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MODERN ENGLISH POETRY*

By J. AQUILINA

It is the fashion to-day to speak of the crisis of this and the crisis of that; but the ominous word, I am afraid, indicates a fear at the back of our mind that is by no means imaginary. It indicates an alarming turning point in our civilization, our sense of insecurity. There is also a crisis in Poetry and that is precisely the title of the book on the subject by Professor V. de Sola da Pinto. Fewer men and women read poetry to-day not only in England but also in other countries. The problem has become so acute, the poet has been so alarmed by his growing isolation, that he has decided to study the position carefully and do something about it. Last year M. Pierre-Louis Flouquet, the editor of *Journal des Poètes* convened a meeting of 150 poets in Belgium, under the chairmanship of M. Jean Cassou. The poets representing forty nations were asked to study and provide answers for the following questions:

Comment faire pénétrer plus avant la Poésie dans le peuple?

Ne doit-on pas souhaiter une critique poétique plus technique?

Mr. W.G. Bebbington in the preface to his anthology *Introducing Modern Poetry*, compiled with the express purpose of showing that not 'all modern poetry is occult and incomprehensible', writes with the experience of a headmaster that English boys and girls are leaving the secondary schools thinking that poetry is the moribund hobby of antiquarians; and as a citizen', he continued, 'I also know that most adults have the same idea'. 'The Charge of the Light Brigade' is still the *pièce de résistance* of a party, and the only contemporary verse that seems to be widely known and appreciated is the dance-tune 'lyric' and the music-hall 'monologue'.

As you see, to speak of a crisis in Poetry is by no means to indulge in hyperboles in order to underline the decline of poetic literature. Poetry is moribund. Those who, years ago, anticipated its slow death because of the increasing pressure of the sciences and technology now rub their hands self-complacently and tell us 'I told you so in good time. Poetry in this mechanistic age has no chance.' When I was still an undergraduate, I wrote an essay in Italian to show that, though poetry might suffer many a setback, it would not be killed outright; that sooner or later there would

* Lecture delivered in the British Institute of Valletta, in 1953.

be a come-back. That to-day is still my opinion — poetry as one of the graces of civilization cannot go completely out of fashion though publication may become so difficult, as it has become in our times, that verse will have to be published in slim books or even in typescript for private circulation.

That is the unhappy position to-day. These are the sad facts that we have to face. But we must push our inquiry into the present conditions further if we wish really to find why English Poetry, one of the greatest glories of the British people, greater indeed than their perishable empire, has been losing the support of the British public. As I have already pointed out, this lack of support is by no means British only; it is French, Italian, German, it is, briefly, international; as epidemic as the plague in the Dark Ages. Therefore, in discussing the reasons for this disturbing decline we have to dig deep into the soil of contemporary civilization till we reach the roots of the trouble, for all serious diseases attack the roots first.

What is Modern Poetry and what does it set out to achieve? Modern is by no means a synonym of 'contemporary', mind you. The value of the word is more 'formal' than 'chronological'. Lascelles Abercrombie, Hilaire Belloc, Laurence Binyon, Edmund Blunden, Walter de la Mare and others are contemporary but not modern in the sense that Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, Auden, Stephen Spender and others are 'modern'. Let me explain myself. When I say that poets like Walter de la Mare and the rest of the list I have read are not 'modern', I do not mean that these poets are old in the sense that they have nothing new to say to us, their contemporaries, that was not said by their predecessors, and that the moderns on the other hand are the heralds of the New Message. What I want to say is that the moderns are those poets, who, by virtue of their verse-technique, largely of an experimental nature, and the subject-matter or the approach to it, have broken away from old rules.

Who are the modern poets, the men that have broken away from tradition? If you think of the poetic movement as a planetary system, you will have to place T.S. Eliot right in the centre as the sun, and the other known minor poets as the stars revolving around this centre and in time breaking away from it to form, in their turn, a poetic planetary system of their own. Such are H.W. Auden, William Empson, Stephen Spender, Louis MacNiece, Cecil Day Lewis, and Dylan Thomas. There are other minor stars in the constellation.

T.S. Eliot who hailed Ezra Pound as *il miglior fabbro* is the veteran of the movement. He is now sixty-five years old while the oldest of the moderns, Cecil Day Lewis is forty-nine years old and the youngest Dylan

is thirty-nine years old. When T.S. Eliot wrote his 'Prufrock — and other Observations' — new poetic shock tactics at that time — in 1911 Cecil Day Lewis was seven years old, W.H. Auden a four year old baby and Dylan Thomas still *in mente Dei*.

T.S. Eliot is easily the pontiff of the Moderns, though we must admit he was more so before he anchored his beliefs in High Anglicanism that younger left-wing poets of the aggressive thirties did not approve. But loyalty to the master has never failed completely, nor it is likely to do so because the poetic stature of T.S. Eliot is a tower of strength in the precarious fortress of Modern Poetry. That his poetry remains remote from the general public is a misfortune that not even genius can help, for genius accepts the vision and prophet-like it interprets it in human language. Mark you, I have already expressed my admiration for the pontiff of the Moderns not without a cautionary 'but'. T.S. Eliot has always been, and will always be, the poet of the select few and the fact that, like the prophets of the Old Testament, he has in his own time several exegetes expounding and commenting his poetry to make it intelligible is already proof enough that though T.S. Eliot stands on top of a tower, he stands so far above the heads of the crowds of men and women down the streets below that he can never be their poet in time of happiness or distress. T.S. Eliot has given England great poetry that will affect literary coteries but not the people. In other words, T.S. Eliot's poetry is difficult poetry — difficult because it is so personal; because so much is private property, so much is occult and so little can be communicated clearly enough. But ... O, yes, the critic will say 'communication, poetic communication need not, indeed should not, be so spread out all on the surface that it leaves nothing to the imagination'. And he will remind me of what the French poet Mallarmé wrote on the subject: 'To name an object', says Mallarmé, 'is to do away with three quarters of that delight in a poem which consists in unravelling it bit by bit. It must be suggestive; poetry must always remain a riddle'. I could not agree more — poetry is not a dish you can serve hot on a plate for your guests. I agree but — again there is a 'but' — I do not agree that poetry should be 'a riddle'. Poetry should suggest more than state, and good poetry does so according to the suggestive force, the associateve range of the inspired poet (mark the word *inspired*), but to say that it should be like a conundrum or enigma expressly intended to be puzzling or mysterious, calling for the emergency assistance of obliging contemporary critics to puzzle out the poet's riddles is sheer heresy. And that I am afraid explains why modern poetry has lost its public, if it ever had one apart from the members of the coteries and the intellectual admirers. We all like riddles — like not only to puzzle out other people's riddles

but to turn our own life into a riddle. That way lies the barbed wire which cuts off the poets from the reader, especially the modern reader with little time to spare and, alas, with little will to support not only a theological faith, but also a poetic faith that clothes itself in laboured phrases and strained, erratic imagery.

Puzzling out obscure poetry may be good fun for the intellectual critic who is willing to exercise not only his critical acumen but also his own imagination. Professor J. Isaacs in his book *The Background of Modern Poetry* tells a delightful little anecdote. 'To remember', he says, 'Mr J.L. Richard's strange analysis of *A Cooking Egg*, telling the author about it, and particularly of the view that 'the red-eyed scavengers' creeping from Kentish Town and Golders Green were Mr Eliot's favourite rats, this time with red eyes and Mr Eliot assured me, with his hand on his heart, that he never looked a rat in the eyes'.

You see, how the imaginative critic contributes to the stock of the poet's fluid imagery his orgy of extravagant conceits. To defend himself, he may say that whether the image was actually intended by the poet or not, if it was suggested by the associative context even inadvertently, its explanation is legitimate because its existence, though unintended, was 'embryonic'. The contention is that the poet not only creates but he also suggests and what he suggests grows in the imagination of the reader who has his own association of ideas. The poet's suggestion may be compared to a seed that grows into a many branched tree in the reader's imagination. There is something in this, I agree, but this is no defence of arbitrary commentaries on the poetic output of deliberately obscure poets.

I remember an English colleague of mine who has since made a name as a classical scholar in England reading my poem 'The Canto of Snakes' with unusual interest. In this poem I used the Bull as a symbol of insatiable Lust—Sex the merciless taskmaster that drives men and women in the vicious circle of the tremendous unresolved conflict between morality and biology. He asked me to explain to him what I really meant to convey by the Animal-Symbol, and I was amused to hear references to the phallic virtues of the Bull unintended by me but, I must admit, not unsuitable to the context.

I admit a legitimate freedom of interpretation to the imaginative critic who is freer to exercise his imagination when the poet is dead, but I cannot help feeling that there is much verbal bluff, intellectual perversity, in some of the commentaries that are published from time to time to explain the 'imaginary obscurity' of the poet. The learned critic provides the key, though what he provides is indeed the key to his own imagination stirred by the poet's vision. T.S. Eliot must have been agreeably and disagreeably

surprised by the commentaries of some of his devoted critics.

In my younger days, in the early thirties of the century when I was still an undergraduate, 'futurism' was the vogue, at least in Maltese literary circles. Ungaretti had his student devotees and two of these, prematurely dead, would recognize no poet other than Ungaretti. I was on the side of the poet with a message, even if he was a traditionalist, and I tried to convince them that our hero-worship is often a servile acceptance of the arbitrary judgement of the critics of the day. On another occasion, I tried a harmless stratagem. I studied Ungaretti's verse technique, wrote a poem in his style and claiming the authorship of one of Ungaretti's own poems I attributed to him the imitation poem I had composed. Then I asked my friends what on-earth could make them think that Ungaretti's poem was more than a trifle, once I could imitate his style so easily. There was a general laugh. 'But my dear friend' retorted one of them, 'read Ungaretti's poem properly and note the beauty of the imagery, the compressed ideas, the associations and the unusual vocabulary. How dare you say that you can imitate his poem? Yours is so thin by comparison. It is no more than a bauble! That was my little triumph. My professor of Italian, the late Dr V. Laurenza, was amused; only he who knew Italian literature better than myself and my friends, while praising the imitation, said that a more careful reader of Ungaretti would not have been so easily deceived. Anyhow, I felt I proved to my friends that poetry is more than technique, and that if it is nothing more it is uninspired verse, and that we praised Ungaretti and the advanced moderns not because we really understood them, but because that was the literary fashion of the time. I still think that is as true today as it was then. The cult of obscurity has received support from intellectual critics not unwilling to use their own imagination, but it has never appealed to the general reader.

I cannot help feeling that the obscurity of some of the modern poets is deliberate. Now deliberate obscurity puts off the reader who reads poetry because he expects something in return for his effort—the communication of a pleasant feeling, a message, comfort in distress, beauty amidst ugliness, faith amidst so much rejection, dignity amidst so much indignity; an interpretation of his inner self, the hard struggle that takes place in the inner world of Thought and Feeling. But if instead of all this, or something like it, instead of a recognizable communication he is presented with jumbles of hard words, nouns and adjectives strung together haphazard in the unusual or unnatural way in order merely to surprise him by what one might describe as 'shock tactics', the disappointed reader will put down the book of verse and employ his time more profitably. And that

I am afraid is what many potential poetry readers are doing – they are seeking other outlets, and when they feel like reading good poetry they go back to the immortals who have written imperishable poetry which, being above all fashion and as high up as the Tower of Man's aspiring soul, will always find an echo in the hearts of the younger and older generations.

I am a lover of poetry; but one who finds little human value in the contemporary poetic output remarkable mainly for daring new verse technique, new rhythms, new poetic experiments. I am one of those who without despising some of the best contemporary poets find more understanding and comprehension amongst the older bards. And is it not strange, after all, that a poet who lived four hundred or six hundred years ago should still please more than a contemporary? In Dante's and Chaucer's time the poet was his own critic and there were no professional critics to tell him how to write or not to write. There were great classics to follow and to learn from. That was the time when poets obeyed their genius which instinctively finds its own suitable medium and, being men of higher principles (most principles have been debunked in our Atomic Age'), they responded to higher levels of inspiration.

I must not give an impression that I am no admirer of T.S. Eliot or that I do not rate him as high as he deserves. Let me tell you that I admire this Anglo-American, Anglo-Catholic poet and appreciate his invaluable contribution to English imagery and rhythm. What I regret is that other poets not immediately inspired like him carried his technique to an extreme that is often self-defeating and sometimes outrageous as most un-inspired imitations are.

What makes modern poetry rather, and sometimes very difficult? To answer this question properly, we have to bear in mind that one of the more important achievements of modern poetry is the creation of new rhythms and new images – images most unorthodox when compared with those of the classical and Romantic poets. An image, 'is an imitation, rough imitation, of the external form of an object, or an interpretation of a concept in visual or auditory form'. Ponder this definition which is by no means perfect, and you will note that there are therefore two terms of reference in an image – the object or concept on the one hand, and its representation on the other. These two terms of reference are brought and linked together by a logical nexus. When I compare the face of my beloved to the sun, or her lips to a rose, you will judge the image good or bad in proportion to its visual representation, the link between the object compared and the symbol. Now if this nexus is not logical – if it is strained, far-fetched, or hackneyed – the image falls flat or becomes unrecognizable.

Most modern poetry is difficult precisely because it employs unlinked images. The attempt to extend the frontiers of the Poetic Image is praiseworthy – poets are explorers and the inspired phrase ceases to be so when it is continuously employed as a matter of verbal habit. The war on stereotyped images, phrases, hackneyed comparisons has enriched the English vocabulary. Modern poets have not only revitalized the overworked vocabulary of the English Muse, they have also enriched it with new rhythms. Free verse supported by well-balanced rhythms has dug up long-buried treasures of the English Muse. That is all very well. But extremes meet and verse that is too free is 'Loose Verse' and images that are far-fetched or strained to breaking point are 'empty conceits' – ill-strung beads that do not make a rosary.

A significant contribution that the Moderns have made to Poetry is their liberation of the poetic vocabulary from the hackneyed words and overworked phrases and the incorporation of hard, commonplace words into the poetic vocabulary. But again extremes meet. Human language pushed beyond certain frontiers – poetic frontiers in our case – becomes gibberish or just commonplace prose. Alas, modern poetry abounds in both!

I shall now give you examples of the verbal and formal technique used by modern poets. The examples are mainly from T.S. Eliot and in the case of this poet, the master mind of the movement, they are not intended as criticism of his poetry but as illustrations of a technique so often abused by inferior poets. I give you examples of orthodox imagery which may be surprisingly pleasant even when you feel it has somehow leaped over the boundaries of reality and unorthodox imagery that is unconvincing.

In 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' we find the following animal-image of Fog, an image, which I confess I like very much.

After telling us that: 'In the room the women come and go talking of Michaelangelo', the poet writes that:

The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes,
 The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-panes
 Licked its tongue into the corners of the evening,
 Lingered upon the pools that stand in drains,
 Let fall upon its back the soot that falls from chimneys,
 Slipped by the terrace, made a sudden leap,
 And seeing that it was a soft October night,
 Curled once about the house, and fell asleep.

The comparison of fog to the body of a Beast lying heavily on the houses surprises us by its unexpected appropriateness, so surprisingly evident

yet never thought of before. Having accepted the Animal-image of fog, the description of animal movements enforces the image and its poetic effect in an apt context. Note in the passage the 'colloquial tone', the repetitions, and verse-freedom, with which we shall deal later on. 'A Cooking Egg', on the other hand contains images which, lacking the element of 'pleasant surprise,' lack poetic cogency. Here are the last nine lines:

But where is the penny world I bought
To eat with Pipit behind the screen?
The red-eyed scavengers are creeping
From Kentish Town and Golder's Green;

Where are the eagles and the trumpets?

Buried beneath some snow-deep Alps.
Over buttered scones and crumpets
Weeping, weeping multitudes
Droop in a hundred A. B. C's.

No wonder Dr Richards mistook 'the red-eyed scavengers' for T.S. Eliot's favourite mice!

In the lines I have quoted apart from the fifth and sixth, there is no recognizable poetry, no compelling imagery, no intelligible message. Verbally, I think that not a few lines of this poem qualify as examples of 'sheer gibberish'.

I give you another example of obscure verse by Dylan Thomas, the first twelve lines of his poem 'Then was my Neophyte'. Unravel the pretentious puzzle, if you can!:

When was my neophyte,
Child in white blood bent on its knees
Under the bell of rocks,
Ducked in the twelve, disciple seas
The winder of the water-clocks
Calls a green day and night.
My sea hermaphrodite,
Snail of man in His ship of fires
That burn the bitten-decks,
Knew all His horrible desires
The climber of the water sex
Calls the green rock of light.

I agree there are flashes of a powerful imagination, but they are all

sparks flying crazily about, not one beam strong and straight enough to pierce the darkness.

In the passage from the Song of Prufrock, I called your attention to the 'colloquial tone'. This is a feature of much modern poetic diction. Wordsworth tried Common Man's speech avoiding naturally his strong language that does not frighten the hard-boiled modern poet, and failed. The moderns have used Common Man's speech with varying success. T.S. Eliot has used it too, and the effect sometimes is palatable, and sometimes not quite so.

Here are examples of modern colloquial diction. The following is a passage from T.S. Eliot 'A Game of Chess'.

'My nerves are bad tonight. Yes, bad. Stay with me.
'Speak to me. Why do you never speak? Speak.
'What are you thinking of? What thinking? What?
'I never know what you are thinking. Think;

I think we are in rats' alley
Where the dead men lost their bones.

'What is that noise?

The wind under the door

'What is that noise now? What is the wind doing?'

Nothing again nothing.

I wouldn't condemn this style at all, because it derives its strength from the context. Note how the second part contextualises the colloquial tone of the first part. The two parts together create an atmosphere. 'I think we are in rats' alley' carries with it a cold breeze from the world of fear. The image is well minted. It creates an atmosphere and that is one of the functions of a certain type of poetry – the mental type of poetry, the introspective type of poetry that probes deep into unexplored corners of the human psyche and receives pleasant and unpleasant shocks from the discoveries which it makes there below, deep down under the skin.

Gone for good is the poetic language of the dreamy Romantics. It has been replaced by the unpoetic vocabulary of everyday life which, when employed with discretion, carries with it the native poetry of the people's own soul, but down are the barriers that keep Prose and Verse apart formally and substantially.

Here are some examples of poetic language that Coleridge, Shelley and Keats would have rejected straightaway: the passage is from the "Triumphal

March? that has also some beautiful passages:

We can wait with our stools and sausages.
 What comes first? Can you see? Tell us. It is
 5,800,000 rifles and carbines,
 102,000 machine-guns,
 28,000 trench mortars,
 53,000 field and heavy guns.
 I cannot tell how many projectiles, mines and fuses
 13,000 aeroplanes,
 24,000 aeroplane engines,
 50,000 ammunition waggons,
 now. 55,000 army waggons,
 11,000 field kitchens,
 1,150 field bakeries.

This 'atmosphere' passage is part of a series of more poetic statements, and the intention is, no doubt, to debunk a myth or a convention by heightening the prosaic effect of the drabber side of stark reality, the halo of which is effectively and not less realistically introduced thus:

Stone, bronze, stone, steel, oakleaves, horses' heels
 Over the paving.
 And the flags, And the trumpets. And so many eagles.
 How many? Count them. And such a press of people.
 We hardly knew ourselves that day, or knew the City.

Other similar passages could be easily culled from the poems of minor poets, passages as prosaic and even more incomprehensible and altogether unredeemed by the argument of a suitable 'atmosphere' context.

When I called your attention to Eliot's free verse you surely noticed, even from the few examples that I gave you, first that he uses also, though less frequently, the traditional measures of the older poets to express a subject-matter which is, however, completely modern, and that his free verse has a discipline of its own, a discipline of scansion which though determined by no fixed, unalterable laws, exercises its control not less effectively and sometimes even more so than the fixed measures of modern poetry, playing on new rhythms and undertones which extended the auditory field already broadened by his predecessors, among those the most distinguished being Fr Gerald Manley Hopkins S.J. who employed sprung rhythms with surprising effect. That is the supreme merit of T.S.

Eliot and of some of the younger modern poets — they have enlarged the auditory and visual field of English poetry. Even their failures have not been without their use. They have given something to the language, made the English poetic idiom more flexible and driven the roots of vision deeper down into the flesh and blood of man caught between the hidden forces of his own humanity and the world he has to live in. And as Man's soul is obscure, so has the poetry of the modern poet been obscure and inevitably experimental.

I feel I must pay this tribute to the modern poets because the tribute is indeed deserved, and I do not wish to give the impression that my attitude to their poetry is negative or unresponsive. I condemn the perverse experiment that would, if possible, cut off modern poetry from its historical sources, which like plenteous rivers flow down the centuries winding about the confluent directions. But T.S. Eliot, unlike some of the modern daring, though less able, modern poets, does not despise tradition. He is the president of the Virgil Society that wishes to preserve the Latin Christian tradition of the West and is also a cultured admirer of Dante Alighieri.

So far I have quoted passages from his *Collected Poems* to illustrate his poetic technique in so far as it is characteristic of modern poetry. I am now going to quote another passage for its sheer beauty which more than justifies his technical experiments along the untrammelled road of free verse — a disciplined freedom that gives longer breath to Verse, wider girth to the body of Poetry and a rich instrument to play upon to the twentieth century. I could quote numerous such passages from *The Waste Land* and *The Quartet*, and his verse plays such as *Reunion* and *Cocktail Party*.

But I must limit the selection to a passage from Poem V in *Ash Wednesday*. Hear the deep counterpointed music and note the suggestive imagery, the content of which is suitably intellectual.

If the lost word is lost, if the spent word is spent
 If the unheard, unspoken
 Word is unspoken, unheard;
 Still is the unspoken word, the Word unheard,
 The Word without a word, the Word within
 The world and for the world;
 And the light shone in darkness and
 Against the World the unstilled world still whirled
 About the centre of the silent Word.

O my people, what have I done unto thee.

Where shall the word be found, where will the word
Resound? Not here, there is not enough silence
Not on the sea or on the islands, not
On the mainland, in the desert or the rain land,
For those who walk in darkness
Both in the day and in the night time
The right time and the right place are not here
No place of grace for those who avoid the face
No time to rejoice for those who walk among noise and deny the voice

Will the veiled sister pray for
Those who walk in darkness, who choose thee and oppose thee,
Those who are torn on the horn between season and season, time and
time, between
Hour and hour, word and word, power and power, those who wait
In darkness? Will the veiled sister pray
For the children at the gate
Who will go away and cannot pray:
Pray for those who choose and oppose

O my people, what have I done unto thee.

Will the veiled sister between the slender
Yew trees pray for those who offend her
And are terrified and cannot surrender
And affirm before the world and deny between the rocks
In the last desert between the last blue rocks
The desert in the garden the garden in the desert
Of drouth, spitting from the mouth the withered apple seed

O my people.

I do not expect you to understand more than I have. Like most of T.S. Eliot's verse, this passage is obscure in parts but you cannot miss the rhythm of the lines — it is largely counterpoint, mind you

I promised you a lecture on English modern poets and I have spoken more about T.S. Eliot than about any of the modern group. That is so. But to tackle all the best modern poets would be more than I could possibly do, and I have instead dealt with the master of the movement whose style, if not his ideas, have been imitated, sometimes also assimilated and re-directed, by his devoted followers.

The qualities of style and diction that I have noted in the poetry of T.S. Eliot are shared to a varying degree by the younger poets that followed

his poetic school. This does not mean that there is nothing individual in Dylan Thomas, Auden, MacNiece, Day Lewis and a few others. These poets have their own individual approach to poetic idiom, but they share the formal idiosyncrasies of the new literary style. In these, and other modern poets, you notice obscurities, deliberate irrelevancies, repetitions for emphasis and atmosphere, colloquialism, and musical phrases within the unrestricted rush of free verse, the subject-matter being mainly subjective, the flowering of an introspective mind at war with itself and its environment. Those interested in modern English poetry will learn more about it if they will read the poet's own work. There is much that you will reject; much that will not evoke the slightest response from you; much will irritate you; but those of you who love poetic experiments will find much that is new and fresh in verbal imagery and musical phraseology, the musical undertones of rich counterpoint, provided you have a trained ear and are prepared to cudgel your brains not a little in order to squeeze some meaning out of the many jumbles of bold and very often strained images.

We now go back to the beginning of this lecture — the decline of interest in poetry and poets, a decline of which even the poets themselves are painfully aware. Modern English poetry is so difficult and so obscure that the average reader no longer thinks of it as a source of diversion for himself in his hour of depression or of strength in his hour of doubt. It is for him too cerebral an exercise, too much like a difficult cross-word puzzle, too heavy an entertainment, or shall we say most unentertaining entertainment. Hence poetry has ceased to sell, and publishers do not willingly publish books of Verse at their own expense except for those whose reputation is already established.

The average reader, if he reads poetry at all, reads the classics, and more intelligible poets like Walter de la Mare, and Yeats. Is the new technique standing in the way of great poetry? That is a sensible question that some one might ask at this stage. There is nothing wrong with technique. What is wrong is the adventitious obscurity and the morbid, almost schizophrenic interest in the underworld of the human soul and its pathetic 'jargon'. We want more sanity; more cheerfulness and more faith — more ideals to live and die for.

Great Poetry is the product of great times and those times are great that rest on Faith and Dignity, as on two unshakeable pillars. Our mechanized age has left us little of the faith that inspired Dante, Milton and Thompson, little of the dignity that fired the imagination of Shakespeare and the Greek dramatists, little of the nobility of that philosophy which considered this world as a stepping stone to a better one and Man as a

child of God. There are echoes but oh how faint! Indeed how faintly Dylan Thomas's statement in the preface to his collected Poems published recently by Dent that 'his poems with all their crudities doubts and confusions are written for the love of man in the praise of God', echoes Milton's prayer to God in Book I of 'Paradise Lost'.

what in me is dark
 Illumine, what is low raise and support;
 That, to the height of this great argument,
 I may assert Eternal Providence,
 And justify the ways of God to men.

The inauspicious times have certainly dwarfed the contemporary poetic stature not only in England but also in other parts of the world.

Gone are the times of the great poetic geniuses. Gone are the Giants. The world awaits impatiently the second Renaissance, but this re-birth will come only when men and women recapture the lost faith and the lost dignity. Economic man is a failure.

What is the present strength of Modern poetry? Is it on the increase or is it on the decline?

Here is a brief estimate by an anonymous reviewer of the Collected Poems of Dylan Thomas in the 'Times Literary Supplement' of Nov. 28th (1952): 'Twenty years ago', says the reviewer, 'English poetry seemed to be on the threshold of some momentous success. Yeats had performed his astonishing feat of rejuvenation and taken his place past gainsaying among the great poets of England. Mr Eliot had moved from 'The Waste Land' to 'Ash Wednesday', and his influence on the young writers was already having exciting results. Much was looked for from the new left-wing poets. The elect who read Mr Day Lewis's 'A Hope for Poetry', and then Michael Roberts's 'Faber Book of Modern Verse' in 1936, felt they were assisting at the christening of a child from whom a great deal might be expected. To-day the position is very different, and some say that the child born then has already come to a premature death. We have been enriched immensely by Yeats's last poems and by 'The Four Quartets' (which seem likely to stand as Mr Eliot's greatest achievement). But Yeats is dead, Mr Eliot gives no sign of writing but plays, and Mr Ezra Pound, to whose explorations modern poets owe so much, is confined in an American asylum. The young poets of the early thirties still enjoy considerable celebrity, and produce slim volumes of verse at intervals; but no one awaits these with the excitement that attended their early poems. Their bluff has been called - only it was the reading public that bluffed itself and the elephant in the moon is revealed as a mouse in the telescope'.

That is the estimate of Modern English poetry in a review otherwise flattering to Dylan Thomas.

Is there no hope for Poetry? Has the Muse so damned herself that she will never expiate her Sin? The hope of poetry, like the hope of Christianity, is the hope of Civilization itself. We are often told that 'time marches on' and so it does; but we are not as often reminded that 'time marches also backwards'.

This dreadful age of machines shall outlive its purpose one day, when there will be a return to a more worthwhile age of Culture and Faith. Then time marching backwards may, before it resumes its forward march, as many wish it will, recapture and revitalize the living Muse that inspired immortal poetry.