

The Discursive Mode

REFLECTIONS ON THE ECOLOGY OF POETRY

THERE have been many histories of poetry, but its natural history has yet to be written. The fantastic variety and profusion of living forms in nature are all related and depend on one another. The naturalist knows this well and he knows that, while these relations are never simple in themselves, they often depend on a few quite simple natural laws which constitute the science of ecology.

Man is part of nature, and human ecology is a part of general ecology. The arts of man rise and flourish and decay as do the races and species of living things; they are rooted in the mind and heart, they depend on the climate of society in much the same way as plants and animals depend on soil and seasons.

The balance of nature in any region undisturbed by man appears to be relatively constant. Each species of plant or animal has its natural and prodigal fertility kept in check by natural enemies and the limitation of its supply of food. But each species depends on other species for a suitable and protective environment and this becomes apparent when the balance is upset. Disappearance of one species because of the failure of controls on its natural enemies may lead to disappearance of the predators as well. And this may in turn lead to further disturbance of the balance of nature. Destruction of tall timber may lead to the disappearance of many types of undergrowth which it sheltered, and destruction of certain lowly types of plants may lead to leaching of the soil, which leads ultimately to destruction of the major forms of vegetation.

It would be foolish to apply this analogy too closely or too literally to poetry. Poems are not organisms and do not reproduce themselves. But the various forms of poetry do depend on one another in something the same way as the various forms of animal and plant life. They have a natural order among themselves, and neglect of any of the great forms by the poets affects the practice of all the others. The introduction of a new literary form, if it becomes popular, may seriously upset the whole traditional balance of literature. Moreover changes in social structure, in education or in belief, outside the field of literature, may destroy this balance in such a way that certain traditional forms fail to command respect and cease to be practised. This, in turn, weakens the respect for others, for the different forms support one another. One after another the great forms disappear; the remaining forms proliferate and hypertrophy and display increasing eccentricity and lack of control. A general erosion of the mind proceeds

with more and more acceleration. A desert ecology replaces the ecology of the rain forest. The forms are few, small, hardy, and reflect the impoverished soil in which they grow. If the process goes a little further a point of no return is reached; sand, clay and naked rock present a lifeless and inhuman landscape where only minimal forms of life persist.

I have seen physical deserts of this kind in several parts of Australia: that made by the intrusion of the goat and the rabbit in South Australia; that produced by the greed and ignorance of too intense cultivation in the Mallee; that produced by poisonous fumes around Mt Lyell in Tasmania. The analogous destruction of the landscape of literature by the intrusion of alien and sterile forms of cheap amusement, by exhaustion of the heart and mind, proceeding from greedy and ignorant exploitation of their resources, and by a poisoning of the atmosphere of belief in which the forms of art breathe and flourish, is an obvious feature of the world in which we live. Looking backwards, it is easy now to see the slow progress towards a desert ecology from the sixteenth century to the present day. It is still a young desert, like parts of the centre of Australia, capable of responding to rain and good seasons or to irrigation, not yet a Sahara or a Gobi. It has its oases. But gone is the landscape in which the epic, the great philosophic poem and the verse tragedy massed their great timbers and delighted by the contrast of forms and foliage; in which verse satire, the ode, the epistle, the elegy, the romance, the hortatory or instructive poem, the pastoral and the long meditative poem or celebrant hymn, gave its general character to the woodland, while innumerable lowlier forms of sonnet or epigram and song filled all the space between. Instead there now is only the sparse and monotonous vegetation of the arid steppe: little poems of reflection, brief comments, interior monologues, sharp critical barks and hisses, songs that never become articulate; earnestness that lacks the enchantment of truth, and frivolity that disgusts by its absence of charm.

The death of the great poem began in the seventeenth century. The balance of nature was disturbed when a new literary form, the novel or, as Fielding called it, the comic prose epic, arose. It is no accident that one died as the other began to flourish. Something noble in the mind of man died with it and something more comfortable and amusing took its place. Verse tragedy no longer supported by the taste for epic declined too, and comedy supported by the novel rose to take its place. The tragic mode gave way to the pathetic. In the eighteenth century, satire became the dominant form, and the disposition of the lesser kinds it sheltered was changed. The profuse varieties of lyric verse disappeared till only the song designed to be sung in the theatre remained. The ode suffered hypertrophy into the grotesque Pindarique. Sham extensions of the *Georgics* celebrated the

wool-trade, the cultivation of sugar cane and the art of preserving health. The pigmy shape of mock epic flourished in the space left by epic in exquisite or impotent parody. The great poems of the period were ghosts: Dryden's translation of the *Aeneid*, Pope's translation of Homer. These poets gave life to what they transplanted, but in themselves they were a sign that the impulse to write original epic was gone.

When the long narrative poem was revived once more it was plain that the impulse came now from another source. It is not Ariosto or Pulci that stands behind Byron's *Don Juan* but the novels of Sterne and Fielding; it is not Milton or Lucretius that give character to Wordsworth's *Prelude* but the *Confessions* of Rousseau and the novels of Henry Mackenzie. Even *The Idylls of the King* is a kind of Victorian fiction in romantic fancy dress. The great narrative poem began to accept its inferiority to the novel and to imitate its methods. Clough and the Brownings went all the way. But the year *The Bothie of Tober-na-Vuolich* appeared was the year of *Dombey and Son*, *Vanity Fair*, and *Wuthering Heights*. *Aurora Leigh* appeared between *Little Dorrit* and *The Virginians*, and *Red Cotton Night-Cap Country* on the heels of *Middlemarch*. What chance could they have? The poets had sold the pass to no purpose.

Things now fell apart rapidly and thoroughly. Verse tragedy, which had tried to take the place of epic in the seventeenth century, died a lingering death in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, to be exhumed in the twentieth by writers of recitative which imitates the voice of poetry much as a female impersonator imitates feminine mannerisms. Satire succumbed with Byron. The elegy, the ode, and the verse epistle quietly stopped breathing and nobody noticed their passing. The twentieth century woke up to find that the forest had vanished and only the monotonous mediocrity of the prairie remained.

Just as a certain nobility of mind was lost with the passing of epic from the living forms, just as real magnanimity was lost with tragedy, so one by one the attitudes of mind and heart, which made the use and being of the other great forms, died out as they ceased to be practised. A loss and a limitation of consciousness followed, so that men, whether readers or poets, were unable any longer to understand what they had lost, or indeed what was meant by a 'form' at all. That the power and range of each kind of poetry was intimately related to the structure, the appropriate metres, the formal character of epic, of satire, of ode, or drama, exactly as the character and nature of each kind of plant or animal is the product of its 'form', it was no longer possible to recognize. Men could see nothing but arbitrary or chance types of construction, and they came to the perverse conclusion that these forms, having perished, had nothing to do with the

essential nature of poetry. Poetry in its purest form they decided was to be found in the lyric. Edgar Allan Poe propounded the new heresy in an essay which became one of the bases of symbolist doctrine. Narrative, drama, excogitation, argument, description were rejected as having nothing to do with the pure essence of poetry. Poetry was music. Poetry was not the thing said, but continual evocation of delicious suggestions of meaning. Poetry was an unconscious crystallization of glittering images upon the bare twig of metre. Poetry, at the nadir of this search for its essence, became the formless babble and vomit of the poet's subconscious mind.

One thing more disastrous, perhaps, than the disappearance of the great forms, has been the concomitant disappearance of the middle form of poetry: that form in which the uses of poetry approach closest to the uses of prose, and yet remain essentially poetry. It was a form which served without pretension the purposes of narration, the essay, the letter, conversation, meditation, argument, exposition, description, satire or cheerful fun. Its mood, like the mode, was discursive, not intense or elevated or passionate. It was in this middle field that the poets learned the exercise and management of their craft, the maintenance and modulation of tone, the arts of being at once well-bred, elegant, sincere and adept. It was from this middle ground that the poets moved to higher flights, and moved with assurance and skill. And it was from this common ground, this basic level of performance, that public taste was able to measure their progress towards the true sublime and to appreciate lapses of poetic tact, failures, and absurdities, which are largely hidden from the poets and their readers today. It did not depend, like most of the admired poetry of today, on a profusion of startling images, but on the plain resources of ordinary English used with inimitable aptness and animated by metre and rhyme. It was in this middle style that Chaucer wrote his tales, that Jonson could describe Penshurst, the house of his friend and patron, Dryden retell a tale from Boccaccio or argue in *Religio Laici* against the faith he was so soon to embrace, Smart describe the picking of hops in Kent, or Wordsworth relate with quiet amusement his student life at Cambridge. Browning found it ready to hand, the medium of speech neither dramatic nor merely colloquial, yet suggesting both, for his remarkable gallery of men and women. In it he wrote *The Ring and the Book*, the greatest *poem* of the nineteenth century, which, because of its medium, is perfectly effective and yet not great poetry. The discursive mode is not wholly unpractised today. Martyn Skinner has used it in *Letters to Malaya*, and Robert Frost in some of his New England poems, to mention two modern poets. But it has disappeared from what is fashionable and has therefore ceased to be part of the education of young poets and the natural measure and standard, for

public taste, of success or failure in the intenser forms of poetry.

One of the masters of the discursive mode in English is Cowper. Few read *The Task* nowadays, but it deserves to be read if only to remind us of the still centre, the simple graces, the unobtrusive ceremony of language, for loss of which the whole natural order of poetic forms has fallen apart:

*Now stir the fire, and close the shutters fast,
Let fall the curtains, wheel the sofa round,
And, while the bubbling and loud-hissing urn
Throws up a steamy column, and the cups,
That cheer but not inebriate, wait on each,
So let us welcome peaceful evening in.*

In Cowper, in much of Dryden, above all in Chaucer we have the discursive mode at its barest and simplest. Metre and the unaffected skill of the poet draw the natural words and syntax into a movement that constitutes the dance of language we call poetry. On mastery of this basic skill depends the successful use of all the higher resources of poetry. On a taste discriminating enough to appreciate this as poetry, depends the power to discriminate and to appreciate all the higher forms in their appropriate and natural order, and to see them for what they are. Without this principle of discrimination no one can understand the *composition* of a long poem. No long poem can stay always at the height; the poet must understand the art of modulation, and mastery of the discursive mode is the key to this art. On this depend proportion, harmony, connection, surprise, and the power to return without lapsing into dullness—all the architectonic skills. In the possession of this knowledge the poets have no need, as seems to be the case today, of theories of magic or techniques of chance collision or subterranean evocation. The theory of poetry is simply that of the natural use of natural forces to produce effects never known in nature and to make these forces serve ends, not different from those met with in other kinds of social intercourse, but only at a heightened level of perception and a higher organization of heart and mind. And it is in this use of natural forces to new ends that poetry takes its place among the characteristically human and humane occupations.

The counter view, which now holds the field, was enunciated by Poe in 1848:

I hold that a long poem does not exist. I maintain that the phrase, 'a long poem', is simply a flat contradiction in terms. I need scarcely observe that a poem deserves its title only inasmuch as it excites, by elevating the soul. The value of the poem is in the ratio of this elevating excitement. But all excitements are, through a psychal necessity, transient. . . .

That degree of excitement which would entitle a poem to be so-called at all, cannot be sustained throughout a composition of any great length. After the lapse of half an hour, at the utmost, it flags—fails—a revulsion ensues—and then the poem is, in effect, and in fact, no longer such.

There would be no point in contemplating the ingenious but essentially trivial arguments of Poe's *The Poetic Principle* had these arguments not had the misfortune to justify so aptly what was going on in poetic practice in the nineteenth century, and had they not, by a series of unfortunate accidents, become the basis of so many varieties of modern poetic doctrine. Poe's opinion hardly deserves a serious answer. He might just as well have maintained that love consists only of brief passages of intense excitement in sexual intercourse, and that, because a man cannot prolong these moments indefinitely, he is never in love except when he is in bed. Nothing so well illustrates the disaster which followed the loss of any sense of the nature and the importance of the discursive mode as this tendency to equate poetry with excitement. Poe's essay goes on to proclaim that coherent argument, narrative, and description are irrelevant. Poetry, he makes it seem, elevates us as a bottle of whisky may put us in a state of elevation. If we take more than a little of either 'a revulsion ensues'. A generation which could see no poetry in Pope took the view that the essence of poetry was to be found in Palgrave's *Golden Treasury* of 1861 and 1869.

'Though they may write in verse, though they may in a certain sense be masters of the art of versification, Dryden and Pope are not classics of our poetry, they are classics of our prose,' wrote Matthew Arnold in 1880. Palgrave and Arnold were education officials. Both became Professors of Poetry at Oxford. It may be significant that since their day education in schools, on which the formation of public taste so much depends, has offered as the basis of the study of poetry mainly anthologies of the Palgrave sort, and that the study of poetry in universities so often neglects the discursive mode. We live in a world which has been systematically brought up without appreciation of the plain bread of poetry, which has as systematically had its taste formed on little cakes and sugar-plums, to appreciate nothing but short spasms and concentrated sweetness, which has never learned the habits of sustained attention which greater works demand.

When plant ecologists have wished to restore and regenerate the surface of an erosion plain they first planted the dunes with coarse and resistant grasses with roots that bind and stabilize the clay slope along with a hardy succulent—such as pigface. Additional grass and small weeds could then take root on the protected surface. Slowly humus was formed; bacteria and

fungi in the humus built up nutrients, fixed nitrogen, and restored the soil until it could support shrubs and bushes, until

. . . last

*Rose as in Dance the stately Trees, and spread
Their branches hung with copious Fruit: or gemm'd
Their Blossoms: with high Woods the Hills were crown'd,
With tufts the vallies and each fountain side,
With borders long the Rivers. That Earth now
Seem'd like to Heav'n, a seat where Gods might dwell
Or wander with delight, and love to haunt
Her sacred shades.*

In other words they followed exactly the steps which Milton describes in the primal act of creation. But where God simply created, they must plant and tend and water.

The regeneration of the ecology of eroded minds is not as easy as this. But because it is hard it should not be thought to be impossible, and the ecological analogy is perhaps instructive. We must start first with the coarse grasses that bind and protect. The first step in intelligent regeneration of the soil of poetry may well be to re-establish the discursive mode, in particular to restore the practice of formal satire. For good satire not only spreads and encourages an appreciation of basic, simple forms of poetry, it not only nourishes and binds the soil, it is in itself a powerful force to check and to eradicate the destructive forms, the noxious and parasitic growths within a civilization, by making them absurd and contemptible. The evil and incoherence and folly in society are also connected. They rely and depend on one another. Wherever the golden derision or the *saeva indignatio* of satire strikes, it weakens and shakes the forces that corrupt the heart and destroy poetry.