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POETRY AND THE MACHINE

ONCE THEY WERE SEERS, whose communicated silence upon peaks made articulate the visions of their age. Now it would appear that the age has passed all poetry; its speed, though manifestly not yet superhuman, apparently is super-poetical. The erratic cadences, chaotic imagery, and those opacities which stay opaque because they are too personal for words mark the failure of poetry to cope with such a transmutation of the human and his works as has been wrought by the machine. No longer does poetry express the age, said Lord Dunsany in his essay, "On Modern Poetry," writing so gracefully of things he thought had repudiated grace:

. . . to me it seems that the complications of our machinery are too intricate for our brains and that the more sensitive ones are being disordered first, and that modern poetry, rather than being the song of the machines, is rather the wreckage that is being cast down by them. . . Modern lines are not shaped to tell of the ruin, but are a part of it.

There are always ruins, there have always been, and old coherences have struggled to embrace the ineluctably obscure. The core of art has always been transcendent clarity, building on riches of meaning, extending them. At the edges, too, there have been darkneses: the shadows where new meanings reach, to eventually illuminate in our experience what is for a while only adumbrated. Among the wreckages of man's works have always been the men themselves—but the wreckage is defined itself by some new building, as well as by debris of what has stood. Wreckage itself may be made to speak, and if the men who give the ruins words are themselves inarticulate, this states the problem of the men, and not of the matter. If there is a "problem" of modern poetry, it is one of poets and not of poetry.

For no language is in itself poetical, and no subject-matter inherently obscure. The time even may come—perhaps when some Magellan, hurtling through blackness, circumnavigates the universe—when the most microscopic specificities may

yield their universal music in an artist's hand. Matter is made poetical, not by its only being there in any Being or Form, awaiting record, but by its being made into a poet's image: something they were not before, and would not be except for a unique creator who has made a new reality.

That some modern poets and their poetry are among the wreckage they themselves try to express is undeniable. But this is not to say that there may not be the poets who will order the chaos for our eyes by their imagery. Chaos is in our eyes and in our works. What is beyond, around, involving all of us, goes on, oblivious of those human values we denote as order and disorder. An artist lifts his brush, raises his pen, and we are shown the true humanity of what it is that man has done. Modern poetry, if it fails, does not do so through inevitable fault of the machine; of shattered cities, broken lives and minds. Where it fails, it does so because the poet himself has failed. Something too private has been said. Some inner claim has not clamoured out loud that we be involved, insisting on our apprehension of its inner form and spirit by its overt ordering.

Machines surely have made new problems, new concerns which tower over older meanings, shutting out older illuminations, throwing new shadows on new landscapes where we must wander for a while or forever without light. But these problems are not those of machines, but of men who made them and must live with them. The poet must contend not only with new cadences, new musics made in the intricate meshings of myriad crenellated wheels, though these inescapably must alter the rhythms of our speech. We no longer live our lives to the accompaniment of horses' hooves and those sounds of nature which the centuries have rendered into songs as familiar and as comforting as old, traditional lullabies. More than with these newer pulsings that somehow must sing out newer prosodies, the poet must contend with those human disarrangings and arrangements which have followed the machine. It is of people and their world that he sings, and it is from their visions and their blindnesses that he begins.

The mind goes on piling complexity upon complexity, making machines which no longer may be simply objects but must be taken into account. It is even said that we may make the monsters which, without themselves having life, yet may decide concerning the living. This may be true, and was, and is, wherever and whenever we abdicate humanity, forgetting that the line between the dead and living is something we invent: that we must justify ourselves in light of purposes; that when we simply use each other or the world, we have made machinery of what we may mean for one another.

Let us grant that the poet's family is shattering, as its members find their

integral involvements elsewhere than in such unity as they could make together. His friends become the images of his salient self, reflecting even to his own eyes the carapaces with which he fends off friendship. His lover is savoured, drop by drop, spilling precious identity to fill the bottomless mould of what she must be to be loved by him. All people and all things are held away by myriad interventions, the surrogates for selfhood, of which machines and machine-relationships are only many among more: all of whose faces he can never see at once without an insect's compound eye and God's humility. His privacy is but another unit subtracted from an infinity of arrogance, and does not change its size, or call forth scruples to prevent his overwhelming. All poetry is walking on an edge, and when it falls, its fallings describe trajectories of obscurity, lit up for fitful moments by random mad-nesses.

The civilization of which poetry is a part cannot be held to blame for the difficulty of its representation. A civilization really cannot be held to blame at all, nor can such indictments mean much more than impotence expressing its own self-pity. To dramatize, to truly indict a characteristic impotence demands power, mastery—not further weakness. From such power comes the infusion of new substance into civilization: the phoenix comes forth from ashes, decadence itself permits such flights that soar over static provincialisms, rising above particularities of time and place by making new time and place, that never were before in earth or heaven, and yet will be again, long into future memory, ancient and ever-new.

Remember that we talk here of glory and not of paradise: of pain and its perennial possibility. Man is made no better than he is simply by his working at what we know as art. Capacity for hurt and fault and misery is like a constant, changing only its form and its intensity from one time to the next. Nor do we know of it unless we lift ourselves outside the peculiar boundaries of here and now, looking upon ourselves from our new vantages, recognizing evil according to new visions of the good.

Now we may return to older harmonies only from cacophony; now we distinguish the banal from the beautiful in those past musics—perhaps in our sophistication finding room even for vulgarities of other ages and places, these being exotic, quaint—outrageous little things to set upon our mantels, the bric-a-brac of just such baroque impudence to set off central heating as some new, unnatural marvel that simply must be borne.

Now we may return to cacophony from what has been harmony, knowing its chaos as we could not before: something belonging to harmony in a mutuality of opposites, each opposite revealed as aspect of some strange unity—a terrible, un-

manageable, apparently fragmented unity. We are always, always part of more than we can know—ourselves alone and in great collectivities of knowers: of an enveloping realm of mystery without boundary or mastery, defined by what we are unpredictably, inevitably, in whatever infinities of circumstance. Harmony, disharmony, one and many, depend so much upon our place of view and how we look. Modern obscurity arises out of older clarity, to make new clarity—if we can make it, in our expression and comprehension. Perhaps what seems obscure are things too quickly seen—and not only by the poets, as Lord Dunsany suggests. There was more time before for all of us to stop and see and listen: fewer concerns to swallow up our interest and our time, fewer things to intervene as comforts, necessities, competing entertainments. The poet's vision may take a lifetime of labor to achieve its marvellous, instantaneous clarity. But this instant for the reader may have to be a growing thing, less definitely temporal than in the spirit groping for meaning.

How many readings are necessary for a modern poem to be understood? How many readings is the poem worth? Obscurity for its own sake will never be understood, since understanding is not its end. Nor will many of those darknesses be illuminated which are the shadows cast by ideas and feelings not clear to the poet himself—although we may not ignore those unconscious insights which serve others more brilliantly than they do their creators. So the tortured paintings of European children after the war challenged a greater sophistication than they themselves could master, probing deeper in their indictment of grown-up terrors than they themselves could know. In order to be heard, in order that the very difficulty of his expression will be wrestled with, the poet must offer the incentive for others to go on reading him—even where comprehension is not immediate. By his art he must lead them on into the exquisite intricacies of his thought, feeling, and intention, so that each may have his own experience therein. He may not rightfully demand that everyone have but one, orthodox experience of his work, and at the same time in their reading. This would be to deny the individuality of each of his audience, the unique participation each must bring in creating the poem's meaning. This does not enforce or make legitimate a chaos of isolated, unrelated experiences, one as good as any other, and all irrelevant to the poet's intention. A poem succeeds as it sets up those invisible but invincible lines of force which direct the reader's peculiar involvement. Art may never dictate and remain art. In its essence, it creates conditions for the greatest degree of individual expression—not walls for immuring finitudes of static meaning, but beams of light carrying infinities of expanding individual richnesses along their paths.

Lord Dunsany concludes,

Those who desert rhythm and metre desert the lore of the ages, to send out their cargoes of thought on seas of Time in vessels of new shapes. . . . Jewels are not set in tin or lead, and are not packed up in old matchboxes. Nor will the poet relate his vision in cacophonous lines. If he does, those lines will founder with all they contain, and the years will sweep over them, leaving no more trace than the surface of the sea has left of sunken ships. Posterity has not troubled itself with muddled thought yet, and unmelodious lines will carry nothing over the years to whatever people shall dwell upon any shore of Time.

One splendid day after the war, two young men sat overlooking the Hudson River, watching the many ships sailing leisurely by and the rush of automobile traffic on the great highway that runs along the bank. It was a tranquil day, but of that modern tranquillity that is embedded in perpetual uproar. For the young men, the day was calm because of the kind of their involvement in it. They were momentarily concerned as spectators of movement, and not as movers—although to someone viewing the scene from a higher vantage, they themselves appeared, perhaps, as figures in a dynamic landscape—while to the ears of tiny insects crashing through grasses at their feet, their voices may have seemed as distant as the music of celestial spheres.

While they watched, a huge airliner roared overhead, climbing upward towards the western horizon. One of the young men remarked bitterly that the airplane was an invader in the blue sky: only birds belonged there, and clouds, and stars—and all the “natural”, clear, clean air of the heavenly firmament. For the other, the airplane at that moment was a graceful thing, integrally in harmony with a landscape that was characteristically modern, and not any more “unnatural” than man himself.

Their difference was argued with much heat—as they again involved themselves in all the enveloping flux of the world before their eyes. Not only airplanes, but automobiles, ships, roads, bridges, buildings, books, and all human contrivances were reviewed according to the differing measures of man and nature. And at the beginning, as at the end, of all their argument were their separate ways of placing man’s creations in Creation. If man is in nature, as the ancients asked, how may anything he does or makes be said to be unnatural?

Underlying Lord Dunsany’s view is a regard of nature and man’s place therein as something fixed, determined, and determinable according to certain traditional criteria of coherence. Like the young man who resented the airplane, he regards man’s newer works as violating his essential nature. The airplane in the sky dis-

orders man's mind, since it is so contrary to an intrinsic order—and it is the poet's sanity that suffers first, since it is the most sensitive. The issue no longer is whether this or that poet is insane, or whether sane poetry can be written about the airplane, the machine, but whether or in what manner man may comprehend his own works.

Does our modern speech, cast in cadences which express the eccentric sounds and rhythms of our modern life, really "desert rhythm and metre"? Or rather does it have its own rhythm and metre, honestly begotten of the life whence it emerges? Do we deny "the lore of the ages" when we live, speak, write poetry within the context of our own time? Or rather do we build inevitably upon such lore, even when protesting against it, even when attempting to destroy it? For posterity is never in the past, but in the future, which belongs to it and is unknown. Nor are "muddled thoughts" of today necessarily muddled tomorrow. Indeed, what is muddled and what is not is open to much debate today; clarity is not so clear that it is only one and indivisible. What is made clear has set up vectors of intended meaning that lead and carry along illimitable individualities of intention: all the things we each alone will feel and understand and try to communicate to one another. Posterity will, in its arrogance, as we do in ours, claim greater understanding of the past than the past had of itself. It is false hope, and falser prophecy, to invent a future that is already past, to vindicate the present by referring it to a fictitious providence.

Are Heraclitus, Plato, Isaiah, Dante, Shakespeare, Milton, and Goethe so clear, transparent, that it is their profound difficulty that is illusion, if only our pride would yield? If only our pride would yield! Vanity, vainglory, are not in making things, but in worshipping them. And there is a pride that passes for humility, revering what has been made while patronizing what is in the making. The treasures of tradition are not perpetually paid to enrich potentiality, but are too often put up as ikons to be less comprehended than sealed off from defilement in gaudy temples. Our classics too often are eminently unread and worshipfully misconstrued, as we remain afraid to look at them from our own vantages—making shadowy, imaginary coigns of "objectivity" to hide our fear of inescapable responsibility to be ourselves. We may not disclaim our culpability for what is ugly, vicious, and terrible in our machines and machined life. Nor may we demand for poets or for poetry exemption from living concerns, sung out in living imagery. Coherence is not static, but dynamic—changing as we change, needing always to take new bearings on new landmarks of meaning on the shores of civilization: eroding, building, altering its face under the unremitting pounding of "the seas of time."

It was the disconcertion of an older science, now itself surpassed, that led John Donne to say of the world, that it was

. . . all in pieces, all coherence gone,
All just supply, and just relation.

All coherence was gone for Donne—except the masterful coherence of his art, the living greatness of his poetry, that has outlived the error of his view, and has at last, and in its own way, made it right. Let poets only honestly despair of clarity, and write their despair honestly, and they will never be more clear—though all coherence goes but that men make by their art.