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UNIT 17

Modern poetry

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Modernism and poetry, 1900-39

This section will be concerned with what many readers consider one of the most exciting movements in English literature, the poetry of the twentieth century. This poetry belongs to the movement now known as 'modernism' which affected all the arts, in different ways, throughout Europe and North America. The movement can be approximately dated as starting at about the turn of the century; it cannot be said to have an end, for much writing being produced now, nearly a hundred years later, is still basically modernist in spirit. The movement does however develop, and it is fairly easy to recognize works from its earliest years, works which express the spirit of formal experiment, moral and social questioning and cultural openness which are most typical of it; works from a somewhat later period - the 1930s and 1940s - tend to integrate these qualities with a sense of tradition, restraint, social responsibility and concern for clear communication. The most distinctive starting-point of modem poetry is the school known as Imagism, of which the leading figure is the American poet and theorist Ezra Pound. This school distanced itself very consciously from the poetry which was still being written in a more or less Romantic tradition by rejecting regular verbal form and concentrating on the image, the sharply focused presentation of a single sense experience. This tends to reduce the apparent importance of feeling, reflection and abstract generalization in the poem: immediacy of experience displaces context and narrative development. Strongly influenced by this cult of the precise image was a friend of Pound's, T.S. Eliot. Eliot became very well known in the 1920s, especially for his long poem, *The Waste Land.* and his poetry startled many readers through the strangeness and seeming incoherence of his images. As time has gone on, however, and especially in the light of his more calm and traditional later poetry, it has become possible to see Eliot as making use of the new techniques and concerns of modernism within an ongoing tradition of English reflective poetry. Also much influenced by the new movement was W.B. Yeats, an Irish poet who had started his career in what some would consider a self-indulgently Romantic manner, but who matured to become one of the most powerful and imaginative writers of the century.

One should not too sharply distinguish modem poetry from the poetry of the

nineteenth century. Modern poetry can be seen as arising from the Romantic and post-Romantic cult of the imagination, of the visionary and the sensual, and of a type of language which communicates through the suggestions of image and rhythm rather than through the presentation of ideas and emotions which allow themselves to be - at least approximately - paraphrased; so there are clear analogies between the work of, say, Blake and Yeats. Similarly the modernist concern for the individual speaking voice often produces echoes of Browning. But there does come - as with the other arts - a clearly marked shift in the normal style of poetry in the early years of the century. So in his pioneering study *New Bearings in English Poetry* (1932), F.R. Leavis saw his period as marking a 'decisive reordering of the tradition of English poetry', while a few years later Cleanth Brooks, in his important study *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* (1939), claimed that modem poetry implied a literary revolution comparable to the Romantic Revolt. More recent studies, such as C.K. Stead's *The New Poetic* (1975) have taken a more balanced approach; but the basic shift is incontrovertible. It is often traced in the contrast between the Georgian poets, whose work maintains the rural settings, coherent, moderate and explicit emotional stance and lucid organization typical of the nineteenth century, and the Imagists, whose work is characteristically modernist: discontinuous in style, sometimes obscure through the failure to specify links between sentences, uneven in rhythm, affecting the reader's sensibilities through concrete presentation of distinct and disparate experiences, elusive as to the personality of the speaker, sometimes referring to distinctively modem, mechanized and urban settings, sometimes referring to remote civilizations such as those of China or ancient Greece. A typical example is Richard Aldington's 'New Love' (1915):

> She has new leaves
> After her dead flowers,
> Like a little almond tree
> Which the frost hurt.

Poetry of this kind seems strange to the reader; it extends one's experience and challenges one to comprehend it.

The implication of such writing is that experience has to be faced in itself, as something fresh and difficult, without the guidance of religion, social morality or normal patterns of personal relationship and emotional responsiveness. There was indeed at that time a considerable questioning of the norms which society offers to the individual's feeling about other people, the established culture and the physical world. Christianity had lost some of its status among intellectuals as a result of a feeling that it was incompatible with science (and especially with Darwinian evolution), and non-Christian thinking was widespread among philosophers; Nietzsche had just rejected Christianity with particular vehemence. The political order was threatened by an awareness of the extreme social disparities of the modem city, and a realization was starting to grow of the dangers and injustices of colonialism. The relativity of different national cultures came to be more readily felt: it is revealing that of the four major figures to be considered in this unit two were American by birth and one Irish, while the fourth, W.H. Auden, spent a large pan of

his life outside England. The sense of the personality was undermined by such thinkers as Marx, who regarded individual consciousness as a product of social and economic forces, and by Freud who regarded the personality as a product of primitive drives of which the individual must be unconscious. Soon the value of Western civilization was to be very radically brought into question by the futile slaughter of the First World War. There is, then, a general atmosphere among writers at the beginning of the century of doubt and readiness for change; it is fuelled in pan by the exploratory kinds of writing already undertaken abroad, notably in France by such writers as Mallarme, Rimbaud, Laforgue and Corbiere. In this atmosphere the major changes in poetry are marked by the appearance of the Imagist anthologies (1914-17), their manifesto (1915), the appearance of Eliot's early verse *(Prufrock and Other Observations,* 1917), and Yeats's discovery of a modernist style, after his post-Romantic Celtic beginnings, with *Responsibilities* (1914). The period after 1914 sees, thus, the establishment of a new kind of verse. This reaches maturity with Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), Pound's *Mauberley* (1920) and several volumes of Yeats, especially perhaps *The Tower* (1928). All three poets continued to write after the 1920s, and developed in divergent ways. Yeats develops from a Romantic standpoint to a modernist one, bringing with him a cult of myth and of mystical vision which he tempers with a harsh awareness of the bleakness of the modem world, with an acute lucidity about his own feelings and a masterful sense of rhythm and construction. A characteristic passage is the opening of his sonnet 'Leda and the Swan':

> A sudden blow: the great wings beating still
> Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed
> By the dark webs, her nape caught in his bill,
> He holds her helpless breast upon his breast.

The violent sensuality of this, enhanced by the onward surge of the rhythm and the rich pattern of echoing sounds, may suggest Keats rather than the cold accuracy of the imagists such as Aldington; but the cultural complexities which will emerge later in the poem make it unmistakably modernist. Pound starts his career with short poems of epigrammatic wit and startlingly sharp observation, and goes on to produce in his *Cantos* (1925-) a series of long poems, in which he combines his accuracy of physical depiction with his immense learning to convey an extraordinarily ambitious vision of the movement of history. The first of the *Cantos,* for instance, starts with a long, skilful pastiche of Homeric epic, but after two pages this is interrupted by a sudden imperative and then by details of publication:

> Then Anticlea came.
> Lie quiet Divus. I mean, that is Andreas Divus,
> In officina Wechseli, 1538, out of Homer.

The canto ends in mid-sentence, with the words 'So that:' and Canto 2 starts with a disrespectful parody of a modem poet:

> Hang it all, Robert Browning.
> there can be but the one 'Sordello'.

Eliot, starting with ironic and disturbing poems about the confusions and frustrations of urban life in the early twentieth century, later produces deeply meditative poems on the significance of Christian faith in a world of war, suffering and frustration, in which the poet's sensitivity to atmosphere and intellectual honesty acutely convey the experience of a mind searching for meaning.

A second generation of modernist poetry is usually associated especially with the decade of the 1930s, and in particular with the anthologies *New Signatures* (1932) and *New Country* (1933). The young poets of the 1930s clearly had learnt much from the generation of Eliot and Pound in economy, indirectness and unconventionality of expression; they are distinct from them in their close concern with the immediate contemporary world and especially with the acute political and economic problems of their time, and by greater use of a light, conversational, playful and ingenious style, by a sense of poetry as game and fantasy. The outstanding figure of this generation was immediately recognized to be W.H. Auden, who wrote brilliantly original, witty and fantastic poems on the wish for personal and political renovation characteristic of his generation. Auden was the centre of a group of writers including the poets Louis MacNeice, Stephen Spender and C. Day Lewis, who share his concern with the public themes of the state of England and the need for political and social change, his concern for sincere friendship, his fear of public pressures on private life and his search for a fresh poetic style which would correspond to the speed, sophistication, novelty and social variety of their age. There are also important individual poets such as William Empson, with his densely wrought, intensely intellectual and subtly ironic reflections on personal relationships, and there are literary movements which reflect similar preoccupations to those of the central modernist figures, but with a considerable difference of emphasis: such as the surrealist poets including David Gascoyne and Hugh Sykes Davies, inspired by the French surrealists in their cult of the startling images that demonstrate the free play of the irrational imagination and, later, the neo-Romantiqs such as Dylan Thomas.

There is, then, in twentieth-century poetry', a wide variation of subject matter, and of personal belief and character; what the poets have in common is the conviction that poetry' is not simply an elegant statement of important views, but that it is a search for a new way of formulating meaning that will meet the challenge of a period in history when traditional beliefs and traditional relationships between writers and readers are being threatened.

Such a new form of expression is likely to be difficult. The difficulty of poetry is very lucidly discussed by T.S. Eliot, who places it in the context of a discussion of why poetry matters. Eliot comments that

> poets in our civilisation, as it exists at present, must be difficult. Our civilisation comprehends great variety and complexity and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce varied and complex results. The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning. (Eliot, 1951. p. 289)

The passage is an important one. First, it shows that what Eliot looks for above all in a poet is a 'refined sensibility'; the idea of 'refinement' obviously does not

refer to trivial grace of manner but to the subtlety with which poets grasp experience. Secondly, it shows that Eliot regards poetry as a product of society and a judgement of it; the combination of fine perception and lucid judgement implies an important task for poetry, which preserves human values threatened by 'our civilisation, as it now exists'. Thirdly, he lists very acutely the techniques of modem poetry which make it difficult to many readers, and presents these as a means of controlling language. In one of his poems he translates the phrase used by the French poet Mallarme to define the task of the poet: 'To purify the language of the tribe'. Poetry, that is, is essentially an enterprise within language, and one that requires great discipline and consciousness. One might think that poetry is not about language but about such major concerns as death, love and nature. Eliot implies that we can only really think about such things if we have a reliable language. Elsewhere in this same essay he comments that 'the ordinary man's experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary'. The remark may annoy many people who reasonably think that it is precisely modem poetry which is 'chaotic, irregular and fragmentary'; Eliot implicitly defends these qualities of poetry by claiming that they are a genuine reproduction of a difficult world, and indeed that it is the poet who, ideally, brings order and cohesion into the world.

How exactly is poetry to do this? For one major answer we may turn to Ezra Pound, a friend and inspiration of Eliot, who called him, in the dedication of *The Waste Land, il miglior fabbro,* the better craftsman, and elsewhere claimed that he was 'more responsible for the twentieth-century revolution in poetry than any other individual'. For Pound's basic conception is that poetry is a craft which brings precision to language. Pound's influence was most strongly marked within the movement known as Imagism (or *imagisme)* in association with which he produced much of his early work, and his views were disseminated through the periodicals of that movement. But they also represent a major tendency in a great deal of the poetic theory of the twentieth century, and correspond to some important aspects of modern poetic creation. Pound's views are most approachably formulated in his 'A retrospect' ([1918] 1972, pp. 58-68), and particularly in the three principles which he presents as the essence of Imagism.

The first of these is 'direct treatment of the "thing" whether subjective or objective'. The centre of the poem is the 'thing', which may be objective or subjective. The interest of the poem, that is, lies in the reactions of the poet to a specific experience, and the experience should be conveyed as precisely as possible. To bring out the implications of this, one needs first to stress that the concern is with 'things' and not with ideas; the poem is aimed against abstraction, against language which intervenes between reader and experience, against what is often called rhetoric. The poem, in short, for the imagists, should be concrete. The point is reiterated by Eliot in an essay on Swinburne, often regarded by modem poets as the typical example of the faults they reject in the poetry of the nineteenth century, which Pound refers to as 'a blurry, messy sort of period': 'Language in a healthy state presents the object, is so close to the object that the two are identified' (Eliot, 1951, p. 327).

The point of this concreteness is partly to revive the language and sensibilities

of the reader, to bring clarity and vigour to both. Pound approvingly quotes the older poet A.E. Housman as saying that 'good literature read for pleasure must... do some good to the reader, quicken his perception ... sharpen discrimination ... mellow rawness of personal opinion' (Pound, 1985, p. 66). But there is more to it than that. The quickened perception is an answer to one of the traditional problems of Western culture, the distinction we usually make between mind and body or thought and emotion. In discussing one of his literary heroes, the Italian medieval poet Guido Cavalcanti, Pound comments that for such a poet 'the senses at first seem to project for a few yards beyond the body ... The conception of the body as perfect instrument of the increasing intelligence pervades' (Pound, 1985, p. 152). Heightened perception forms a bridge between the outer world and the mind; human life is consistent within itself and continuous with the outside world, and the feeling of not being in command of one's own experience vanishes. This too is the implication of Eliot's famous concept of the 'dissociation of sensibility'. According to him, the poets of the Metaphysical era were capable of 'a direct sensuous apprehension of thought' (Eliot, 1951, p. 286). Since that time, thought and the senses have been dissociated. One may well doubt whether this 'dissociation' is a real historical event. It is however important to recognize the poet's sense that in our time it is difficult to treat ideas as part of our general sensibility, and to see that the difficulty of much modem poetry arises from an attempt to do so, even though this goes against the grain of our usual way of speaking or thinking. The point may be approached through a line from Donne which Eliot quotes: when Donne speaks of 'A bracelet of bright hair about the bone', the contrast of the bright colour and narrow line of the hair with the dull and less clearly shaped bone helps us to focus on the implicit contrast of sensuality and mortality. Eliot perhaps aims at a similar contrast in his own memorable lines, from 'Little Gidding': '

Ash on an old man's sleeve
Is all the ash burnt roses leave;

The triple contrast of ash, cloth and flower similarly - though perhaps less acutely and more oddly - points to a contrast of beauty and ageing.

This fascination with the object can also be seen as part of a broader tradition. This is the symbolist tradition, which was developed most consciously in nineteenth-century France and became known in England through the work of such authors as A.J.A. Symons in his book *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* ([1899] 1971). The word *symbol* may be misleading, because it frequently suggests that some word or picture 'stands for' an idea (so that the cross is the symbol of Christianity). This is not the sense of the word here. Its meaning is best conveyed by the French poet Baudelaire, who speaks of moments when 'the depth of life reveals itself wholly in the sight, however ordinary it may be, that one has in front of one's eyes. The sight becomes the symbol of it.' The symbol, that is, is a significant concentration of experience; by extension the task of the poet or artist is to find or create moments in which the depth of life is similarly concentrated and expressed. So when a character in *The Waste Land* describes himself as 'Looking into the heart of light, the silence', what is conveyed is not just an intense sense-experience; it is also the

potential of a purer and richer life and the limitations of our everyday life which prevent us from attaining it. The image that Pound cultivated is partly important because it is different from the perceiving mind; but it is also important because it focuses on some qualities of experience that do matter to the subjective observer.

A poet such as Yeats stresses much more the traditional symbolist view of the meaning fulness of objects in poetry: referring explicitly to Symons's book, he stresses the creative force of the symbol, which can produce new emotions or new ideas: the symbol lies in the combination of aspects of the thing depicted, and the combination names an emotion or an idea which has no existence before it is named. Naming is seen, by many modem poets in an almost mystic sense, as a way in which human beings can gain control over their experience. Auden, notably, says that poetry is concerned with the encounter of the imagination with what he calls 'sacred beings'; and that beauty arises when a ritual is constituted which gives expression to this encounter: Tn poetry the rite is verbal; it pays homage by naming' (Auden, 1975, p. 57). By 'sacred beings' here Auden does not necessarily refer to any supernatural existence, but to moments in which life seems specially significant. He approvingly quotes a passage from the novelist Charles Williams which strongly recalls Baudelaire's view of the symbolic moment: 'One is aware that a phenomenon, being wholly itself, is laden with universal meaning. A hand lighting a cigarette is the explanation of everything; a foot stepping from the train is the rock of all existence .. .* (Auden, 1975, p. 55). Auden, that is, wants to treat vision as a sort of revelation; and in this he speaks for a major tendency in modem poetry.

Eliot gives a somewhat different emphasis to the question of emotion in poetry. Emotions and feelings, he recognizes, have a part in the experience of which poetry is composed, but they are formed into a 'new compound* which 'is a concentration, and a new thing resulting from the concentration, of a very great number of experiences which to the practical and active person may not seem to be experiences at all' (Eliot. [1919] 1972, p. 76). This means that 'the emotion of art is impersonal' or that 'Poetry' is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality* (Eliot, [1919] 1972, p. 76). Pound placed his emphasis on the thing, subjective or objective; Eliot comes to emphasize a distillation of things, in which the poet is essentially a catalyst, and which transcends the distinction.

There is in all of this a centring of interest on the imagination. Yeats, at the very beginning of the century, called for a 'return to imagination, [an] understanding that the laws of art, which are the hidden laws of the world, can alone bind the imagination' (Yeats. [1900] 1972, p. 34). Auden, much later, in discussing the 'sacred beings', speaks of 'the sacred encounters of the imagination' and insists that 'Whatever its actual content and overt interest, every poem is rooted in imaginative awe* (Auden. 1975, p. 60). Yeats's view of the 'hidden laws of the world* relates to a mysticism which later poets might not have endorsed; what they might have accepted is Auden's view that imagination is a response of the whole mind, with its massive accumulation of memories, knowledge and feeling, to the challenge of exceptional experience. It is thus a unifying force in the incoherence of modern life.

It is also an irrational force; the imagination draws upon the whole range of associations of the words of a poem, emotional, formal, cultural, mythical, as well as the strict logic of meaning. Eliot, notoriously, commented that 'genuine poetry can communicate before it is understood'; in the immediate context he was thinking of the poetry of Dante which may be not understood because it is in a foreign language, but the principle might also validate poetry in English which is not understood because it contains unclear references or because it suppresses steps in argument.

Language, then, needs to be fully exploited. This is the theme of Pound's second principle. One should 'use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation'; one should 'go in fear of abstractions'. Consistently with this view he defines great literature as 'language charged with meaning to the utmost degree'. And this meaning is to come from all aspects of the language: the images conveyed, but also the sound of language, its 'music' and its connotations. Elsewhere Pound implies that a vital criterion of good poetry is that it should contain 'an invention, a definite contribution to the art of verbal expression' (Pound, 1985, p. 17); creation in language is essential because it adds to the range of things that can be expressed, and so to our imaginative command of our experience and our own feelings. The urgency and difficulty of the task is recalled, anxiously, by Eliot in one of his major poems:

> And so each venture
> Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate
> With shabby equipment always deteriorating
> In the general mess of imprecision of feeling,
> Undisciplined squads of emotion.
>
> 'East Coker', V, 7-11

Precise, disciplined articulation of feeling: this, for Eliot, is the essence of poetry.

If much modem poetry can be seen as a celebration of the imagination, one should not assume that the imagination is too simply endorsed. Poets are often conscious that the imaginary is the Active, or at least close to it; and so as well as presenting the symbolic vision, they often challenge it, simultaneously or in rapid succession, by irony. So Eliot praises Marvell's 'wit' (in the seventeenth-century sense of the word) because it restricts the authority of the experiences the poet presents; there is in Marvell, he thinks, 'a recognition, implicit in the expression of every experience, of other kinds of experience which are possible' (Eliot, 1951, p. 303). A very obvious example in Eliot's own early work is 'Sweeney Erect'; the poem starts with grandiose classical speech:

> Paint me a cavernous waste shore
> Cast in the unstilled Cyclades,

but it proves to be about a woman in a modem brothel having an epileptic fit, and the final tone is very different as a character remarks that 'It does the house no sort of good'. Which tone is more appropriate? How can one decide?

Auden, himself a master of ironic and playful writing, comments in similar spirit that 'in poetry, all facts and all beliefs cease to be true and become interesting possibilities' (Auden, [1963] 1972, p. 640) and continues, with characteristic subtlety and complexity: 'In so far as poetry, or any other of the arts, can be said to have an ulterior purpose, it is, by telling the truth, to disenchant and disintoxicate' (p. 645). One may further here refer to Pound's (eccentrically named) concept of 'logopoeia', a kind of poetry in which words are used with a sense of their normal contexts and associations, and so exposed to 'ironical play'. This sort of writing Pound calls 'the dance of the intellect among words'; the phrase elegantly sums up one dimension of modem poetry. Poetry, for modern poets, is both celebration of vision and disenchantment of ideas. If they are right, poetry is a valuable hygiene in a world in which language is threatened by abstraction and clichd, and in which an imprecise language may impede our feeling for concrete experience.

The symbol must be given further life and placed in a context by formulation in a rhythmically ordered text. Yeats lays much emphasis on rhythm as a means of 'prolonging the moment of contemplation', which makes the reader especially receptive to the symbol, placing the reader in a state which he regards as akin to trance. Yeats's formulation may suggest a dreamy passivity which is more characteristic of late nineteenth-century writing than of much modernist literature; it is however important to note that Yeats is conscious of the double effect of rhythm which both lulls through 'alluring monotony' and stimulates by variety.

The balance of monotony and variety becomes a major aspect of twentieth-century verse, not least in the thinking of Pound and Eliot. Their aesthetic gives great weight to surprise, which one might expect to lead to a stress on variety. Traditionally, verse is distinguished from prose by its regularity; the stresses of words (in English) form regular patterns, these patterns form lines of regular length, the division of the lines is enhanced by rhyme; moreover there is much sameness in poetry, brought about by repetitions of sound or by repetitions of ideas or images. Etymologically speaking, prose is what goes straight on, verse is what turns back and - in some sense - does the same things again. It is easy to think that this consistency of style and content is not appropriate either to a kind of writing that claims to be new, or to a world which the poets regard as unpredictable and incoherent. And so it is not surprising that irregular verse, the so-called *vers libre,* becomes common in twentieth-century poetry. (Though more or less regular verse continues to be used also to great effect by many writers, and there is for instance little free verse by Yeats or Auden.)

The poets are then eager to define exactly what free verse consists of, and exactly how regular verse can continue to be used with freshness and pertinence. Pound especially, the better craftsman, devotes much attention to the form of verse, though the other poets are not far behind in their sense of the discipline of verse-writing. Pound's third principle of imagism is in fact a cautious justification of free verse; he recommends that poets should 'compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome'. He returns to the issue in his account of early music. He assembles many quotations from early musicians showing that they

advised against over-strict following of metre, and recommended that one should 'imitate the irregularities of the beautiful voice' (Pound, 1985, p. 439). Natural speech is the point of reference of Pound's poetry; rhythm should heighten it and not distort it. An example is the beginning of 'Cino':

> Bah' I have sung women jn three cities,
> But it is all the same;
> And I will sing of the sun.

If there is a regular rhythm here, it is in the suggestion of a recurring three-syllable metre; but this is far from overriding the speaker's shifts of feeling and energy. This spoken rhythm imposes on the poet the need for a subtle judgement (apparent, for instance, when Pound asks himself if he has not gone too far towards making his rhythms flexible and discreet): he has both to reproduce ordinary language and to transform it. The dilemma is one inherent in the whole project of modern poetry which both reproduces the discontinuities and incongruities of modem life and creates order and significance within it. There is a real tension here; and the honesty and lucidity with which modem poets have faced up to the tension is a sign of the importance of their work.

Texts, authors, contexts

W.B. Yeats

The first important poet of the modernist period in the British Isles is W.B. Yeats. Yeats did not however begin his career in a modernist style; his early work is largely a continuation of a Romantic tradition, with strong references to Irish folklore, sometimes in ballad form, making heavy use of conspicuous effects of lulling sound echoes and insistent rhythms and primarily expressing fairly simple emotions of nostalgia, longing, heroism and love: a typical example comes from 'The Song of Wandering Aengus':

> Though I am old with wandering
> Through hollow lands and hilly lands,
> I will find out where she has gone,
> And kiss her lips and take her hands.

But as his career develops, his style matures, growing less ornate, relying more on dense and uneven rhythms and focusing more on the concrete details of perception. With the important volume *Responsibilities* (1914) Yeats discovers an urgent public subject matter, in the cultural and political state of Ireland, at the same time that he begins to evolve an elaborate mythical scheme of history which tacitly underlies many of his works (see Unit 25, pp. 662-6). The combination of personal emotion, public commentary and eccentric vision makes him a challenging writer and many critics have sought to characterize his work; one may particularly recommend

Ellmann (1965) and Henn (1966). Yeats increasingly feels his poetic role to be that of the outsider who can criticize and judge the civilization from which he emerges. The poem 'A Coat' announces the new bareness of his style and its significance as a vehicle of opposition. His song, he says - thinking of his early Romantic work - was

> Covered with embroideries
> Out of old mythologies.

but he has been robbed of it. He accepts his loss:

> For there's more enterprise
> In walking naked.

The effect of this new bareness of writing on Yeats's view of one of the great myths is apparent in a poem from *Responsibilities:*

> THE MAGI
> Now as at all times I can see in the mind's eye.
> In their stiff, painted clothes, the pale unsatisfied ones
> Appear and disappear in the blue depth of the sky
> With all their ancient faces like rain-beaten stones.
> And all their helms of silver hovering side by side,
> And all their eyes still fixed, hoping to find once more,
> Being by Calvary's turbulence unsatisfied,
> The uncontrollable mystery on the bestial floor.

Yeats, it is apparent from this poem, is a master of transitions. The poem starts with the poet, apparently in rather dull chatty mood, recounting his own imaginations (the incidental 'at all times' and the cliche 'the mind's eye' do a lot to set a mood of vague curiosity); it ends with an intense and disturbing vision: the symmetrical form of the last line, paralleling 'uncontrollable' and 'bestial*; the extreme emotions conveyed by these words and especially the apparently misplaced clinging to respectable order implied in 'uncontrollable'; the imprecise suggestions of the horrifying sacrifices of the pagan mystery religions, together with the indirect treatment of the Christian story of the Incarnation which takes place in the animal (if not bestial) context of a stable, all of these things make a powerful conclusion to the poem. And Yeats passes from the prosy opening to the overwhelming end within a single sentence (of 153 words), in which we are forced constantly to vary our expectation as to the way the poem is going to develop, and in which the changes in attitude are delicately underlined by changes in the rate at which information is provided. So the first half of the poem teases the reader by appearing to complete the sentence structure, but then withholds the actual conclusion (so the first two lines seem to imply that the speaker sees the 'unsatisfied ones', but it then proves that he sees them appear and disappear). It seems rather as if there is here a gesture by the speaker of holding back the information which is either particularly fascinating or particularly frightening by filling up his utterance with, chiefly, visual detail: the colours, the stiffness, the stones; this detail stressing the remoteness, age, immobility

of the people referred to - as if they were no more than figures in a painting, while the delayed climax stresses the personal urgency of dissatisfaction and hope. These variations in the flow of information are delicately underlined by changes in rhythm (a fine example is the pause in the middle of line 6) and by a subtle play of sound (the 'h' and 's' sounds in line 5, for instance, creating a sense of 'hovering'). The rhyme patterns add yet a further nuance to the difficult coherence of the poem, since line ending does not always coincide with syntactic grouping; the rhyme words are not always in fact pronounced alike, and the grouping of lines by rhyme does not correspond to grouping by verbal pattern. It is only towards the end of the poem that the rhymes seem really to articulate some major new step in the reader's knowledge; the fairly uninformative 'side by side' leads to the key term 'unsatisfied' and 'once more', apparently innocuous when it first appears, leads to the 'bestial floor' and a wholesale reviewing of the Nativity story; it is debased by being reduced from manger to floor and, most crucially of all, it becomes not unique, as it is for Christians, but something repeatable, something which can be seen 'once more'.

In addition to this there is a fluctuation in the reader's confidence in grasping the subject matter. Does it describe the Magi or a picture of them? Does it show respect or irony towards them? What moment of their life is depicted? We learn, little by little, that the poem is not the tribute to Christian story that the title might have led us to expect, but an appropriation of it. The Magi are dissatisfied not with the pre-Christian life that leads them to seek the redeemer, but with Calvary, the culminating sacrifice of the Christian religion, reduced to mere turbulence (perhaps more suggestive of the brawling on the Mount of Olives). Yeats approaches this new incarnation deviously, through the pale, stone-like fixity of the Magi, sign both of obsessiveness and of unimmediacv, and finds something too immediate. What reaction does the poem require the reader to show to the 'hope' of the Magi? On the one hand, the poem seems to agree that Calvary was indeed turbulent, and to set this against the almost ghostly inaction of the Magi; but the logic of the last line seems to be that Calvary was not turbulent enough and that what they want is more extreme, more beyond human control, more acutely focusing the difference between the divine and the animal. The paradox of the text then is that it uses a restrained, calm, discreet, perhaps delicately ironic tone to articulate the wish for an overwhelming transcendence.

Such paradoxes are not uncommon in modem poetry; nor is the fascination with the mythical and visionary, or the unorthodox use of myth. This concern with myth is in fact typical of the later Yeats: another powerful revision of the Christian story is 'The Second Coming', in which the poet, aghast at a century of 'mere anarchy', prophesies the coming of a 'rough beast', which 'Slouches towards Bethlehem to be bom'. Non-Christian legend and history' also become the material of a transfiguration, as with the two poems 'Sailing to Byzantium' and 'Byzantium', in which the changeless impersonal art of Byzantium becomes a temptation or a threat for the vulnerable and passionate speaker. Another case is 'Leda and the Swan', which counterpoints the brief violence of the rape of Leda with the tragic history which it inaugurated, and the brutal force of the god with the cultural knowledge which gives depth to the scene.

The past has intense immediacy for Yeats: the point is apparent in our second Yeats poem:

LONG-LEGGED FLY
That civilisation may not sink,
Its great battle lost,
Quiet the dog, tether the pony
To a distant post;
Our master Caesar is in the tent
Where the maps are spread,
His eyes fixed upon nothing,
A hand under his head.
Like a long-legged fly upon the stream
His mind moves upon silence.

That the topless towers be burnt
And men recall that face,
Move most gently if move you must
In this lonely place.
She thinks, part woman, three parts a child,
That nobody looks; her feet
Practice a tinker shuffle
Picked up on a street.
Like a long-legged fly upon the stream
Her mind moves upon silence.

That girls at puberty may find
The first Adam in their thought,
Shut the door of the Pope's chapel,
Keep these children out.
There on the scaffolding reclines
Michael Angelo.
With no more sound than the mice make
His hand moves to and fro.
Like a long-legged fly upon the stream
His mind moves upon silence.

The literary theorist Roman Jakobson believes that poetry is distinguished from prose by the fact that it is dominated by the 'principle of equivalence'; the words in a poem do not just complement each other to form meaningful sentences, but also resemble each other in sound and sense, so as to create a sense of consistency or sameness in the text (see Unit 18, pp. 528-32). This poem by Yeats clearly illustrates the principle: the three stanzas are very conspicuously composed to be equivalent to each other in content, grammatical form, the speaker's relationship to the hearer (or reader), the verse form and the rhythm, and the resemblance between them is strongly emphasized by the repeated refrain.

Each stanza recounts a moment of calm intimacy involving a major figure from history or legend, calls on the listener not to disturb the moment, and presents it as a preparation for some major event which is enshrined in our culture. But there are

variations between victory and defeat, intellect and bodily motion, male and female, activity and passivity', power and sexuality, variations in the intelligibility of the preparation, in the dignity' of the characters, in the explicitness of reference to them. These differences are reinforced by shifts within the basic rhythmic pattern. Yeats, it seems, is insisting that history and culture are constituted not only by acts - by such decisive and sometimes catastrophic acts as the victories of Caesar and the fall of Troy - but by a quality of preparedness, of anticipation, of potential; his three stanzas depict examples of such potential, which are also examples of awe-inspiring characters: the soldier, the beautiful and seductive woman, the creative artist. But the idea of potential - though of great importance to modern writers and especially modem poets - is itself a tenuous one which is manifest in various forms: mental and physical (and it seems the distinction corresponds to that of male and female), intended by the character or incidental, self-assured or involving social tension, creative or destructive.

What most unites these disparate images in the poem is the refrain. This, it is true, may at first seem to the reader actually to add another difficulty, since the fly on the stream has no obvious connection with the people depicted and the relation of fly to water is not obviously 'like' that of mind to silence. On reflection it proves that the 'likeness' is so complex and many-sided that the long-legged fly becomes a true symbol. The fly is light, free, elegant, vulnerable; the stream, by contrast, is deep - and so partially unknown - it is continuous and of a single consistency and it makes predictable progress. Now this relationship, of the free creature paradoxically drawing support from the dangerous and elusive depths, might most readily be applied to the great figures who appear memorably in what we sometimes call the stream of history, whom we understand in the context of a series of events but who retain their separate identity. But Yeats has transferred the symbol from this obvious sense - which readers are unlikely to forget completely - to relate it to the atmosphere of silence in which the characters are glimpsed. The moment of stillness, of isolation, is what allows the distinctive gesture - just as the gesture itself allows the creation and preservation of a continuing culture in which modem people think about Rome, Troy and Adam. The fly image is an image of separate-ness in continuity; and the great continuity of life is what forms the consistency of this poem.

The reader, moreover, is fictitiously involved in the poem, being put into the position of an observer - which readers, in one sense, necessarily are. But the scenes and people are familiar not from first-hand observation but from learning, and the text makes this very' apparent, in the broad historical perspective of the 'sinking' of civilization, in the modified quotation of Marlowe's 'face that launch'd a thousand ships/ And burnt the topless towers of Ilium', in the theological implications of 'the first Adam' and the very modem explicitness about puberty and welcome for sexual alertness. In each stanza the text moves from a concern with the lasting values of civilization - conceived as dramatically precarious, or built on sacrifice or on an eternal sexuality - to an imaginative intrusion into a private scene, the stanza ending with humble physical detail, so that the legendary Helen becomes a hopping child. Readers are reminded both that they belong to history and possess a

culture (and Yeats's culture here is somewhat broader than that of most of us and a good deal more elaborately thought out) and also that they are capable of moments of significant vision.

Yeats, in a sense, is putting his personal intensity of feeling and imagination to the test of an exterior culture and of a lucid and disciplined language. The same may be said of the many poems in which he comments on contemporary events, notably the Irish campaign for independence and the subsequent civil war, memorably contemplated in 'Easter 1916', 'A Meditation in Time of War', 'Meditations in Time of Civil War' and many other poems, or in which he pays tribute to people he knows, such as Eva Gore-Booth and Constance Markiewicz, Parnell or Lady Gregory, or to the way of life they incarnate, or which is implicit in certain places, such as the 'Ancestral Houses' or 'Coole Park'. Increasingly also, however, Yeats finds himself preoccupied with the extremities of irrational feeling, with 'the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart', and the difficulty of reconciling passion with order, and seeks through the discovery of a series of personae to give dignity to the recognition of bodily need and decline: the 'Crazy Jane' poems are a fine example, but there are also times when the persona is very near the real Yeats, who complains, for instance, in 'The Tower' of

> this caricature,
> Decrepit age that has been tied to me
> As to a dog's tail.

A fine example of the balance of objective and subjective vision is 'Among School Children', in which the poet first sees himself from outside as 'a sixty-year-old smiling public man' but then goes on through a series of private memories, fantasies, cultural allusions, to meditate finally on the relation of beauty to suffering, of the work to the author, to end with the unifying vision of the dancer who is identical with her an: 'How can we know the dancer from the dance?' An becomes self-justifying and self-sufficient, because art is corporeal; the balance of knowledge, sensation and imagination that characterizes Yeats's writing becomes an unage of an ideal life.

Ezra Pound

Ezra Pound is known not only for his poetry but, as we have seen, for his critical and theoretical writings and also for his dynamic effect in stimulating new thought about poetry through personal contact and through his role in the little magazines of the early years of the century . As a poet he is perhaps best known - even notorious - for a few poems which consist entirely of a sharply observed image. One quite extreme example is this:

> IN A STATION OF THE METRO
> The apparition of these faces in the crowd:
> Petals on a wet. black bough.

This is the whole of the poem: it almost blatantly refuses anything beyond the noting

of an impression, an impression that depends on a comparison which the reader can recognize as incongruously apt. The startling economy of this text has achieved for it the status of a modernist icon and you will find a reading of it in Unit 1, p. 10.

Other poems, some not much longer, show the influence of Chinese verse and the *haiku* in that their effect depends on a delicate shift of reference in the final line. One instance is 'Liu Ch'e': the first four lines of the poem evoke an autumnal scene of dead leaves, and in the fifth the speaker regrets his beloved: 'And she the rejoicer of the heart is beneath them'; the sixth and last line, printed after a blank, turns to a new external detail which is presented without comment but nevertheless seems symbolically to unite inner and outer: 'A wet leaf that clings to the threshold'. This sort of poetry, in which the poetic effect appears to arise from the presentation of objects (though in fact verbal rhythm and the implied metaphorical structure also play a large part), is typical of Imagism. Several other poets of the movement produced works with a similar accuracy of vision and economy of phrasing: one may mention, for instance, T.E. Hulme with 'Autumn' (in which the speaker sees the stars 'With white faces like town children'), H.D. (Hilda Doolittle) with such works as 'Oread' (which presents the steep waves of the sea as pine-trees) or 'Hermes of the Ways' (which clearly demonstrates the verbal restraint of the movement:

> Apples on the small trees
> Are hard,
> Too small,
> Too late ripened
> By a desperate sun
> That struggles through sea-mist.)

or Amy Lowell (whose three-line poem 'Middle Age' compares the speaker's heart to

> black ice
> Scrolled over with unintelligible patterns by an ignorant skater.)

The movement had a great influence in America: a poet associated with it, William Carlos Williams, was to produce an important body of poetry based on the belief expressed in the slogan 'no ideas but in things', poetry which perhaps focused even more on the uninterpreted object than that of the Imagists proper, as in this poem which relies on a symmetry of rhythm - which one may feel to be artificially induced by the line breaks - and on the tension between the portentous 'depends' and the apparently humdrum naming of objects:

> So much depends
> upon
>
> a red wheel
> barrow
>
> glazed with rain
> water
>
> beside the white
> chickens.

And this manner was to have an important heritage in such poets as Zukofsky. Charles Olson and Robert Creeley - see Unit 14, pp. 374-5.

But one should not loo exclusively stress the imagist side of Pound. **It is** complemented in his early work by a fascination with different cultures and ways of life: his first volumes of verse are called *Personae* because they show him adopting personalities drawn from ancient Greece and Rome or medieval France and Provence; later he was to add Anglo-Saxon England and China. The sense of a somewhat alien, artificial self-expression through role-playing is never quite absent from his work. It sometimes produces an elegant wit, sometimes a fairly broad humour, sometimes a grave pathos or a delicate sensuality: in all cases the reader is conscious of a distancing of the poet from the character, of his sense of the oddness and indirectness of life. A poem which combines an acute precision of image with complex ironies of cultural observation is this:

THE GARDEN
En robe de parade.
Samain

Like a skein of loose silk blown against a wall
She walks by the railing of a path in Kensington Gardens,
And she is dying piece-meal
of a sort of emotional anaemia.

And round about there is a rabble
Of the filthy, sturdy, unkillable infants of the very poor.
They shall inherit the earth.

In her is the end of breeding.
Her boredom is exquisite and excessive.
She would like some one to speak to her,
And is almost afraid that I
will commit that indiscretion.

This is a sort of epigram; it economically depicts a person and in a pithy final line implies an ironic judgement. The style of writing can be traced back to the poets of Greece and Rome, in whom Pound felt a strong interest, and is a sign of his fidelity to literary tradition as well of his liking for dry, precise, unsentimental writing; but there is a great deal in the poem in addition to these qualities, and it can well be described in Pound's phrase as a 'dance of the intellect among words'.

The poem is based on a glimpse of a person, seen in a well-known public place. Like *The Magi,* it is a poem of transitions: its interest lies in the way the speaker passes from a direct visual perception of the person to a presentation of her assumed attitude to himself, by way of an assessment of her general character and a characterization of the people around, the children playing in the Gardens. The subject may seem an extremely slight one (man sees woman). But it in fact presents complex attitudes: the speaker admires and criticizes the woman and the children, the woman, the last line hints, both wishes and fears contact with the speaker; more broadly the poem both accepts an 'aesthetic' detachment from life and regrets the 'end of breeding'. It would be easy to summarize this as a straightforward satire.

The woman suggests the aesthetes of the late nineteenth century, who were popularly thought of as concerned with dress, disdainful of the ordinary people, cultivating isolation and therefore boredom and appearing superior to the life of the body. The speaker, it appears, contrasts this over-refined sensibility with the healthy vigour of the poor, and mocks the inability of the aesthete to maintain whole-heartedly the solitude she has chosen. The speaker, on this account, is a strong personality, active enough to begin a healthy social contact perhaps inclining to flirtation.

But the various ambiguities and unclarities we have noted already show that things are not so simple. The final line is indeed ironic in its adoption of the woman's (presumed) point of view. But the beginning actually celebrates an aesthetic perspective. It presents the person in purely visual terms - so much so that the reader does not even know yet that there is a person there; it implies a knowledge of clothing ('skein' is a fairly technical term); it shows a fascination with movement ('blown') and with contrast of textures and character (the 'loose silk' and the solid wall). Moreover, although this is strictly a simile (the woman is *like* silk), there is every temptation to read this as verging on metonymy, if we assume the woman looks like silk because she is actually wearing silk. And the shift in the line from vision to movement is reinforced by a delicate set of sound echoes and a rhythmic shift at the word 'blown'. Complexity of linguistic effect corresponds to intensity of vision.

Two questions remain. Is this poetry? And is it modem? Some of the techniques of writing could, of course, appear in prose: the shifting distance from the subject, the changing point of view, the echoes of certain kinds of language (biblical or 'refined'). What transposes this into the poetic is the opening image, the effects of sound repetition, unobtrusively handled throughout, and most of all the effects of rhythm, the line expanding and contracting to match the speaker's fascination or brusque decisiveness. Is the poem modem? It is difficult to say that no such features could be found in, say, Browning; but the combination of brevity and apparent incompletion, allusiveness, ambiguity and instability at least points in the direction modem poetry was to follow.

If the early *The Garden* is not unmistakably modernist, Pound's *Cantos,* which form his largest poetic undertaking and occupied much of his later life, are modernism in its most extreme form. They too contain many vivid images; but they extend Pound's readiness to adopt personae derived from alien cultures to the point of creating a kind of writing so eclectic as to be extremely difficult for most readers to comprehend with any certainty. So much so, in fact, that Pound has had few followers in this style (unless one is to include Basil Bunting). A typical example is this:

/ro/n CANTO LXXIV
The enormous tragedy of the dream in the peasant's bent
shoulders
Manes' Manes was tanned and stuffed.
Thus Ben and Clara *a Milano*
by the heels at Milano

That maggots shd/ eat the dead bullock
DIGONOS, *dtyovoc,* but the twice crucified
where in history will you find it?
yet say this to the Possum: a bang, not a whimper,
with a bane not a whimper,
To build the cits of Dioce whose terraces are the colour of stars.
The suave eyes, quiet, not scornful.
rain also is of the process.
XMtat you depart from is not the way
and olive tree blown white in the wind
w ashed in the Kiang and Han
w hat whiteness will you add to this whiteness,
what candor?

There is a great deal in a passage such as this to bewilder almost any reader; if modernism can be thought of as giving evidence of the difficulty of literary communication in the twentieth century brought about by the lack of a common culture between poet and reader and by the poet's persistent concern for his private feelings and associations of ideas, it is difficult to imagine any passage which is more obviously modernist. Indeed some readers may feel that this is not far from parody of modernism. So we have fragmentary sentences, ill-constructed sentences, sentences which succeed each other without obvious connection, rapid shifts in tone, apparent or actual quotations with no explanation of their source or their relevance, references to people and places the reader may not be able to identify, a word in Greek, repeated in Greek type, and a phrase in Italian, then partly translated. We have, too, trivial annoyances such as the eccentric abbreviation for [1] should' and the apparently random use or avoidance of capitals at the beginning of lines of verse. At first sight, this is an outrageous infraction of the normal courtesy of writer to reader, which requires the writer to ensure as far as possible that there is no obstacle to comprehension. And it must be admitted that some degree of such discourtesy - if that is what it is - is not rare in modem verse.

Why then should we read such material? There are, I think, three reasons: Pound's mastery of tone, his complex thematic structure and his wide culture.

The two lines about Dioce and the 'suave eyes' show something of the mastery of poetic expression of which Pound is capable. The echoes of 'd', 's', 't', 'k' sounds link the key words so as to create a curiously indirect consistency of texture, reinforced by the slow and flexible rhythm of the two lines. The two figurative expressions complement each other in focusing on the process of seeing and transposing it to an atmosphere of calm pleasure; this is then characterized morally, 'quiet, not scornful' contrasting with the images of cruelty and distaste earlier in the poem, and then transposed to a new visual sensation, that of the rain. Poetry in these lines gives verbal form to the complex activity of seeing things carefully.

This acutely observed detail takes its place in a broad pattern of feeling. Up to this point the passage has been concerned with death, defeat, finality, though it has also contained the hint of a dream which might give some satisfaction to the hard-worn

peasant; from the Dioce image on, the passage is concerned with a discovery of new meaningfulness and purity, with a 'way' from which one may not depart - or cannot depart - in nature and brightness, in 'candor', both personal honesty and, etymologically, the whiteness of the landscape. The poem is turning from a preoccupation with the ugliness of actual history to a hope for peace in nature and myth.

Thirdly, the reader is conscious of a mind turning with great rapidity to a number of domains of experience and to a number of ways of talking about them. Even totally uninformed, the reader may be impressed - if also disquieted - by the refusal to dissociate the poet's knowledge of the immediate scene, his acquaintances, and his cultural knowledge of Greece and China, or his familiarity with the rhythms of everyday conversation, elegiac lament, romantic verse, a specific modem poem, gnomic wisdom, his own earlier bare lyric. The attempt to combine these things, of course, lays bare their separateness in the minds of most of us, and so creates a fragmentary impression; but this fragmentation can be seen as an honest attempt to face up to the confusing multiplicity of modem culture.

In any case, most readers are not totally uninformed. It is not difficult to get the reference to the dictator Benito Mussolini and his mistress Clara Petacci, killed and hung upside down in a public square in Milan at the end of the war, and many readers may know of Pound's misguided admiration for Mussolini; for all readers then this is a reminder of the cruelty of war, and for those capable of feeling some sympathy with Pound it is also a sign of a sense of the end of a worthwhile epoch. Most people familiar with modem poetry will have little difficulty with Old Possum, and see in the reference a friendly nod to an ally in gloom.

There remain the unfortunate Manes, Digonos, Dioce, Kiang and Han. Some research will identify these. Woodward's *Ezra Pound and the Pisan Cantos* (1980) reveals that Manes is a prophet and *digonos* ('twice-born') a term referring to the god Dionysos, both of these references placing the death of the dictator in a context of myth and sacrifice, and that Dioce is the builder of a holy city in Herodotus. Flory's *Ezra Pound and the Cantos* (1980) identifies Kiang and Han (not surprisingly) as Chinese rivers, and (more importantly) traces the line about washing to a quotation from Mencius which also appears in Pound's *Confucius.*

As these cases may suggest, the encyclopaedic character of Pound's writing has given rise to a vast amount of commentary and explanation. A particularly comprehensive and pertinent example is Hugh Kenner's *The Pound Era* (1972). Research in such works, of course, may not produce the spontaneous emotional response that recognition does; in practice many readers are left in a state of half-comprehension (if they don't do the research) or half-response (if they do). They recognize in fact the limits of communication, when it is communication with a mind as varied and demanding as Pound's; and the effort to close in those limits can be a very rewarding one.

T.S. Eliot

We turn next to T.S. Eliot, perhaps the most respected and influential modern poet in England. Eliot's first poems, published in 1917, are remarkable for their intensity

and complexity of feeling, for their command of a rhythm which combines forceful progress with an elusive irregularity, for their apt and economical evocation of characteristic modem scenes, for their ironic account of characters and situations from modem sophisticated society (as with the Jamesian 'Portrait of a Lady'). The influence of the less well-known French poets of the late nineteenth century, with their hybrid style made up of lyricism, parody, realism and irony, is apparent in some works (very obviously in 'Conversation Galante*), but Eliot's tense richness of significance gives a very individual tone to such lines as these (from 'Preludes'):

His soul stretched tight across the skies
That fade behind a city block.
Or trampled by insistent feet
At four and five and six o clock.

The volume is named after its most striking poem, one which presents an elusive and complex character through a kaleidoscope of scenes and manners of speech, 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock'. These are the opening lines:

Let us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherised upon a table;
Let us go through certain half-deserted streets,
The muttering retreats
Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels
And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells:
Streets that follow like a tedious argument
Of insidious intent
To lead you to an overwhelming question...
Oh, do not ask, 'What is it?'
Let us go and make our visit.

This is a dramatic monologue, but very different from those of Browning, which seek to present to the reader the strong emotions of a forceful and self-confident personality - a technique discussed in Unit 12, pp. 312-16. The personality here is evasive, and his relationship with the reader is not at all clear or consistent. The speaker proposes a shared exploration of the city, but an exploration which he views with both wit and distaste. The invitation, pressing as it is, is not specially attractive: symbolically the atmosphere conveyed is that of suffering, helplessness, tedium and menace; realistically conveyed is a world of isolation, poverty and discomfort.

The urban setting is typically modern. It is presented both through sharp realistic detail (the oyster shells) and through phantastic imagery. The relationship of reader to speaker is unclear: is the reader to identify himself or herself with the person addressed (whoever this may be)? Moreover, the tone adopted towards the reader verges on the hectoring: the poem apparently starts in mid-conversation, takes for granted the relationship of 'you and I\ insistently repeats phrases, and, in line 12, seems to casually brush off the listener's possible reluctance. The reader, like the listener, does not even know what the overwhelming question is: there are in fact a number of questions later in the poem, such as 'Do I dare/ Disturb the universe?' and, much repeated, 'How should I presume?' and one or more of these may, or may not, be the overwhelming question, delayed.

It is above all the two striking similes that give strong emotional significance to this apparently awkward communication. Both imply a crucial difficulty. In what sense is the evening 'spread out against the sky' and in what sense does it resemble the patient? There is no problem in seeing that the patient may be spread out, but it is difficult to apply this to the evening until we know what about the evening it is that is spread. (Could it be that the darkness; starting to cover the sky, can be seen stretching along the horizon of a lighter sky?) There is moreover a curious appropriacy in the ether, which is both an anaesthetic (in the simile) and the sky itself (in traditional poetic diction). Similarly, if less obscurely, the streets follow one from each other in the sense that one walks through one to get to the next - and in doing so, the poem implies, carries on a train of thought, 'just as' the conclusion of an argument follows from its premises. The second example is a brilliant coalescence of the narrated process of walking and thinking with the suggested process of deduction, but its brilliance is a sleight of hand: what the 'just as' really indicates is not much more than a pun.

The text then seems both to assert that the observed scene is continuous with the character's (or the characters') anxieties and to leave the reader unsettled about the nature of this continuity. The consistency of outer and inner world is strengthened by a mastery of free verse structure that has its own insidious intent, involving the reader in a curiosity that leaves him ready to ask the momentous question, or at least wishing to know more.

The rhyme scheme essentially consists of couplets. The rhymes themselves may seem banal. A certain banality is indeed one aspect of the text, which is colloquial, conversational, not obviously sophisticated (but really very sophisticated). But there are subtle variations in this simplicity of style. Two lines do not rhyme with anything. The first startling image, the table, shocks the reader into expecting some symmetrical phantastic vision; it does not come, and the poem goes into realistic listing. The 'question' arouses acute curiosity as to what it will be, but the line fades out in dots and there is no complement to the line. Some of the rhymes are awkward too: the final pair 'is it' - 'visit' verges on the comic, and the pair 'argument' - 'intent' works fully only if we give 'argument' a false stress. The rhythm of the poem is a masterly exploitation of the musical rhythm advocated by Pound. It hovers between a two-syllable and a three-syllable metric foot, between a solemn regularity and conversational spontaneity. If we give extra stress to the last syllable of 'argument' we get a very emphatic line of basically iambic character, in which the key terms 'streets', 'follow', 'tedious', 'argument' all receive heavy stress; if we maintain a normal stress, 'follow' is likely to be reduced to lower prominence, obscuring its key position in the texture of thought. This elusive flexibility of rhythm is further reinforced by a set of word echoes: here 'insidious' echoes the sound of 'tedious', while 'leads' appears to correspond in sense to 'follows', leaving us surprised that the streets can both lead and follow.

All this makes the poem ambiguous. Essentially, it presents the state of mind of the character as arising inevitably from the context; but this inevitability also appears to be a rhetorical fiction, the result of the speaker's attempts to entice the listener or reader into complicity with him.

The major poem of Eliot's youth, *The Waste Land,* is an extension of the concerns of 'Prufrock': it too shows a rootless and fragmented modem life through a variety of apparently incoherent voices, shifting rhythms, boldly suggestive images and an extraordinary - and at first obscure - range of cultural reference and citation. But it goes far beyond 'Prufrock* in its aspiration to spirituality, conveyed largely through references to the .Arthurian myth of the Grail which gives new grace to a deathly land - a myth which, in accordance with the anthropological v iewpoint of Sir James Frazer and Jessie Weston, is superimposed on the pattern of death and rebirth in the cycle of the seasons - and through its transcending the viewpoint of a single character to give a series of snapshots of disparate but equally bleak scenes typifying the desperation, discontinuity and emotional impoverishment that Eliot sees in modem life. Some of these scenes may seem distasteful, since the emotional impoverishment may in fact seem to be little more than Eliot's lack of sympathy for working-class and lower middle-class life (and other such passages were edited out as part of a general pruning undertaken by Pound at his friend's request); even so, the attempt to unify the multiple experience of the modem city within a mythic vision is an impressive undertaking. *The Waste Land* is too ambitious and complex a work to present thoroughly in a general study; but it must be recognized as one of the peaks of modern poetic creation.

This vein is further developed in a number of poems in which Eliot approaches ever closer to traditional Christian feeling and rejection of the secular world: 'The Hollow Men', 'Ash Wednesday', the 'Ariel Poems'. These are poems in which distinctive symbols come to bear more and more the weight of the poet's contemplation: the 'eyes I dare not meet in dreams' of 'The Hollow Men', the winding stair of 'Ash Wednesday'. At the same time the style acquires a solemn almost ritual repetitiousness, a certain generality and abstraction of vocabulary and a slow measured rhythm, sometimes counterpointed with a strong sense for the individuality of the speaking voice. The tender gravity to which the poet attains as he approaches Christian faith is especially finely conveyed in 'The Journey of the Magi' (from the 'Ariel Poems') through a style which is almost conversational but actually delicately suggestive in its rhythms and the precision of its vocabulary:

> A cold coming we had of it,
> Just the worst time of the year
> For a journey, and such a long journey
> The ways deep and the weather sharp.
> The very dead of winter.

There are other sides to Eliot's achievement. Notably there are the neatly patterned, erudite and amusingly ironic 'quatrain poems' of 1920, where the elegance can be at least disconcerting, as in 'Mr Eliot's Sunday Morning Service':

> Poly philoprogenitive,
> Sapient sutlers of the Lord
> Drift across the window-panes.
> In the beginning was the Word.

There is, too, the bleak low-life drama of 'Sweeney Agonistes', with its banal conversations, perfunctory relationships and final music-hall song set against Sweeney's memories of the man who 'did a girl in' and his assertion:

> Birth, and copulation, and death.
> That's all the facts when you get down to brass tacks.

But Eliot's major poetic achievement comes in a further development of the meditation on spiritual need and cultural context adumbrated in 'Prufrock'; it is the series of poems, each named after a particular place, and conveying a strong sense of the character of places, called *Four Quartets* (1935-42). After this work, Eliot published no major new poems, but concentrated on drama and on critical writing. An extract will show how, in this mature poetry', the difficulty of communication central to 'Prufrock' and *The Waste Land* will, in important ways, have been transcended:

> /rom EAST COKER
> In my beginning is my end. Now the light falls
> Across the open fields, leaving rhe deep lane
> Shuttered with branches, dark in the afternoon.
> Where you lean against a bank while a van passes,
> And the deep lane insists on the direction
> Into the village, in the electric heat
> Hypnotised. In a warm haze the sultry light
> Is absorbed, not refracted, by grey stone.
> The dahlias sleep in empty silence.
> Wait for the early owl.

But there is still a great deal in 'East Coker' that recalls the strategy of 'Prufrock': this poem is again a reflection on place, a place not just 'half-deserted' but 'empty', in which the setting orients the attention of the person addressed, who again is not clearly identified, and who again is subject to peremptory instruction ('wait'). Again there is a confident assumption of a known kind of scene, which the van shows to be modem. Some differences are immediately apparent: the scene is rural, the time is afternoon (though evening is anticipated in the last line quoted), the atmosphere is primarily one of comfortable tranquillity, of rest and warmth. One thing that makes this a very fine piece of writing in fact is the way a calm fullness of attention is conveyed by the steady but varied pace of the lines, by the repeated consonants (notably the 'd's and Ts), by the repetitions of words or ideas (notably of depth and heat), by the line-endings which echo without quite rhyming, and by the gradual evocation of a typical scene: field, lane, bank, village, grey stone. But there is more to the poem than this; there are elements which don't quite fit the calm harmony of the scene. There are the contrasts between open field and closed lane, darkness and light, leaning and mobility; the discreet hint of coercion in 'insists' and 'hypnotised': the curious intellectual precision, almost pedantry, in the eighth line, bringing with it a shift of rhythm to the almost prosaic; and the sharp reorientation at the end of the passage, as line 9 suddenly focuses on a very specific flower and places it in a figurative context. The attention of the poet is partly sunk into the

soporific warmth of the day; he is also aware of what could be different, of the potential for change in the scene and in his own sensibility.

The poem may seem to be a transcription of a picture. But the picture implies movement and so time. The passage ends - perhaps rather incongruously - by exhorting the hearer to wait. Immediately the hearer is to wait for evening, for the night bird appearing early. Later in the poem the theme of waiting for God and of the 'darkness of God' will become major ones; the English landscape anticipates a longing for the divine. And the passage has begun with a reflection on time, even more alien to the tone of the description itself. 'In my beginning is my end': the phrase is a repetition of the opening words of the whole poem, sixteen lines earlier (and, incidentally, a quotation from Mary Queen of Scots) and will be echoed in the last phrase of this section of the poem, thiry-eight lines later.

The poem has an elaborate construction in repeated motifs, like those in a string quartet; as contrasting themes in music intertwine and complement each other, so here the themes of time and space interact. The previous section has expressed fascination at the idea of change, of the sequence of birth and death. The musical repetition may seem to still this process of variation in time, and the moment of pause gives rise to a sudden concentration on the 'now' - implicit in which is the sense of futurity and of a possible disruption of time.

This then is a kind of philosophical poetry, concerned with the basic dimen sions of human life, space and time. It considers them not through abstract argument but through detailed and sensitive attention to a scene. It is not difficult to see this as part of a tradition of meditative landscape poetry in which the greatest figure is probably Wordsworth. As the poem shows its allegiance to a literary tradition, so it shows its fidelity to a traditional view of a rural England (threatened at the time of writing by war). The modernist features are still there: the discontinu- ity. the impressionistic construction, the self-awareness tending towards irony, the sense of disquiet. But these things are now very restrained; the outsider's search for significance that made 'Prufrock' so provocative, eccentric and disquieting has been succeeded by a feeling of belonging, a loving acceptance of a familiar world, which has become the basis of a perhaps even more deeply questioning search for understanding.

W.H. Auden and the poetry of the 1930s

The poets who came to prominence in the late 1920s and early 1930s - the best-known names are those of W.H. Auden, Louis MacNeice, Stephen Spender and C. Day Lewis - were viewed at the time as aggressively modernistic because of their insistent references to the contemporary world, with its technical and economic progress (pylons, subject of a poem by Spender, are often thought to be specially characteristic of the movement), with the rise of a popular culture of cinema and journalism, with that greater awareness of different social classes, with the rise of new and potentially subversive theories and styles of thought such as Freudian psychology and Marxism, and above all with the political and social insecurity

brought about by economic catastrophe, high unemployment, the rise of extremist political movements, the spread of war in many countries and the fear of war involving Britain. A fine study of the whole movement is Hynes (1976). These poets are modern in the sense that they reflect in almost a journalistic spirit the world known to their readers. If we consider the essence of Eliot's modernism to be a weakening of the sense of the integrity of individual personality and a readiness to adopt a variety of — perhaps incompatible - personae, then the poets of the 1930s are much less clearly modernistic, and their use of a new poetic style, marked by surprising epithets, discontinuities of argument, similes which are compressed to the point of unclarity, learned or private allusions and sudden shifts in tone or in attitude to the reader, is less a matter of discontent with the potential of literary communication than of a rhetoric intended to heighten the novelty or immediacy of their experience. A case is W.H. Auden's 7929:

> It was Easter as I walked in the public gardens,
> Hearing the frogs from the pond,
> Watching traffic of magnificent cloud
> Moving without anxiety on open sky -
> Season when lovers and writers find
> An altering speech for altering things,
> An emphasis on new names, on the arm
> A fresh hand with fresh power.
> But thinking so I came at once
> Where solitary man sat weeping on a bench,
> Hanging his head down, with his mouth distorted
> Helpless and ugly as an embryo chicken.

These opening lines take up the general setting of 'Prufrock', the stranger walking through the city and defining its character and atmosphere, but the tone is very' new. The poem is presented as a reminiscence of the speaker rather than as a dialogue, and serves indirectly to characterize the speaker as lover or writer. The speaker is delighted with novelty; the spring season brings with it a feeling of openness, freedom, strength. Auden is conscious of belonging to a new generation, capable of new ways of life - personal and political - and new forms of expression. The passage ends with the individual who does not fit in to this new world, the weeping solitary, who leads the poet to reflect, in later parts of the poem, on the death and suffering that form an essential sacrifice as part of the Easter renewal. There is then a harsh contrast, strongly underlined by the sudden change in style, from the long complex first sentence, marked by continuous brilliance of effect, by surprise, incongruity and conspicuousness, with verbal parallels, sudden shifts of focus, elusive metaphor and rhetorical repetitions, to the second sentence, which verges on the lax or prosaic until the distasteful shock of the final simile. The first sentence manifests the speaker's pride in his *joie de vivre*\ his delight in 'an altering speech' is apparent in the cunning illusions of language he has prepared for his readers. The second sentence shows a moment of reluctant observation, totally external to the speaker, illustrating the limits of human pride, and finally coming into horrible focus in the chicken image.

The image itself, though, is one more of Auden's illusions. It is difficult to see how a mouth can resemble a chicken, as the text appears to claim: it is much easier to think of the helpless form and especially the disproportionately thin neck of the chicken as representing the whole figure of the man with bent head. The image is neat: the spring chicken is a symbol of Easter; but this aborted embryo is a cruel parody of the new life of spring. But here we come to a crucial factor in Auden, and especially the early Auden. The reader of such material is very struck by the ingenuity, wit, inventiveness of the writing; we may even be struck by such small eccentricities as the omission of articles with some nouns ('traffic', 'cloud* and 'man' here). Such originality is extremely attractive; it is not clear that it is appropriate, either for the apparent pride in new life or for the disquiet at ugliness: the speaker seems to show more enjoyment in verbal creativity than we might expect. It also serves a dramatic purpose: the speaker is at first characterized as a *flaneur,* a light-hearted observer, and the encounter with suffering is his first step to the political and personal commitment that is expressed at the end of the whole poem. And yet what is always striking in Auden is the note of hyperbole, the readiness to fantasize and exaggerate - and a note of irony directed to such imaginary freedom.

The poet, that is, is both observer and fantasist, both objective and introspective. These complex tendencies are apparent in much of the writing of the 1930s. In Auden himself, for instance, we find such 'documentary' poems as 'Casino', 'Oxford', 'Dover' and many other poems describing places and characters; MacNeice as well as Auden wrote about Birmingham; in other poets we find such works as Spender's 'Landscape near an Aerodrome' or Bernard Spencer's 'Allotments: April*. Among current events the Spanish Civil War attracted a vast amount of poetic comment, notably from Auden, Spender and MacNeice, as well as John Comford who was to die in that war; such issues as unemployment, mass holidays, urbanization and industrialization are reflected in a great many poems of the time. Especially deserving of mention is MacNeice's *Autumn Journal,* a long meditative poem reflecting on many aspects of urban life and public affairs in the late 1930s as well as on the poet's private emotional life. But as well as all this responsible public commentary there is a constant vein of dream, fantasy and purely personal feeling. One extreme is the surrealistic tendency seen in, for instance, much of David Gascoyne or in Philip O'Connor's 'Blue Bugs in Liquid Silk', which begins

> blue bugs in liquid silk
> talk with correlation particularly like
> two women in white bandages

But in Auden too the private note is very strongly struck: the outsider, the spy, the 'helmeted airman' of the early verse is not just the objective observer, but also the exile, the solitary; the world of the 1930s is threatened not just by poverty and war but by such menacing figures of imagination as in 'The Witnesses':

> the hooded woman, the hump-backed surgeons
> And the Scissor-Man.

Some of his most deeply felt verse, in fact, is concerned with the need to preserve a private life despite the pressure of the public: 'Lullaby' seeks to assert love despite its own instability and despite his awareness of 'the fashionable madmen' with 'their pedantic boring cry', and 'A bride in the 30s' rehearses the signs of the times: travel, steel and polished glass, tyranny and mass demonstrations, names Hitler, Mussolini, Churchill, Roosevelt, van der Lubbe, but ends with the voice of the heart asserting in characteristically elusive images and dense syntax, the centrality of moral choice:

> 'Yours the choice to whom the gods awarded
> The language of learning, the language of love,
> Crooked to move as a money-bug, as a cancer,
> Or straight as a dove[5].

Auden, like Eliot, was to mature, especially after his move to the United States in 1939, which coincided with his conversion to Christianity and a new subject matter for his poems, which display a less tense and spectacular kind of verse. An example is this:

> *from* MOUNTAINS
> To be sitting in privacy, like a cat
> On the warm roof of a loft,
> Where the high-spirited son of some gloomy tarn
> Comes sprinting down through a green croft,
> Bright with flowers laid out in exquisite splodges
> Like a Chinese poem, while, near enough, a real darling
> Is cooking a delicious lunch, would keep me happy for
> What? five minutes? For an uncatlike
> Creature who has gone wrong,
> Five minutes on even the nicest mountain
> Are awfully long.

This is the final stanza of a son of landscape poem: it differs a great deal both from his own earlier picture of an observed scene in *1929* and from Eliot's depiction of place in 'East Coker'. Firstly, Auden here does not purport to re-enact a situation in which he participates directly; he discusses the feelings people have about mountains, and he speculates on a setting which *would* keep him happy. Moreover the incongruous details - the cat comparison, the eccentric vocabulary, the definite article in 'the high-spirited son', the 'splodges' - suggest that this is not a real mountain at all but some conventional image of a mountain. And finally the speaker turns away from the scene altogether to think about love and lunch. This looks like blatant frivolity. Wordsworth, discreetly evoked earlier in the poem, might have been outraged. The approach to the reader, moreover, largely maintains a tone of modest amusement which suggests an unpoetic - even a non-written - casualness, and it may seem very far from the high ambitions for poetry as a special kind of communication voiced and practised by many modem writers.

Except that things are really rather more complex. This complexity has three aspects. First, those casual and naive phrases do seem to go slightly wrong. Mountains, for instance, are not nice; the claim that they are is a blatant evasion of

the tradition of awe and heroism they have acquired. Secondly, this is verse. It may be difficult to remember the fact, since the metre is so varied as to be barely recognizable at times and since there are only two rhyme pairs in these eleven lines. But in fact the lines do show the real distinguishing features of poetry: the sound and rhythm of the lines do affect the reader's response. And they do so rather strangely at times: lines 3-4, for instance, recount a rapid movement, but give an awkward conglomeration of stressed syllables, consonant groups, and obtrusive sound echoes. There is effort in this sprinting: or rather in the poet's imagination of it, in his exploitation of Romantic fairy-tale. Finally, there is a phrase which is not immediately intelligible, as good conversation should be: why is Auden (or why is humanity in general) 'an uncatlike/ Creature who has gone wrong'? The adjective, moreover, undermines the argument because it implies that the whole of the introductory section, in which Auden envies the cat, is irrelevant. How has mankind gone wrong? One obvious answer is through original sin, which, for Christians, is part of the crucial difference between people and animals. The complacent ease of communication, the enjoyment of familiar legends, of aesthetics, of domesticity: these are real values, charmingly communicated in much of the poem. But they are not the ultimate values, which the poem is too discreet to formulate exactly.

Modem poetry, as we have seen, is a challenging and vital exploration of what language can achieve; it may be called 'experimental' in the sense that poets have sought to establish how richly a sensibility can be conveyed in language, despite the widespread feeling that life is becoming more private, that the gap between the particular culture of the individual writer and the general culture of readers is widening, and that the language is being debased and oversimplified by such forms of mass communication as journalism, advertising, political and religious propaganda and sensational fiction. This experimentation is an enterprise that deserves our respect for its refusal to compromise. It is intriguing to notice that while Pound grew' more experimental with age, Eliot and Auden grew less so, whether through personal maturing or through an increasing feeling that modem culture - at least a substantial minority culture — had developed to the point where ready communication has become possible. We shall see in the closing part of this unit that the tension between experimentation and community was to continue in later poetry.

Poetry since 1945

The best-known poet in Britain in the post-war years was no doubt Dylan Thomas. Thomas had in fact been writing verse throughout the 1930s (his first mature poems date from 1930, when he was 16: hence his sarcastic reference to himself as 'the boy Rimbaud of Cwmdonkin Drive'). But his work was alien to the mainstream of 1930s poetry, as represented by Auden and his group, and his reputation is most firmly settled by such collections as *Deaths and Entrances* (1946) and the *Collected Poems* of 1952. His reputation was enhanced by a notoriously Bohemian lifestyle and by the exceptional success of his radio play *Under Milk Wood,* which owes its popularity to his astoundingly exuberant verbal inventiveness and his ironically

good-natured view of the everyday excesses of Welsh village life. As a poet, he represents a culmination of a Romantic-symbolist tradition: his subject matter is predominantly the biological-spiritual domain of death, vitality, birth, childhood, ageing and God; the imagery is predominantly elemental: earth, air, water, the human body; the rhythms are dense and reinforced by a rich set of sound echoes. Most crucially of all, the metaphors are so numerous and so closely interwoven that almost no clue is given to the literal sense of some texts, a quality heightened by the poet's tendency apparently to start the poem in the midst of some unspecified situation. The result may be that readers at first let themselves be carried along by the poet's intoxicating love of words, the only landmarks being provided by some coherently linked keywords and by some strikingly compressed phrases: [4]a grief ago', "all the sun long', 'it was my thirtieth year to heaven'. The total effect is as of a Hopkins out of control (see Unit 12, pp. 327-30 for a discussion of Hopkins's verse and technique). But in fact Thomas is not, at best, out of control: a passage such as this shows a complex organization of tone, verbal play, sensuous apprehension, verse rhythm and syntax:

> Now as I was young and easy under the apple boughs
> About the lilting house and happy as the grass was green,
> The night above the dingle starry.
> Time let me hail and climb
> Golden in the heydays of his eyes...
>
> ('Fem Hili', 11. 1-5)

This aims at synthesis rather than precision: it appears to be both day and night, 'Time' appears to be a vague stand-in for some concept such as 'those people around me in my youth in whose eyes I was perceived'; but the sense of varied joy is acutely conveyed by the reader's awareness of a landscape dear to the poet but not quite accessible to his audience. And one should recall that this is not Thomas's only vein; among his most impressive work is the comparatively austere dignity of 'Do not go gentle into that good night' and the balance of symbolic punning and explicit apothegms in the 'Refusal to mourn the death, by fire, of a child in London'.

Dylan Thomas brought to an extreme the idea of poetry' as a special language, in which fullness of meaning strains against the discipline and energy of syntax. This attitude may be found in other neo-Romantic poets of his generation: David Jones, Vernon Watkins, George Barker, John Heath-Stubbs. A harsher, less expansive view of poetry, which however still depends on the creation of a dense and startling language, is found in R.S. Thomas, with his sense of the limits and hardships of Welsh farming life:

> Too far for you to see
> The fluke and the foot-rot and the fat maggot
> Gnawing the skin from the small bones,
> The sheep are grazing at Bwlch-y-Fedwen...
>
> ('The Welsh Hill Country', 11. 1-4)

But the next major tendency in poetry in the post-war years was the creation of a range of styles in which poetic language was closely aligned to the everyday speech

of educated people. This is the group of writers known as 'The Movement' (see Blake Morrison's study, 1980); its arrival in the public domain can most closely be located in the publication of Philip Larkin's volume *The Less Deceived* (1955) and of the anthology *New Lines* (1956). The tone of the Movement may also be seen in the popular novel *Lucky Jim* (1954) by one of the *New Lines* poets, Kingsley Amis: it is close to everyday experience (especially the experience of the middle- or lower-middle classes), suspicious of theory, abstractions and pretensions, cautious and self-restrained, sometimes self-mocking, often given to conspicuously rational argument and to systematic debate, witty, ironic and observant. 'The most glaring fault awaiting correction' in poetry before the Movement, according to New *Lines* editor, Robert Conquest, 'was the omission of the necessary intellectual component from poetry'; the most obvious example of the unintellectual or irrational - although he is not named - is Dylan Thomas.

The outstanding figure of the Movement was undoubtedly Philip Larkin; starting in his youth in a rather Yeatsian vein (77ie *North Ship,* 1945) he finds in the almost prosaic ordinariness of his chosen stance a discipline which allows him to engage discreetly and lucidly with major issues. A famous and typical example is 'Church Going'. The speaker in the poem, like most intellectuals of his generation, is not a Christian believer, and visits churches (by bicycle) out of a tourist's curiosity. The opening stresses his ignorance and indifference, in awkwardly colloquial tones:

> Once I am sure there's nothing going on
> I step inside, letting the door thud shut.
> Another church: matting, seats and stone,
> And little books.

The rhythm of 'thud shut' gives an acute sense of seclusion; the vagueness and flatness of the rest suggests tedium. But as the speaker departs, leaving an Irish sixpence as a crudely comic donation, he starts to reflect on what, if anything, churches still mean. And gradually the detached cynicism yields to a respect for 'this special shell', and the poet concludes by recognizing 'A hunger in himself to be more serious' and a pull towards

> this ground,
> Which, he once heard, was proper to grow wise in.
> If only that so many dead lie round.

This is a poem in which honesty and self-discipline seem almost as one, and in which they are conveyed by the neat verse form, the constant qualifications of the points made ('he once heard', 'if only'), the slow shift from the superficial to the solemn: wisdom, seriousness, specialness, the modem reader may feel, may be claimed all the more convincingly because they emerge from a sense of embarrass-ment and strangeness. Larkin remained throughout his creative life a keen observer of the surfaces of modem life (the city of Hull and its environs are captured with intimate knowledge and commitment, if not enjoyment); he extended his mimetic power in depicting different styles of speech and types of personality; and throughout his work there is the aspiration to celebrate the emptiness which he finds

behind the busy world of commerce, leisure and work, or to tentatively endorse the social structures that seek to transcend it - a fine example is the rural 'Show Saturday', of which he reflects that it should be

> something people do
> Not noticing how time's rolling smithy-smoke
> Shadows much greater gestures;...

Larkin essentially is anti-modernist. He rejects the imprecise suggestiveness of much modem verse, and the sense of the poet as visionary and guide that sometimes goes with it. His conservatism (literary and political), his respect for clarity and for the actual appearances of things, can lead him back to an expression not far from the Georgian style, as in this delicately melancholy nature poem, 'Cut Grass':

> Cut grass lies frail:
> Brief is the breath
> Mown stalks exhale.
> Long, long the death
>
> It dies in the white hours ...

Of the other *New Lines* poets, one of the most prominent has been D.J. Enright, with his economic wit and irony, his sense of place, related to wide-ranging travels, his concern for political dilemmas, and his preference for a questioning, inconclusive, understated persona. Still better known has been Thom Gunn, whose early works show a complex metaphysical argumentativeness, allied to an acute self-awareness and an interest in motor cyclists, but whose later work under the influence of American models abandons the Movement decorum to investigate less formal models of verse (including syllabic verse) and a more direct, more literal depiction of personal relationships, and of the experiences of travel and place.

A new mood in poetry is indicated by the 1962 anthology *The New Poetry.* The editor, A. Alvarez, uses his introduction to argue against the principle of gentility, which he found all too normal in English life and writing - including the writing of the Movement - and to recommend 'a new seriousness', most exemplified by the American poets Robert Lowell and John Berryman (and especially by Lowell's latest, confessional volume *Life Studies),* in which poets would face 'the full range of [their] experience' - including their irrational fears and desires, including the extremes of experience. Alvarez illustrates his point by a comparison between two poems. Philip Larkin's 'At Grass' gives a gently melancholy picture of animal life; Alvarez characterizes it as 'elegant and unpretentious', as 'a nostalgic recreation of the Platonic (or *New Yorker)* idea of the English scene'; and he contrasts this with Ted Hughes's 'A Dream of Horses', an image of violent, intense animal life and of the challenge of controlling it, which Alvarez sees as grasping 'unfalsified and in the strongest imaginative terms possible, a powerful complex of emotions and sensations'.

Alvarez chose his example well: Hughes, already one of the most distinctive poets of his generation, was to become a major figure through his attunement of poetic rhythm to the sense of energy and resistance, his acute observation of

concrete detail, his capacity for imaginative empathy, his knowledge of the harshness of natural life, his feeling for a stoical English past and his deployment of a grotesque and excessive mythology, largely concerned with creation and survival. The opening lines of a recent poem (1989) illustrate the fullness of his imaginative concern:

> WOLFWATCHING
> Woolly-bear white, the old wolf
> Is listening to London. His eyes, withered in
> Under the white wool, black peepers,
> While he makes nudging, sniffing offers
> At the horizon of noise, the blue-cold April
> Invitation of airs.

The wolf is reduced, but fumblingly alert, limited by a horizon, displaced in a city, withered by age and yet persistent in his sense of invitation; and all this becomes incongruous in various ways: the wolf is like a woolly-bear, like a clandestine radio-listener, like a sheep, like a shady trader, his eyes reduced to peepers (as in the popular song keepers Creepers') - or perhaps, small, bright and round, they are reduced to black peppers. And the rhythm conveys the observer's fluctuations of surprise and curiosity, while the alliterations suggest effort and uneasy coherence of ideas. There is almost too much here for the reader to grasp in a coherent way; the sense is of the intensity of life perceived by the observer - who will go on to combine this intensity of need with the tedium of age and captivity, as the poem itself is realigned to hopeless emptiness. This is a poem of conflict, of will and loss, effective as a tribute to a futile vitality.

A poetry of intensity or excess does establish itself in the 1960s. One may mention Geoffrey Hill, with his densely wrought meditations on the immanence of a transforming supernatural, and Peter Redgrove, with his unremitting fascination with his own blood and body. The poet who, in the British domain, comes closest to the American confessional style is Sylvia Plath (herself American by birth) who expresses with astonishing directness an acute neurotic sensibility, painfully open to the force of visual sensation and unrelenting in judgement of herself and her family. This may produce something like a mystical vision, as with her sense that 'The high green meadows are glowing, as if lit from within' or (in the same poem, 'Blackberrying') the discovery of empty sea and sky from a rock 'That looks out on nothing, nothing but a great space/Of white and pewter lights'. Elsewhere it may produce a harshly abstracted and dramatized self-accusation, as in the treatment of suicide and survival through the myth of resurrection and through the disturbing echoes of the Holocaust in 'Lady Lazarus':

> Dying
> Is an art, like everything else.
> I do it exceptionally well.

It may be helpful to see in this context of the flight from gentility one of the unmistakably major figures of the period, the Northern Irish poet Seamus Heaney.

His work, like that of Hughes, shows an ongoing engagement with the force of animal life, with the demands of simple farming and the contact of the elements, expressed in a language rich in sense reference and dense in sound, a language energetic and self-conscious. Three lines from 'Glanmore Sonnets' will show the interdependence of poet and natural world, and of senses and intellect:

> Old ploughsocks gorge the subsoil of each sense
> And I am quickened with a redolence
> Of the fundamental dark unblown rose.

Most distinctive in his work are perhaps his awareness of the troubles of Northern Ireland and his capacity for viewing them through myth and history (see Unit 25, pp. 668-9). The series of poems which confront death through the uncertain pathos of the 'bog people' (bodies, often of sacrificial victims, preserved in bogland) subtly correlate a directly physical response to the transformed body with a sense of cultural and moral relativities. In 'Punishment', for instance, he visualizes the victim as part of a natural cycle:

> her shaved head
> like a stubble of black com,
> her blindfold a soiled bandage,
> her noose a ring
>
> to store
> the memories of love.

But the poet, 'the artful voyeur', also sees her as a contemporary victim of IRA retribution, and both feels 'civilised outrage' and also understands 'the exact/and tribal, intimate revenge'. Imagination, detachment, introspection interact in a compound which is rightly unstable, the gravity of the topic outweighing the observer's fascination. A particularly impressive work is the sequence 'Station Island', in which the tone and manner of Dante are applied to the rituals of Irish Catholicism to engender a grave and calm self-knowledge, in which various dimensions of memory and culture, various degrees of immixture in his native community, come to a mature equilibrium.

But this movement to expressionism, to physicality, extreme emotion and the word as effortful gesture, is not the only tendency in the poetry of the 1960s. As well as a number of poets who do write in this manner, Alvarez's anthology includes John Fuller, a poet of elegance and wit who owes much to the playful inventiveness of Auden. His erudition, wide culture, sense of fantasy, mastery of syntax and of the modest sophistication of educated conversation give a constant urbanity to his writing which creates a fascinating tension in association with his feeling for the vulnerability of middle-class life, the limitations of the body and the problematic nature of the personal relations and of people's images of themselves.

Another poet who works from within a very manifest high culture, in which art, music, poetry (including foreign poetry) play a conspicuous part, is Charles Tomlinson. Direct personal feeling is very muted in his work, which depends rather on the creation of apparently objective images, aesthetically perceived, with an acute

sensitivity to light and colour, and especially to change of colour, and formulated in a discreet, evenly paced and meditative verse, in which surprise and emphasis are rare and the poetic effect lies rather in consistency of tone and delicacy of statement. A few lines from 'Tramontana at Lerici' (a title which itself seems a blow struck against the Movement's dislike of abroad) illustrate the approach:

> Leaf-dapples sharpen. Emboldened by this clarity
> The minds of artificers would turn prismatic,
> Running on lace perforated in crisp wafers
> That could cut like steel.

What is precisely captured is not the minds (which are purely hypothetical) but the leaves, which - by a sort of pun on 'sharpen* - become a threat and a model for art, permitting the mind to become geometrical.

A similar emptiness of landscape characterizes much of the work of another Northern Irish poet, Derek Mahon. Mahon is largely a poet of exile, who rejects what he sees as the alienating harshness of Northern Ireland without finding an alternative or breaking his attachment to the place of his origin. Art again plays a major part in his work, as with his poem on de Hooch's view of Delft, which becomes a way of viewing at a distance the meticulous domestic order of Protestant Belfast. Perhaps his best-known poem is 'A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford', in which some mushrooms left for years in darkness become — pathetically and absurdly - images of the abandoned dead from Treblinka to Pompeii; the insistence on the bodily decline and distaste, on solitude and stoical endurance, is qualified by a wide learning (discreetly displayed), by an almost parodistic enlivening of the topic (the mushrooms cry for 'elbow room') and by an occasional exuberance of verbal invention, as when, for instance, the light cast on them by visitors opening the door becomes a 'flash-bulb firing squad'.

A Northern Ireland poet of similar lucidity and orderliness is Michael Longley. Longley's is largely a poetry of witness as he records with affectionate gravity characters, landscapes and incidents typical of the various ways of life of Ireland, and especially those characteristic of an unsophisticated, unchanging rural and tribal Ireland and of the conflicts of the North. His vision is precise, his sense of space and texture is acute, his tone is measured and implies real sympathetic familiarity with the people and places he writes of.

One may briefly mention other poets from Northern Ireland who show similar qualities of concern, cultural and rural awareness, powers of observation, feeling for environment and control of form and tone: Tom Paulin, Frank Ormsby and Medbh McGuckian. One who has drawn special attention recently is Paul Muldoon. Although Muldoon is capable of this kind of poetry based on intimacy, familiarity, and modest efficiency in verbal form, he has also explored a more fantastic and innovative form of writing, as in his 'Immram', in which the voyage literature of the Irish classical tradition is transformed by the superimposition of a modem American Chandler-style adventure narrative, fast-moving, tough, worldly and cosmopolitan in its reference, open to politics, current affairs and dream, and displaying virtuoso skill in narrative transitions, in verse form and in the creation of

comic and grotesque incident, while his more recent *Madoc* attempts an elusive philosophical debate on the basis of a complex imagined history of American exploration, told in brief, economical fragments, tending towards a certain abstraction and understatement.

There are now a large number of young poets writing in varied styles, and it is not possible to group them readily in any way (nor is it easy to select those most deserving of mention in a survey such as this). A good selection may be found in Blake Morrison and Andrew Motion's anthology, *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry* (1982). This is a far less programmatic work than *New Lines* or *The New Poetry.* Its editors claim to note a shift in poetic sensibility which calls for a reformation of poetic taste, but this shift is in fact very diverse; what they assert as a common purpose is 'to extend the imaginative franchise', or to 'reassert the primacy of the imagination in poetry'. Some readers might feel that this impulse had never been absent from twentieth-century poetry, even in the 'empirical' poetry, based on observation, which they associate with Philip Larkin. Indeed, their own selection shows that contemporary poets balance the cult of the imagination with social and political observation and commentary (notably in the cases of Douglas Dunn and Tony Harrison), so that if there is a shift it may be of degree rather than of kind.

The most widely publicized instance of this revival of imagination is the so-called 'Martian' school - which in fact appears to consist of only two people, Craig Raine and Christopher Reid (and Reid is perhaps doubtful). The movement takes its name from Raine's poem 'A Martian sends a postcard home'. Unfamiliar with the customs and objects of Earth, the Martian names them by what the terrestrial reader sees as a set of ingenious and surprising metaphors; so books (or 'Caxtons') are 'mechanical birds with many wings'. The reader enjoys the strangeness of this, as the ordinary is made new. There is obviously a risk of triviality in this style of writing, which may look like a chain of riddles (though riddles, one should recall, are an ancient poetic form); the risk, one may feel, is evaded here by the range of suggestiveness, hardly masked by the teasing of the riddle form: books are free as birds but also part of an elaborate socio-economic mechanism. To a large extent, these poets are concerned with the uneventful domestic life of the middle classes: what they show is that, with enough inventiveness, almost any detail can be made revealing (see Unit 1, p. 4, for a further discussion of Raine). So Reid's 'Disaffected Old Man' lights a cigarette from his wife's, which is already burning:

> Leaning, we kiss with cigarettes
> To make a tremulous bridge for love.

Distance and closeness are allied in the superficial intimacy of a long marriage. This kind of writing risks, in addition, producing poems which are a string of surprising ideas rather than coherent structures; the risk is often held at bay, perhaps more in Reid than in Raine's early work, and Raine's largely autobiographical collection *Rich* suggests an ambition to move on to more consistent exploration of theme (though his latest volume, the novel in verse *History: The Home Movie,* may cast some doubt on the depth of this ambition).

sensitivity to light and colour, and especially to change of colour, and formulated in a discreet, evenly paced and meditative verse, in which surprise and emphasis are rare and the poetic effect lies rather in consistency of tone and delicacy of statement. A few lines from 'Tramontana at Lerici' (a title which itself seems a blow struck against the Movement's dislike of abroad) illustrate the approach:

> Leaf-dapples sharpen. Emboldened by this clarity
> The minds of artificers would turn prismatic,
> Running on lace perforated in crisp wafers
> That could cut like steel.

What is precisely captured is not the minds (which are purely hypothetical) but the leaves, which - by a sort of pun on 'sharpen* - become a threat and a model for art, permitting the mind to become geometrical.

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The immediate contemporary scene remains extremely varied. There is the lucid, sensitive and economical narrative writing of Andrew Motion, and the wry and witty autobiography of Hugo Williams and Michael Hofmann, there are Eavan Boland and Helen Dunsmore with their discreet and subtly varied reflections on domestic life and on landscape, U.A. Fanthorpe's neat ironies, Paul Durcan's energetic accumulation of experience formulated through a lively conversational narration. Perhaps the most recent discernible tendency is to a virtuoso playfulness, combining wit and a compressed verbal inventiveness with social observation, ironic introspection and parody of the personality-types offered by mass media, previous literature and social stereotypes: one may name Andrew Greig, Glyn Maxwell, Gerard Woodward and Simon Armitage. Two major figures from the Commonwealth offer a very different style of poetry: Les Murray and Derek Walcott both produce works which are mythical, even visionary, expansive, concrete in description and symbol, deeply conscious of the processes of nature and of humanity's relation to its environment, and eager to bear witness to the wish for personal fulfilment and enrichment of experience.

Poetry is in general in a healthy state. Some observers note that it no longer has mass appeal, and consider that it is kept alive primarily by its place in the educational system. It is obvious that it is a minority taste, compared with fiction notably, so that it may not be easy to find a good selection of contemporary' verse in bookshops or libraries outside the major cities. Nevertheless, the considerable range of poetic creation in Britain and Ireland — as well as the continuing interest in American verse and the growing interest in verse translated from European languages - shows that poetry remains a vital concern for many people. In a world where language is often used vaguely or cynically, there is a special excitement in a kind of literature that explores the potentiality of our language in order to grasp new aspects of our personal and social lives.

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