generally obvious than in the other arts. And that has, I suspect, a good deal to do with it. But is not also a main cause the fact (in conjunction with the persistent challenge of prose) that poetry has become practically altogether a thing read instead of a thing heard? For this fact has to some extent narrowed the scope of poetry itself, and has shifted the standard of judgment. It has narrowed the scope of poetry, in that the poet now composes as an individual for individual readers. It has become in the main, as Gummere has said in his *Beginnings of Poetry*, an invitation to a private view of the poet's mind. "The poet now makes himself the central point of all that he says and sees; he lays all history, all romance, under tribute to support the burden of his own fate and frame his proper picture; he is the sun of the system; he serves no clan or guild, and admits his readers only one by one to an audience." Poetry has in consequence become mainly concerned with the emotional mood of a thinker alone with his world. This fact has naturally drawn attention to the poet's soul, and as naturally withdrawn attention from the form. The existence of poetry, removed from the sphere to which it belongs, has to be justified on a different basis. In other words, poetry the art tends to become obscured, and what is left prominent before our eyes is the imaginative stuff which is the raw material of any art, and therefore it begins to look right to say that poetry is that imaginative stuff expressed in language. And then prose steps in, and claims at least an equal right to the name.

The technique of poetry has its basis, its justification, in the fact that poetry, like music, is one of the arts of sound. The technique is an arrangement of sounds, and what distinguishes a poet among artists is simply and solely this, that he possesses the gift of song. It is a phrase often used of a poet, but commonly, I think, in conscious metaphor. I do not mean it metaphorically. Poetry is the art which makes words into a song, and forces us to sing them. The absence of the accompanying musical instrument or of the chanting voice necessitated the perfecting of the metrical instrument, so that none could miss the tune, and this in turn led to the revolt against obviousness and the attempt to achieve an even subtler music, with an increasing but (I think) unwarranted dependence upon the eye, until it is almost true to say that in some cases a visible pattern has been substituted for an audible one. The extraordinary complexity and variety of the rhythmical pattern of a Greek Choral Lyric, revealed and controlled by the dance and the music of the song, cannot be effectually imitated for a reader's eye and ear. The idea seems sound enough, but the instruments do not appear capable, unassisted, of recording and reproducing the pattern intended. The so-called free verse is not, as so many think it (of those who write it as well as of those who don't read it), a breach of the traditional technique of poetry; it is rather an attempt to recover for poetry, without the assistance of music, the complexity of rhythmic pattern which was possible when accompanying music was there to trace and hold the pattern.

Here I must guard against a possible misconception. I am not setting up a crude antithesis between what is called mere form on the one side and meaning on the other, and saying that the poetic value lies in the form apart from the meaning. Poetry is not music. As sheer sound the loveliest poem, I imagine, would have little pleasurable effect. In poetry, the meaning of course is part of the form. Every art, it may be said (inadequately, but truly, I think, so far as it goes), is the re-rendering, in its particular medium and through the limitations imposed by that medium, of an emotional experience. The medium of poetry is words, i.e. sounds that convey a definite meaning, so that meaning—an immediate and obvious meaning—is one of the limitations imposed upon the poet by his medium of expression.*

But words do more than convey a definite meaning. We are affected also by their sound, by their associations, by the cadence

*Someone may be disposed to object, half facetiously, that the meaning of much poetry is anything but immediately obvious. But that objection really illustrates the point it appears to controvert; for it is just because the words convey an immediate meaning that one's lack of understanding strikes one at once and becomes the most prominent characteristic, blotting out every other consideration. In the other arts it is easily overlooked.

which the order of their arrangement gives to the sentence. This fact we all know, and use in our daily lives. We know that a thought that is touched with emotion—as most of our ordinary thoughts are—cannot be really expressed by the (more or less) grammatical collocation of words alone. It needs something more. That which adds the needed touch, which breathes life into the words, and carries it over into expression, is the form in which we state it. Tone, cadence, order of presenting the ideas, choice of vivid words—these are the things we instinctively have resort to. And the elaborate technique of poetry, though it has perhaps a different origin, has a similar purpose. The rhythm of the verse, the recurring musical movement, line upon line, the various devices—rhyme, alliteration, the measured variations of vowel-sounds, the delicate utilization and adjustment of the sound, colour, and associations of words,—all these things are not mere decorations; they are additions, if you like, but additions vital to the expression, for what they add is just that emotion which was the *raison d'être*, the apparently incommunicable quality of the original experience. But, it may be said, and with truth, the technique of imaginative prose has exactly the same aim, and what I have to do is to justify the distinctive technique of that which I am calling poetry.

There is, in the first place, this elementary difference. The arbitrary limit to the length of the verse, i.e. the recurring limited length, imposes an extreme compression, which, with the insistent beat of the rhythm, enhances the importance of every word. It becomes something more than a vehicle, something more than a mere cog in the machinery of intellectual communication.

Each word is thrown into individual prominence, so that it commands something like full attention, and must therefore be extremely carefully poised and adjusted to the place it holds in the sound and sense. For almost any word comes trailing clouds of suggestions, so that when there is anything that fixes attention upon it, some of these are likely to betray you, unless it is firmly controlled and limited by its environment. Poetry is *the art of words par excellence*, because in the first place each word necessarily stands out thus in dangerous prominence and therefore with its full potential value threatening to break out, and because, in the second place, it supplies the most delicate machinery for controlling a word's potential value, for shifting its colours and associations, for adjusting and directing the subtle influence of word upon word. It is, in brief, the surest and the most accurate instrument for "controlling our emotional reaction to words." By means of it a real artist can, if he so wishes, make a word stand out starkly,

can bare it, as it were, of superadded associations; he can make it fling its shadow forward to tinge and change by its influence the colour of long subsequent words, or fling its shadow back to gather up, give a new coherence to, organize, the multifarious colours of the words that preceded it.

Is not this, by the way, the reason why it has proved so difficult a medium for plain story-telling? The words *will* not be kept down. You notice them too much, so that the flat parts of the narrative, instead of just unobtrusively performing their office, become remarkable for the flatness of the words; and the device of the much-decried poetic diction was one attempt to meet the difficulty; since the words will stand out, better have finely dressed ones, the poet thought, and make them worth looking at.

Poetry as an art is, I believe, the accidental result of "words being set in delightful proportion." It was a device (how discovered and for what original purpose I will not presume to say) once used to attain the same effect as writing, i.e. permanence of record, before men had learned to write, and this primitive method of writing revealed as a by-product the power words so treated have of evoking a peculiar pleasure, of producing an emotional effect. With writing came prose; in fact, prose is writing made into an art. Now writing is essentially silent words; so that prose derives its artistic characteristics not directly from words as such but from the purpose of words, from the fact that it is a record for record's sake, and the characteristic emotion produced is that which comes from contemplating the thoughts it records. This is, patently, an incomplete account of the nature of prose, for of course it has its own way of calling attention to words, viz., by a straightforward imitation and heightening of the methods of natural speech. But even so (and I shall have more to say on that presently) it remains true that in prose the words are naturally silent, and it is the thoughts they convey that speak to us. There we have, I think, the one great reason why so many intelligent and even artistically-minded men find it difficult to enjoy reading poetry; they read it from the point of view of prose; they are looking solely for the effect of prose, and they say, and rightly, that they find prose more effective; it does not distract them from the business in hand by forcing them to follow another movement than that of the thought. This is the very heart of my subject, and I am painfully conscious that it requires more skilful handling than I am competent to give it; all I can do is to suggest the direction in which my thoughts are running.

"Misunderstanding and under-estimation of poetry is mainly due to over-estimation of the thought in it," says Mr. I. A. Richards. That is exactly my point here. Because poetry uses the conventional instrument for communicating thought, it is difficult, especially for readers, not to think a poem consists in what it *says* (to quote Mr. Richards again), whereas the thought in it plays a part similar to (let us say) the part which the laws of grammar play in the communication of thought. A poem is not just a record of an experience, it is itself an experience. And however we may flatter ourselves, the greater part of the inward experience of living is not thinking. Language is an inadequate instrument we have evolved for trying to grasp and hold experience, and all we get from it is that comparatively small part which is our thought about it. Now the poet essays the difficult task of creating in language a full experience. What irritates the man who reads poetry as prose, i.e. just for what it says, is the realization that the means is over-elaborate for the purpose; there seems to be so much more going on than is necessary to express thought. And he regards it as so much superfluous ornament, an elaborate mechanism that belongs to an outworn tradition, and he is inclined to echo Peacock's savage judgment: "Poetry was the mental rattle that awakened the attention of the intellect in the infancy of civil society; but for the maturity of mind to make a serious business of the playthings of its childhood is as absurd as for a grown man to rub his gums with coral, or cry to be charmed asleep by the jingle of silver bells."

Of course, my disgruntled reader is right; there is more going on than is necessary to express thought, because the poet is trying to do more than express thought. He is making an experience, and, like all artists, he has to fashion it in a medium in which it cannot really exist fully; that medium is articulate thought. If the reader's intellect alone is on the alert, the poetic technique seems to be something coming between it and the thought it seeks; the words in some peculiar way call too much attention to themselves; they obtrude themselves between the mind and its object. But that sense of irritation in my prosaic reader *is* his appreciation of the poetry, the vague stirrings in the depths of his consciousness of the full poetic experience. For, looked at externally, the poetic technique, the patterning in the language, is the symbol, the outward expression of all that part of the experience which language as the expression of thought cannot express, and his irritation with it is his awareness of the presence of that which his preoccupation with the intellectual part of it is excluding. So that, if there is any fitness in Peacock's image of the rattle, far from the poetic technique

being the mental rattle that awakens the attention of the intellect, it is the intellectual part of a poem, its thought, that is the mental rattle which awakens the attention of the whole consciousness. However, I should not put it in that way. In every experience there is an intellectual scum that rises to the surface if we allow it to stand still for the infinitesimal fraction of a moment. The poet reverses the process. He starts with the scum, and makes it produce that from which it arose. Even that sounds as if I were belittling the thought in a poem. All that I mean is that the poetic technique is not just a way of obscuring the obviousness of a thought, or an attempt at beautifying thought; it is a device for building with the one element, thought, the complete structure of which, in fact, thought is just the part visible, so to speak, to the intellect.

I do not, of course, mean that a poem is the actual re-creation of the original experience, that anyone who reads it with full understanding will go through that identical experience which inspired the poet to write it. It is something quite different, because it has been transmuted into art; but it has become in itself an experience, by an arrangement of dead symbols a thing alive with the colour, the depth, the infinite, inexpressible "murmurs" that crowd any moment of consciousness—"the breath and finer spirit" of an experience crystallized in a new form, and hence transmuted into an experience of a different kind. This is effected by an illusion, and an artistic illusion depends upon a convention which through training and tradition has become second nature.

Articulate thought, language, is the plane on which by the technical devices of his art the poet produces the illusion of a full experience. How and why these devices are successful in achieving this result, I cannot explain, though, I admit, such an explanation is required to clinch my argument. But I can dimly see that, because of these poetic devices, in reading poetry we are being forced to follow, willy-nilly, two movements—one the movement of the meaning as such, the thought, and the other the patterned movement of the words; and the inescapable sense of this second movement it is that, just because it compels our attention to something besides the thought, creates the illusion of completeness of experience; for, because its actual effect is largely an emotional effect, even if it be of a very simple kind, it suggests emotion to the consciousness, and the consciousness, so stirred, interprets it in conjunction with the thought into the full emotional context of the thought. It is, as I have said, a symbol of that emotional context, but, as it is akin to the realities of spoken language, and as it is so simple and impossible to miss, it is a sound and satisfactory

symbol. It may be that in reality it is more than a symbol, that the effect it produces is more directly and subtly connected with it as a cause, and this suggestion of mine of the two movements is not meant to do more than point in what I think is the right direction.

Professor Macneile Dixon, speaking of the art of Milton, has said something very similar:

Poetry is the sum of two values, the intellectual and the musical, but somehow the effect is greater than their sum. The words of a poem belong to a double order, the order of thought and the order of sound; in so far as the requirements of the one order are sacrificed to those of the other, the poet has failed. The task he undertakes is simpler or more difficult in proportion to the mass and complexity of his conceptions, the intricacy and variety of his measure. Milton's triumph consists in the undisturbed precision of his thought throughout and despite the complex demands of the rhythm. Each word, like a stone in a cathedral arch, has its place and duty each seems chosen as if for no other purpose than to advance his meaning, to bear its portion of the weight of a vast structure; yet each, viewed from the other side, seems chosen only to play its part in the musical scheme. The pattern of the thought brooks no interference from that of the rhythm, nor that of the rhythm from the pattern of the thought. *Qui perd ses mots, perd son air.*¹

That is it; they both are together what Professor Bradley calls the music of the meaning, and they both are together the meaning of the music.

I have been implying throughout that by poetic technique I mean metre, and that is in the main what I do mean, but at the same time I admit that there has been poetry (and may be again) with a different technical tradition. "Let us recognize" says Professor Lowes² that neither metre, in the strict sense, nor rhyme, as we apply the term, is essential to poetry as such. Hebrew poetry, of course, had neither, and even the oldest English poetry was based on a rhythmic system other than that in use to-day. We are not concerned at the moment with their differences. . . . The essential point is that metrical forms are conventional, and therefore rest, like all matters of usage, on acceptance. They are open to change, as any convention is open to change, and in the same way, viz., by a slow and gradual consent to something else." That strikes me as absolutely right, and as setting at rest for ever all futile discussion on the subject. What poetry requires to be the unique instrument it is, is a convention in the arrangement of words which of itself and apart from the meaning sets up an inescapable expect-

¹ *English Epic and Heroic Poetry*, p. 218.

² *Convention and Revolt in Poetry*.

ancy in the mind of the hearer or reader. You are listening not only for the meaning, but necessarily, spontaneously, for something else, though, as the two lines of expectation proceed simultaneously, they are gratified in and for each other. The method of stimulating this additional expectation is through repetition of some kind, and the inevitability of the expectation depends upon the readiness with which the mind recognizes the repetition, and the definiteness and precision of the expectation on the definiteness and precision of the repetition. Now the temporal repetition that metre introduces has the double advantage that it has its counterpart in natural speech and hence thought can proceed along it undisturbed, and that it is sufficiently *unnatural* to force itself upon the attention. I say it has its counterpart in natural speech, because it is not just a modification or glorification of the rhythm of natural speech. That is what you get in the rhythm of fine emotional prose. Let us pause for a moment on this, for it is just here that the confusion between poetry and prose is most insidious. Because prose has its undoubted rhythms, it is argued that it has everything that verse has, and therefore it can do all that verse does, and therefore that the distinction between poets and prose-writers is a vulgar error. Now my point is that this prose rhythm, which *is* a glorification of the rhythm inherent in emotional speech, is not the prose equivalent of the rhythm which the poetic convention (whatever it is) gives to poetry, that poetry has this prose rhythm and also another, which makes it a different instrument producing a quite different effect. Professor Lowes again has made this distinction between the two rhythms very clear: "The language of elevated thought or feeling is always rhythmic. Strong feeling of whatever sort, that is, imposes upon speech a rhythmic beat. . . . That rhythm is not the rhythm of verse; it is infinitely more varied, less susceptible of formulation, ebbing and flowing with the rise and fall of the emotion that gives it being. And it is that heightening of rhythmic quality, whenever thought is strongly touched with feeling, that characterizes elevated prose. . . . Upon the length or the development of the larger, infinitely varying rhythmic units, metre does not impose any limitations whatever. These are free. They are merely taken up into and merged with another rhythmic movement. . . . The movement of regular verse is a resultant, a resolution, of two rhythms, one of which, taken alone, tends towards utter freedom, the other of which, taken alone, tends towards restraint. There is in verse, on the one hand, the metrical unit—that is to say, for our present purpose, the line. There is, on the other hand, what we may designate as the sentence rhythm or cadence. If the

line length and the sentence rhythm uniformly coincide, we get monotony, deadly, intolerable. If there is only the sentence cadence, without the beat of the line, there is variety, but it is merely the variety of your speech or mine, when charged with emotion in varying degrees. Metrical verse, that is not sheer doggerel, is built upon the harmony of both. Behind the endlessly weaving rhythms of the sentence cadences, beats steadily, in the best verse unobtrusively, the rhythm of the line. In the hands of the artist, the rhythmic cadences determined by the thought, or by the breath, or both, flow around and through and in the beat of the lines, but the beat of the lines is *there*, like time in music. The freedom of regular verse is the freedom of infinitely varied rhythms thrown against a constant rhythmic background."

This is rather a special example of the point I am trying to make than a full statement of it. Professor Lowes is here concerned to explain the difference between what he calls regular verse and free verse, and hence his insistence on the recurrence of the line rhythm, and he ends his paragraph thus: "The regular beat and the shifting rhythm—neither alone, but the two together—these constitute normal English verse. What free verse would strike out is the recurrent rhythm of the line. Regular verse is the resultant of two rhythms, interwoven into innumerable harmonies. Free verse is built on one alone." Now it is very far from my purpose to defend free verse; I am not, I confess, finely organized enough to appreciate it. But, while in the limitation of his context Professor Lowes's statement is of course true, as an absolute statement his last sentence surely is not. If free verse is built on one rhythm alone, there is no point in calling it by a distinctive name; it is simply prose. And to many of us it is simply prose *because we cannot hear its second rhythm*. It is for the sake of this point that I have quoted this distinction of Professor Lowes. For I think my failure to appreciate free verse is extraordinarily enlightening for my purpose. Here is the so-called poetic attitude, the so-called poetic thoughts, the so-called poetic world revealed; yet, because I am not, as I say, finely organized enough to catch that other rhythm which distinguishes it from prose (or because, let me hope, my ear is not yet trained to hear it), I feel, as I read it, somewhat as a man might feel who, while listening to persons singing, suddenly became tone deaf. For me everything is there except the one thing needful. I see that they are singing; the environment, the conditions, all tell me so; I even hear their voices; but they don't *sing*. I say this is enlightening because it shows practically the extraordinarily transforming effect of that other artificial rhythm

which stirs within the consciousness an expectation different from that roused by the meaning of the words. It may be purely mechanical in its means, but it is certainly not mechanical in its effect. I express what that effect is vaguely but truly by saying that free verse, because of this defect in my hearing, is not poetry to me; poetry is made for me when words and expressed meaning by their arrangement set going in my mind that other emotional rhythm along which and in tune with which I hear and understand them.

I am not saying, though I may seem to be, that that rhythm must be what we call metre. What is essential is that there should be set going within the mind, somehow, that spontaneous, almost mechanical, expectation which by its continued provocations and satisfactions, and by the surprise of its occasional disappointments, invests the words which gather into meanings in and through it with a strange power both in themselves and in their control and influence on one another. Metre is just a typical and very precise means by which this expectation is excited—I venture to say the most unerring and hence the most satisfactory and the mightiest of all.

But of course this rhythm of the traditional convention is not really a single, simple system; there are smaller rhythmic patterns that have grown up within it, and larger rhythmic patterns which it builds up, but these are all supported and controlled, brought to light and made relevant, by the definiteness of the temporal rhythm. Language has responded in an infinite number of ways to its influence, and so has revealed and developed its rhythmic resources, i.e. its power to form within the mind patterns of expectation and reminiscence. I think it is Lascelles Abercrombie who says that the poet is the master of the magic of words. And the magic of words is elicited by this, or some such technique as this. How or why it elicits this magic is a mystery, but it is a mystery only in so far as we do not understand the way the mind works, and that mysteriousness, which is just the effect of that ignorance, does not properly reside in the poetry, and is, strictly speaking, quite external to the mental response to the poetry. It comes from the intellect reflecting upon and being at a loss to account for the effect that is being produced; though, it is true, it blends or seems to blend into the whole response, and is thereby transformed into all sorts of marvellous emotional interpretations. I mention this because I suspect that it has much to do with that sense of poetry's "saying something beyond itself," of the presence in it of something the mind cannot quite grasp, that it is in part the presence of that transferred wonder that has made *divine* seem a fitting epithet of poets and poetry.

In part; for undoubtedly it is in part the splendid use that has been made of this powerful instrument by great men that has created the awe of poetry—because great men have found in it so extraordinary a means for communicating with such directness, precision, and fullness, their rich and profound experiences. I can imagine the first great man who made use of it seeing with astonishment and delight how much of the experience he sought to communicate came through; he may have thought only to record his experience, and found that, through the power of his instrument, something of the very living of it had miraculously survived the process and become fixed in permanent form, that the thing was quick with a life of its own—that experience indeed, but fixed in a sort of eternal life and thereby transformed and glorified. I don't mean that it ever literally happened like that, but the parable will serve to illustrate my point that the art of poetry created the poet, that the mode of expression revealed a new power of enlivening and controlling our reaction to words. Quiller-Couch puts the same point in another way when he says that "great poets more often begin with a love of expression and intent to be artists in words, and *come through expression to profound thoughts.*" It is the reach of the expression that discovers and measures the depths of the poet's soul. It plumbs and explores the deep places of the consciousness, and brings to light the treasures that are stored there. But—to emphasize now the other side—it has to do it under the limitation imposed upon the poet through his medium being words, through the fact, that is, that he has got to say something, that he has, in Mr. Binyon's words, to conciliate the intellect. He has got to work under the disability of knowing that, however little he wants them to, his words are going to convey an intellectual meaning. That does not mean that the profundity of the poetry is necessarily dependent on the profundity of the intellectual thought it contains. The profound thoughts to which I think Quiller-Couch refers are not profound intellectual propositions. They are the profound experiences of any kind which the poet communicates, but he has to communicate them by using some kind of intellectual proposition to support them. For good or ill, the experience is organized, focussed, by the intellectual meaning given by the combination of words. He cannot escape from it; however vast and intangible and elusive his experience may be, he has to reduce it to such proportions that an intellectual proposition will, not express it, but potentially contain it—contain it, I mean, as the pot contained the genie. That necessity gives a fine steadying power to the poet's work. He is tied firmly by the foot; but *ex*

pede Herculem, and that exact, inescapable verbal meaning is the solid piece by which the size, the shape, the proportions of the whole experience are determined. He has to let his experience stand still until the intellectual content involved has floated to the top and become firm enough to be crystallized into words, the conventional symbols of intellectual communication. Now this intellectual method of communication, though thin and restricted and inadequate, is the surest, the firmest, the most definite, and the most precise. You can be almost certain of getting so much of your communication over intact into the mind of another, and therefore, if your crystallization has been successful, there is in the mind of your reader a solid and firm basis, an exact and accurate starting-point for his reintegration of your experience.

But when this solid basis of thought either is regarded as the whole (as it is by the prosaic reader), or does in fact comprehend the whole, then the mechanism of the poetic technique becomes as the futile ticking of dead machinery. The second case is what we really mean, I think, by an unpoetic thought—one in which the intellectual content is all, and which therefore leaves the poetic technique busily generating nothing.

With this exception, the distinction between poetic and unpoetic thoughts is a vulgar error. It isn't the thoughts he thinks that make a poet; it is the words he writes. I mean that there is not a poetic thought *to be* clothed in poetic form; a poetic thought is simply a thought clothed in poetic form; the form makes it poetic. Poetry is not an order of thought, it is a mode of artistic expression; and I think it sounder to include Empedocles among the poets because he wrote science in hexameters than to externalize the effect of that sort of expression into a real world lurking behind the world of plain fact—a world into which poetic moods or poetic souls afford us glimpses. I do not deny that we have those feelings and those thoughts that we are accustomed to call poetic, and I go so far as to admit that poetry is the most satisfactory means of expressing them, because words have become our natural means of expressing our feelings, and because poetry has shown itself as possessed of a unique power of controlling our reaction to words. But all the same I think that one way of expressing the distinction between minor and major poets might be found in just these terms. The minor poet seeks first for "poetic" thoughts, and depends for his effects chiefly on the emotion that comes from reflecting on such thoughts; he thinks that poetry is a matter of fancies. The major poet depends for his effects on the words he uses and how he uses them; he knows that the poetry begins with the language he chooses.

The emotion he rouses is the direct emotional impact of words stamped by thought with their appropriate values. Appropriate to what? you ask. To the emotion he is "remembering in tranquillity." He is making as direct an imitation (to use the old, unjustly discredited term) as words organized into thoughts allow, of emotion, or, better perhaps, of the fullness of consciousness; he endeavours to convey directly through words the imaginative value his experience had for him. The thought is just part of his symbol of expression. So that even on the basis of the oldest and most threadbare thought he builds a new thing, a glory that is somehow more profoundly affecting than the loveliest, new-feigned fancy or the profoundest thought.

I have attempted only a general frontal attack on my subject, and I am fully aware that it has not at any point been driven home—but that is not so much, I am convinced, because of the difficulty of the position as of lack of resources, i.e., it is the result of my ignorance, not of any mysterious elusiveness inherent in poetry itself. At least it indicates, roughly, what I regard as the right method of attack, a method which, when our knowledge of the processes of consciousness is complete, will yield decisive results—and that method is to begin with the technique and show the effect that distinctive technique produces on the response of the listener, and how and why it produces it. In the meantime we feel, and show by our practice, in the persistence with which we preserve the tradition even when we think we are breaking it, that that which is regarded as the traditional poetic technique has a right to the distinction of having a separate name, of being a unique and irreplaceable art.