THE END OF POETRY

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> Our native Muse, heaven knows and heaven be praised, is not exclusive. Whether out of the innocence of a childlike heart to whom all things are pure, or with the serenity of a status so majestic that the mere keeping up of tones and appearances, the suburban wonder as to what the strait-laced Unities might possibly think, or sad sour Probability possibly say, are questions for which she doesn't . . . in her lofty maturity any longer . . . care a rap, she invites, dear generous-hearted creature that she is, just *tout le monde* to drop in at any time . . .
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> — W. H. AUDEN, *The Sea and The Mirror*

1.

DESPITE THE STATE OF FRATRICIDAL STRIFE that exists among poets and the schools they are associated with, there is a common and implicit assumption about the poetic calling in the modern world that unites them. It has now attained to the status of an unchallenged dogma, which can be syllogized as follows. First, if a poem is to be a vital and meaningful comment on or analysis of experience, it must to some extent reflect that experience. Secondly, experience in and of the contemporary world is a reductive phenomenon, fragmented, anarchic, pulverized. Consequently, any poem that pretends to authenticity or authority must reflect the discontinuities of the life we are compelled to live by virtue of the fact that we are living *now*.

This series of postulates has much to recommend it and is obviously persuasive. For one thing, who can doubt the critical placebo that poetry must, in one way or another, reflect the structure, quality, or contours of the age in which it moves and has its being if it is to retain its vitality? Otherwise, must it not be hospitalized, kept alive by elaborate life-support systems, surviving intravenously in a state of archival nostalgia? Poetry must be *in* its time in order to be *of* its time, and it must be of its time if it has any intention of lasting since only through a vigorous participation in the temporal can it presume to achieve eternity.

For another thing, the analysis of contemporary experience as disintegrative is now little more than a blatant truism. Hardly anyone questions any longer the psychological commonplace that a sense of alienation, loss, and despair is the essential factor in the modern experience of the world. The only absolute we

acknowledge is the speed of light; as for the rest, the Heraclitean flux has escaped the confines of a pre-Socratic apothegm and threatens to swamp us all in every aspect of our lives. If God died in the nineteenth century, as Nietzsche tells us, Religion promptly followed in the twentieth, taking with it our only viable guarantee of a now mainly worthless moral currency. The spectre of instant annihilation robs us of our seriousness in our dealings with one another and with posterity. Political life has broken down as has the humanist faith in Reason, and even the ultimate cohesions of speech have been syntactically undermined. It is not just that monologue has replaced dialogue but that the monologue has become largely unintelligible. The precarious balance of whatever ecology we wish to consider has been upset beyond, as many suspect, the possibility of restoration.

If this is the condition of life which the poet confronts, then (assuming that the creative élan has not abandoned him, that he has not been reduced to silence, which may be the only honest response to such irremediable devastation) it follows that the poem he sets about composing, repressing the conviction of its futility beneath the surface of his narcissism, must reflect the chaos, the rootlessness, the violence, the disruptions, the spiritual centrifugalities of the world he is condemned to die in. And this evidently means that the poem he is condemned to live in must rid itself of all historical ballast and of all those traditional beatitudes of form, order, and intelligibility invoked by the more fortunate poets who still lived in the age of innocence between Pericles and Hitler.

Such, put simply, is the modern poetic creed. Obviously, the issues it raises are more complex than its mere formulation might indicate. For example, does not a poetry which *resists* its time, opposing lucidity to obscurity, order to chaos, sense to senselessness, by that very token indirectly or elliptically participate in its time, if only through the medium of a problematic recognition? Is not its actual practice implicitly diagnostic? May not rhyme, let us say, constitute a plea for harmony and not an atavistic ineptitude? May not the very existence of, if not metre, a discernible cadence suggest the need for internal continuity and psychic momentum rather than the ineffectual hope of dim arcadian symmetries? In short, may there not be historical periods in which poetry if it wishes to survive is compelled to live *in partibus infidelium*, carrying on a sort of guerrilla warfare against the pervasive assumptions and dominant 'realities' of the day? The relation of literature to its time is not necessarily one of strict equivalence and the commitment of the former to the latter is often paradoxical or rebellious.[1]

We are touching on the insoluble dilemma of the relation between art and life which I do not want to resurrect here. Suffice it to say that neither pole of the equation can substitute for the equation itself. The self-contained world of art is at best a dubious refuge from the confusions and banalities of raw experience, bringing with it the dangers of inanition and preciosity. On the other hand, the sheer, voluminous flux of experience into which the artist is regularly advised to

plunge in order to revitalize his flagging energies will more likely than not leave his literary corpse washed up on the beaches of respectability, academia or, if he is thorough, in the churning surf of an African exile. But the artist must nevertheless judge which pole of the equation he should diffidently approach in the service of his unforgiving muse if his work is to avoid becoming parodistic or inconsequential.

To return to the development of our theme. Despite the almost infinite permutations which the subject permits, the theory of poetry reduces as does that of art in general to the theory of imitation taken in its widest conceivable sense. And imitation is conceived in basically two ways. The artist is required either to imitate "nature," which can mean anything from landscape to manners to interior or psychological configurations. Or he is exhorted to the imitation of the traditional forms of literary endeavour in appropriate language, in which case he "copies" not "nature" but one or another of the formally established ways in which it has been agreed that nature may be copied. In the first instance, his imagination must be governed by his apperception of reality or, in the complex refinements of later speculation, by its own intrinsic laws as it conspires with the external *materia* to produce reality itself. In the second case, imagination must be subordinated to a social and critical consensus regarding the appropriate forms of literary representation, whose pedigree dates from the *Republic* and the *Poetics*.

The operative terms are, of course, to be understood with a certain generous latitude. Literature is not slavishly mimetic, it is also inventive and analytic, and no genuine writer is concerned with photographic verisimilitude. He does not copy so much as interpret. Similarly, the antithetical terms "nature" and "tradition," notwithstanding the venerable polarity into which they have been historically locked, are susceptible of endless modification. But the two "moments" of the antithesis can never be entirely eluded and the thrust of the writer's creative temperament moves in one or another of these ancestral and inevitable directions. In this sense it may be valid to claim that beneath the profusion of individual modulations we can distinguish these two fundamental impulses toward the imitation of "nature" on the one side or the imitation of established "form" on the other. That is, we may speak either of the "laws" which the creative temperament must obey or of the "norms" to which it must conform.

The two impulses are not at bottom diametrically opposed, as the social doctrine implicitly assumes that reality is not infinite and there accordingly exists a definable number of expressive forms which correspond to its limited permutations. Of course, the classical world is extinct and the neo-classical sensibility was hijacked by Industrial Capitalism, but the simple fact that we continue to accept the rhetorical distinction between poetry and prose, that poets (somewhat heedless of their innovative practices) tend to leave the customary margins on either side of the page, and are also given to declaiming or chanting their verses rather

than merely *reading* them, is evidence of an abiding belief in the formal difference between the two media and therefore in the general validity of the classical idea. "Form" is grounded in "nature" and is solidly associated with a repertoire of legitimate strategies for the expression of different kinds of experience.

2.

The blunt fact remains that the theory of poetic convention has fallen on evil days and is widely regarded as superannuated. The classical idea of poetry as requiring elevated diction — as commanding a unique language distinct from both prose and ordinary speech, equipped with a peculiar set of rules, conventions, and formal exclusions — is now considered as an exercise in brahmanic arrogance or anachronistic fatuity. It simply does not meet the brazen imperatives of contemporary experience and is as unseasonable or ludicrous as mixing a Molotov cocktail in a Ming vase. When Ortega defines poetic language as a "hovering" medium, raised above the abrasions and rugosities of current speech, he is looking back to the traditional conceptions of epic, drama, and the prophetic literature. But even the conversion of the hoary emblems of the winged steed or magic carpet into that of the lexical helicopter does not redeem his formulation from the charge of antiquarianism. Poetic conventions are *passé*: rhyme is obsolete (did not Milton consider it a barbarism?); metre is infantile, and even the stress-count is a throwback to Anglo-Saxon artlessness; the stanza form continues to be used but more as a logical convenience, an adaptation of the prose paragraph, than as a part of the traditional architectonic; and the language itself must avoid archaic "heightening" or "point" as it scrupulously democratizes its mandarin inclinations in the direction of the idiomatic, the colloquial, and the ubiquitous. Poetry can now be dialed on the telephone and read on the buses sandwiched between advertisements, as if Wordsworth's Preface were actually to be taken seriously.

The prevailing dogma is clear and unmistakable. The doctrine of the imitation of traditional form is defunct, relegated to the limbo of a classical irrelevance. A poetry which honours the canons and attitudes of its masonic past, which reveres the illustrious predecessor, which recognizes degree and precedence, and which deploys a complex, formally appropriate, and distinctively memorable language is dismissed as either hieratic snobbishness or creative senility. The proper use to which this kind of poetry can be put was determined by Congreve's Mrs. Millamant, who curls her hair with love letters, but "only with those in verse . . . I never pin up my hair with prose." And the poets who continue to practice these ancestral sanctities are patronized as elegant but pitiable old fogies mourning the end of their feudal prerogatives. The world has passed them by. The careening motorcar has flung the yellow caravan into the ditch and the poet

who wishes to survive must shake the dust out of his knickers and dream of magnificent onsets into a levelling future. Thus the principle of mimetic form is no longer adequate to the explosiveness and terror of the modern world and must be abandoned if we are to come to terms with the nature of our experience, the superluminal chaos of our event-horizon. Otherwise, along with religious faith, good craftsmanship, diplomatic immunity, and other such vestigial remnants of a vanished order, poetry cannot hope to escape obsolescence. This, more or less, is the creed to which the majority of poets now subscribes.

But if the imitation of form, the hallowing of poetic convention, has been tossed onto the scrapheap of outmoded pieties, we are left with the imitation of nature as the only theoretical foundation on which to ground the poetry of the modern era. The forms we must devise or discover in order to mirror, contain, or inflect the volatilities of our experience must inevitably *correspond* to that experience. In consequence, form moves toward the paradoxical assimilation of formlessness and the poet begins to conceive of his work as a sequence of ambiguous strategies to reflect the sense of confusion, homelessness, and disruption (or of mere indifference) with which the world persecutes him. Honesty, he asserts, compels him to write directly — eloquence is suspect, stable form the result of quaint artisanal compulsions, and time too valuable and fugitive an inheritance to waste on laborious composition. A poem can no longer claim the luxury of evocativeness, and the sense of its commitment to pressing, immediate needs invalidates its allegiance to its own constituent materials, an activity it can only regard as an untenable hedonism or technical encapsulation. The predictable effect of all this is that poetry comes increasingly to resemble prose.

The poetic modes which flourish in this climate of misinformation are clearly the descriptive narrative, the documentary, and the personal reminiscence (often deflected pronominally into the third person to evade the accusation of lyrical infatuation). These modes of poetic discourse are seen as unobjectionable from the standpoint of the contemporary milieu and even as adventurously experimental. And they are accompanied by the feverish search for structural models: the memoir or diary is high on the list of acceptable templates, but a quicksilver backing can be scraped together from almost any paradigmatic quarter, provided it is non-poetic in origin, such as the TV script, the recipe, the memo, or even the telephone book. (The fact that Villon, among others, used the testament in precisely this way partially explains his resurgent popularity.) The point I am making is that today the tendency is almost universal and by no means a maverick or eccentric gesture. The technical vacuum left by the extinction of conventional form has been surreptitiously filled by the substitution of prosaic or documentary prototypes, since the poet must get his structural patterns from somewhere. The element of disingenuousness arises from the conflict between the proclaimed conviction that form must be internal and organic and the obsessive practice of

ransacking (to use Johnson's word) the world of common, unmediated experience for exemplars and paradigms. There is no escaping the ironical conclusion that the contemporary notion of form is at least as external and artificial as the literary conventions for the application of which the traditional poet is routinely denounced.

But there is a further and more corrosive irony at work in the matter under discussion. The imitation of form is widely construed as archaic, reactionary, and inappropriate; heightened language is regarded as artificial (once a term of approval, now dyslogistic); order and restraint are dismissed as hangovers from a pastoral and genteel state of mind, now understood as historically incongruous or irrelevant. But the imitation of nature or of the given state of affairs which underlies contemporary practice is in effect the province of the novel, as has been the case since Robinson Crusoe domesticated his island and Moll Flanders picked the pockets of the contemporary scene. And when it comes to holding the mirror up to nature on Stendhal's dusty highway or in Hamlet's theatre, poetry is out of its league and cannot compete with its formidable opponent. The novel is just too compendious, too all-embracing, too versatile and flexible and omnivorous a genre to defer in its analysis of experience to the right of poetic primogeniture. Moreover, to add injury to insult, it is capable in its lyrical mood of actually swallowing and digesting its traditional rival, so that the only place where we may still encounter poetry in its old-fashioned guise of evocative speech is in the body of the novel itself — an irritable Jonah, a lying Pinocchio, whistling in the depths of the Leviathan. And as if to administer the *coup de grace*, modern criticism has deposed that the novel is not a continuation of the classical tradition, the descendant of the epic, but is the unique literary expression of modern society deriving ultimately from the Puritan reformation of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and the industrial upheavals of the eighteenth.

This irony is not only inescapable but possibly terminal as well. Poetry, in approximating to the novelistic parallax, ceases to be "poetic" and grows more and more prosaic in structure, content, and language. The idea of "decorum" did not wither away, however, with classical and Renaissance literary values. Decorum may be defined as style accommodated to subject, means to ends, idiom to intention. Thus the idea of poetic decorum in today's literary environment exacts an extortionate price from the practicing poet because he must now bring his poem into line with the novelistic perspective on the world and adopt the techniques and strategies of an alien genre if he is to retain or regain credibility. So the truth stares us glumly in the face. The poet goes on multiplying narrative upon description upon documentary in odd linguistic constructs called poems that scarcely anyone bothers to read except other poets and an entrenched minority of academic critics — without whom, be it said, the medium would quickly succumb to literary entropy. Meanwhile it manages to maintain itself prosthetically.

If the imitation of nature is the privilege or the proper sphere of the novel and the imitation of form has been consigned to oblivion, it seems reasonable to assume that poetry is confronted with only two options, namely, it must be either prosaic or irrelevant. There is no *tertium quid*. It reflects and participates in the modern experience of universal chaos and predictably disintegrates, becoming discontinuous, haphazard and aleatory, or variously smuggles an extraneous concept of order into its performative ambience and so reduces itself to a parasitical and undistinguished existence, encroaching on the terrain of the novel only to be wiped out or incorporated. This is where the imitation of nature inexorably leads it. The other alternative is equally depressing: it opposes the experience of violence and anarchy and stays equally clear of the giantocracy of the novel, setting up a small, countervailing linguistic system predicated on order and continuity. Thus it becomes instantly obsolete and intensely private, the formal expression of nostalgia for a lost coherence.

The modern poet navigates in the straits between the Scylla of the irrelevant and the Charybdis of the prosaic, and there is every sign in the apocalyptic moment we inhabit that his epic journey is about to be cut short, if it has not already ended. And if, as many believe, the novel is itself endangered by the graphic and electronic revolutions inspired by a triumphant technological barbarism, prose will soon confront its own set of complementary options: to become irrelevant as its predecessor, or somehow cinematic and instantaneous as its successor. In which case it is possible that poetry will be deprived of even its posthumous survival in the body of the novel, one more minor, unremembered casualty in the collapse of the past.

NOTE

[1] This is a point stressed, perhaps overstated, by Wilde in *The Decay of Lying*, which claims that art in no case reproduces its age. "So far from being the creation of its time, it is usually in direct opposition to it. . . ."

Concluding Note

In a certain sense poetry (or the improbable act of writing and reading it) has more in common with Science Fiction than with any other branch of prose literature, given the 'Coleridgean' proviso that Science Fiction (of the cruder sort at any rate) is popular since it relies on the familiar operations of fancy and poetry is paradoxically remote since it is based on the rigorous principles of the imagination. The traditional poem and the SF story construct codified worlds which in terms of consistency and intelligibility provide a fleeting alternative to the feeling of dispersion and the experience of triteness we associate with contemporary life. At the same time, it is obvious that Science Fiction cannot be diffracted through the medium of verse (although this has been inadvisedly attempted) without the reciprocal annihilation of the two genres. The poem in its quest for poise and equilibrium is immediately crippled by an orthopedic self-consciousness while the Science Fiction story in its need for spectacle and narrative expansiveness chafes in frustration at the formal

and rhetorical limitations imposed upon it. But it might be worth suggesting that poetry was the Science Fiction of the ancient world, not in the sense of detailing implausible adventures in the epic (or even Lucianic) mode but rather in describing an implicit trajectory that overarched and to some extent negated the world of daily experience. Poetry once provided, as Science Fiction does today, the significant alternative to the commonplace.

We might also note that poetry has been crowded out of the aesthetic field not only by its brawny, mimetic competitor, the novel, but by its once-pliant, former handmaiden, music. Eric Havelock tells us in his *Origins of Western Literacy* that as the written word gained its identity and became "increasingly prosaic," it was freed from its previous bondage to mnemonic verse rhythm. But this emancipation had the concomitant effect of releasing rhythm from its subservience to poetry, allowing it to be conceptualized in pure sound independent of diction and "increasingly thought of not as an accompaniment to words but as a separate technology with its own laws and procedures." Thus both the mimetic and phonetic functions of verse have been taken from it by the disciplines of fiction and music, which are better adapted to the respective modalities of verbal imitation and rhythmic sound than is their ostensible predecessor.