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THE OLD POSE AND THE NEW POETRY

IF WE VENTURE TO WONDER about the habits of a poet, to eavesdrop or to force a visit, as it is Sunday we may find him, like Stevens, simply tracing the pattern in a brightly coloured rug, or like Laforgue, from hearing his neighbour's piano or seeing a demure bourgeois girl returning from church, nurturing a pang, a private, wry, ironic speculation. There might, moreover, be a physical difficulty. Not every poet locates himself for anyone's convenience but his own, so that though we might be helped by Auden's shiny trumpet or by Robert Graves' Mediterranean whistle, there will be others like Jeffers in the fast security and seriousness of their own world who might resent our approach, even on a Sunday.

Should we indeed approach the residence, the Schloss Duino near Trieste perhaps, or that Victorian stucco villa with a face like Betjeman's at the attic window, or perhaps that isolated farm of Reaney's presided over by the man with the appearance of Noah, we might have a townee's apprehension of those real, fanged farm dogs that ought to be mythical, and wonder what to expect, after Byron's menagerie and Miss Moore's real zoo, of that improbable population we were told about—that beast of Yeats, slouching towards but never arriving at Bethlehem, those high hawks of Jeffers, those angels of Rilke, the necessary angel of Stevens. We might find there some assistance, a hand, a hanger-on, who would tell us of the poet's world: his isolation; his anxiety; his desire for the accuracy of his own vision; his delight in craft, away from commerce, away from communication, and away from tourism; his delight in a scattering of blue-jays about his wood as the sharp sense of it puzzles his mind, or his delight in the accord of speech, as puzzling also, something more than he expects, more than the world leads him to expect. But this is the farmhand's view, and while we were talking the poet has already left, on some new unaccountable excursion, some new enterprise which requires his mind, and his craft.

So we are cast back on our own imaginings and on second-hand report. To

know the poet we would give ourselves the difficulty of knowing his world, but the difficulty is great. That world seems never the same. Rather it is like old maps, with their charm and awkwardness: maps even of a square world; or divided into three for Noah's three sons; or into two, the East and West, Rome and Byzantium; or tentative Swiftian sketches like the maps of Pacific adventurers, charts of their new world; or even an accurate map, with colour for emphasis and like the map of Manitoba a large area to the north—*uncharted*. One is amazed that poets surveying and re-surveying take, or have, such different views of it. One is also perplexed. That old chart of, say, Vancouver Sound, though discredited, has besides its antiquity and charm even a certain point as it gives accurately the thing that was seen. So a poem, an old poem, may still have point: a sudden penetration when the poet "looks into the beauty of the mind" and sees not beauty only; in a formal pattern, in the old luxury of a convention one knows to be past, a sudden snag, lines suddenly which are hard to shrug off, as in that old sonnet which begins

They that have power to hurt and will do none,
That do not do the thing they most do show;

or a sudden, memorable felicity of language, as in Donne's phrase where love "inter-inanimates two souls"; or the slight, but then unavoidable tension of a poem which begins "Weighing the steadfastness and state / Of some mean things. . . ."

It is this old penetration and this kind of felicity that makes one reluctant to talk of modern poetry. And there are other thoughts. Outside this scheme of things, this pattern of time, the poet himself might turn out to have such originality, such individuality of attention, that as he reveals a sharp knowledge and wisdom even in a single metaphor, it might be presumptuous to classify or explain, as though the fulness of that knowledge, and the felicity of language which expresses it could somehow be dated, and relegated to the past. Is one going to cavil at the knowledge of Raleigh, or question the perspicacity of Pope?

There is change, however. There is movement—progress in thought and a development of taste. When the age changes, then the metaphors change. The age is its metaphor, in a certain sense. So we are no longer moved by many of the conventions of the past, although we may understand them perfectly well. On the other hand there is a poem which meets us in our own terms, addresses us in our own idiom, perhaps makes something of our idiom, our vernacular, which moves us in an instant spontaneous vital way, moves us by a sudden concordance of what we know and feel and what the poet knows and feels; and it is this feeling of having been touched to the quick, of having felt a present validity that lets us say of a poem that it is modern. There is a poem by F. T. Prince called "Soldiers Bathing". An

army officer watches his men bathing in the sea, and is moved by their innocence that one moment they will be relaxed in the very pleasure of living, and the next perhaps will be fighting savagely to the death. He feels his responsibility to these men who will do simply as he commands. He also feels, as well as knows, the history of their fate—those other soldiers bathing in the sea during a lull in the fighting, whom Michelangelo portrayed in a cartoon, and the Florentine, Pollaiuolo, in a painting. It is hard not to be affected by a poem which treats seriously of war and a man's responsibilities if he is involved in it; and this is a good poem, terse, fluent, and with the discretion of language that a twentieth-century poem must have. The change is that whereas the first generation of twentieth-century poets rarely stood sufficiently away from the subject to see it clearly, and were to a large extent at the mercy of their own introspection, here is a poet trying (in an older way) to have both: both war, the thing itself, and the observer, the poet himself; both the objective reality and the poet's individuality of thought; both fact and sensibility. The second generation therefore seems to have an opportunity which the first did not. It has the opportunity of viewing the world more clearly, not infatuated, or obsessed, or terrified by the new knowledge, but, having absorbed something of that knowledge, with the chance of a clearer understanding and a broader, and perhaps more penetrating vision. A generation that expects little has no need of pose and gesture, no interest in mere *cris de coeur*.

Nevertheless, there is a clumsiness at the end of F. T. Prince's poem. It is an artistic clumsiness, but one which a poet who wishes to say anything may have forced upon him, that is, if he does not protect himself with those Eliot-like bodyguards, Drama and Irony, or find security in arbitrary principles of art. The poet has provided in this case a gloss, an explanation, a personal comment. He says of the scene that he has described, the games of the soldiers and their equipment on the shore: "what could it be / But indirectly or directly a commentary / On the Crucifixion?" and after a few lines:

Though every human deed concerns our blood,
And even we must know, what nobody has understood,
That some great love is over all we do—

and then, to end the poem:

Yet, as I drink the dusty air,
I feel a strange delight that fills me full,
Strange gratitude, as if evil itself were beautiful,
And kiss the wound in thought, while in the west
I watch a streak of red that might have issued from Christ's breast.

There is nothing here of the Betjeman banal; yet something is not quite right. Firstly, the very existence of a commentary permits one, or even obliges one to begin to wonder, even after one has seen the quality of the poem, about the integrity of it. Secondly, the distance which the poem records between the observer and the observed, in this case an officer and his men on a beach, and which is the distance familiar in romantic poems where there is some emphasis on the sensibility of the observer and on the obtuseness or at least remoteness of the observed, makes the conclusion seem arbitrary and vulnerable in the poem, whether or not the real circumstances would justify it. The poem depends upon the irony that soldiers absorbed in unconscious animality are contained nevertheless within a Christian scheme of things: but that happens in the poet's mind, and when one thinks about them, the soldiers, the gloss seems sophistical. What consolation would it be to them to be told their evil was a Commentary on the Crucifixion: a commentary? Thirdly, there is something academic in the working of the poem: that is, there is something about it of a poem being made. The word "commentary" gives this. So does the poet's way of thinking about war: his imagination works in such a way that he seems to go more naturally to someone else's depiction of war, Michelangelo's, than to a recollection of the actual thing. This literary habit of the imagination, rich in one sense, since it allows the poet's consciousness of the past to be drawn into the poem in a live not a pedantic way, in another sense limits the effectiveness of the poem to the extent that the violence of the subject, without the poet, is filtered away as it passes through his consciousness. This awareness of the past, the Christian and cultural past, which in the twentieth century is such a dominant feature of a thinking man's existence, is itself a principle of order that lends a kind of rationality to events and takes away from their awkwardness and their singular point.

There are other things which this poem would lead one to say, for it is good enough to stand discussion. Let it for the moment be a point of balance. It was written during the last world war, and since it is modest, and spare, and unaffected, might indicate a change in poetic direction, or a change in attitude among people who think about poetry. Let us see if this works.

On the one side of the balance are poets such as Yeats, Valéry, Eliot, Auden, Rilke, and Stevens: strong poets in their own world, which is not exactly ours; poets whom, since the war, we can identify in spite of this great difference as belonging to a certain generation which is past; poets whose attitudes can be seen as attitudes and whose truths have also the distinctness of art in as far as they are away from us, public not intimate, not troubling but acknowledged as the very substance of life, where life is a thing worked out and thought about and met in the light of

that thought. Two of these poets are alive, and one, the most "modern", died after the war, in 1955; but they belong most naturally to the years between 1900 and 1930. The *Duino Elegies* were completed in 1922. *The Waste Land* was published in that year. So was Wallace Stevens' first book, *Harmonium*. So was Valéry's volume *Charmes* which contains "Le Cimetière Marin". Yeats' volume *The Tower*, which contains "Sailing to Byzantium", "Among School Children", "All Souls' Night", and "The Tower" itself, was published in 1928. Auden's first volume was published in 1930.

Though these dates are well known, they can serve as a reminder of the "pastness" of the works concerned. To a person thinking about poetry in 1960, they are as past as Tennyson was to Auden when he wrote his Preface. To see something as being past is not the same as to reject it. Indeed, this ability not to reject, which is a present or "modern" possibility of virtue, is a mixed blessing perhaps, since although it leads to an evenness of temper and regard it permits also a more casual or nonchalant attitude to literature, a familiar not an urgent acceptance, to which we might also give the label "modern". Eliot's peptic attack on Hardy, though unbalanced enough to give away his personal feeling, indeed his resentment, at least indicates such a violent involvement in the issue that the potent meaningfulness of literature is never in doubt. This, however, is to anticipate a later part of the discussion. Broadly speaking, these poets of the early part of the twentieth century react against the nineteenth without discovering any alternative: they strike attitudes about the attitudes that they cannot strike. It is the period of startling discoveries. People, that is people thinking about literature, who "discover" that all things can be explained, and their values explained away, spend their lifetime exploring, like Aldous Huxley, the implications of such a predicament. They discover, as though for the first time, that the importance of the individual can be questioned; that his social situation is arbitrary, not God-given, and his upbringing, even the brittle upbringing of the British intellectual, is rejectable; that cities are ugly and vicious; that most people are impoverished, ignorant, and in pain; that wars are futile, and that brutality is a fact; that thinking leads to more thinking, not to the truth; that it is hard to discover any area of personal activity not susceptible to the deterministic pressures of biology or economics; that there are no absolutes, and that one's thinking about the world leads to the gloomy certainty of overpopulated doom; that love is suspect, fear the reality; beauty suspect, ugliness the reality; aspiration suspect, brute mechanical existence the reality, and the unavoidable condition of living. All this, so well-known since Sophocles, and before, but now felt at a fierce introspective point of focus, is recorded in the novels of Aldous Huxley, and Kafka,

and Gide, and in the poetry, for example, of Laforgue. Wallace Stevens, in the poem *The Sense of the Sleight-of-Hand Man*, has a wry comment on it all, which is retrospective, however, and therefore calm:

It may be that the ignorant man, alone
Has any chance to mate his life with life,
That is the sensual, pearly spouse, the life
That is fluent in even the wintriest bronze.

For the awkwardness of this existentialist position there are obvious solutions: to reject and start again; to discover alternatives, that is, partial alternatives; to take up a religion, as of need; to shrug one's shoulders and get on with the practical business of living it out. This discussion, however, is already too theoretical. It is more interesting to recall the poets themselves.

They are poets of doubt. They hanker for the old certainties and know them to be impossible. They reject, but with their heads over their shoulders; and, like the men in Frost's poem who climbed out of the window when there was a knock at the door, might say wryly: "Back over the sill / I bade a 'Come in' / To whatever the knock / At the door may have been." None of them is any good at opening doors. Alternatively, they give away with one hand, and take back with the other, in such a way that the irony implicit in the manoeuvre has an honesty which disguises the actual dishonesty, as in that conclusion of Auden's poem: "Life remains a blessing / Although you cannot bless." Or again, as Laforgue takes Ophelia as a symbol of not accommodating oneself to the crass demands of existence, they prefer the virtues of limited or even negative statement to facile Georgian compromise: "Better mendacities / Than the classics in paraphrase". Their figures are gaunt and troubled, like Prufrock who camouflages intellectual uncertainty beneath a social gaucheness, and who says with a child-like petulance: "I do not think that they will sing to me"; like Laforgue's Pierrot, whose "low scandalous world / Is just one of a thousand throws of the dice", and who ends his poem with affected insouciance:

Et que, chers frères, le beau rôle
Est de vivre de but en blanc
Et, dut-on se battre les flancs,
De hausser à tout les épaules;

like Wallace Stevens' Crispin, whose *Odyssey* ended in domesticity, who slid "by slow recess / To things within his actual eye" and accepted a "haphazard denouement"; or like Valéry's Narcisse, who looking at himself in the water, "inépuisable Moi", finds there "un trésor d'impuissance et d'orgueil" but nothing else: "Nulle!"

One can be glad one does not have to describe these characters as "modern", since they make of their romantic situation something so negative. They are romantic in the sense that they write poems about the orientation of the individual consciousness, the poet's sensibility, in what is by and large an alien world. They never escape the intensities and limitation of their own vision. If they view the world, it is in terms of this regard. They have always their own situation, predicament, human condition, doom.

This is not in the slightest way to detract from the power of poems written at that time. Often they are strong poems because they express the poet's urgent awareness of this very situation. The poems can be described in their essential limitations: they are poems about poets, or poet's poems about being set away from the world, or poems about poetry. They are not the less strong for this. On the contrary, very often they bring the reader uncomfortably to the very point of being "modern". That poem of Valéry, for example, "Le Cimetière Marin", which is sustained contemplation and a request for meaning at the centre of the poet's existence, which asks the question "Et vous, grande âme, espérez-vous un songe / Qui n'aura plus ces couleurs de mensonge / Qu'aux yeux de chair l'onde et l'or font ici?" and which answers the hope for immortality, the hope for ultimate meaning with the curt line "Le beau mensonge et la pieuse ruse!", ends with the well-known, vulnerable, awkward assertion ". . . il faut tenter de vivre!" as though the huge gap between knowing and living was one of the unavoidable necessities of existence. The poem expresses so forcefully and so well the experience of wanting to know, that one is put out by the realistic barrenness of the reply. Yet this is not an isolated instance. Very frequently, at that time, there is a tension, perhaps only a slight tension, between the poem that is made and what eventually the poet has to say, so that, since the meditation of Valéry would have been an unnatural and unjustified excursion if the conclusion were already decided upon, one is forced to say that there is an awkwardness, an artistic awkwardness in the termination, something much less satisfying, because on a different level, than the poem as a whole. This awkwardness can of course be easily avoided in trivial poems like the one of Auden already quoted. And it is avoided in some good poems where the poet contents himself with the question, the doubts, the uneasiness of mind. Yeats' poem "Among School Children" ends literally with this kind of question mark. In the "Waste Land", amid a plethora of academic uncertainty, the imaginary Grail hero shores up "these fragments against his ruins": he neither arrives, nor exactly fails to arrive. Stevens' "Sunday Morning" ends with the same kind of question mark. Although the poem asserted the impossibility of absolutes, the flight and the beauty of the pigeons are "ambiguous"

that is, still open, puzzling, beyond one's reach. But it is not always that he carries this tension in the subtlety of a single word like "ambiguous". In a later poem, "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction", one of the best poems he wrote, the difficulty becomes more clear, is left in the open, is addressed with a kind of desperation. The poem is specifically about the difficulty of knowing, the desire for an absolute, or as Stevens calls it, in his Neo-Platonic, Santayana idiom, a "Supreme Fiction", and it moves from the acceptance of fact, "things as they are", to direct query, and from epistemology to an attempt at something real. Nevertheless, the poem is strong because it expresses what it feels like to want to know and the experience of being in a world where one does not. Away from that keenness of apprehension a relative weakness can still be felt. He says:

To discover an order as of
 A season, to discover summer and know it,
 To discover winter and know it well, to find,
 Not to impose, not to have reasoned at all,
 Out of nothing to have come on major weather,
 It is possible, possible, possible. It must
 Be possible. It must be that in time
 The real will from its crude compoundings come

That is as far as he is prepared to go. Indeed, along that route it is not possible to go further. Without claiming, therefore, that there was any neat pattern into which all poets fitted, it could be said that the generation of poets writing in the 1920's wanted absolutes and could not have them; wrote poems about the desire, where despite the camouflage of understatement and irony the desire and the desperation of the desire appear too obvious in retrospect, and thus vulnerable; and eventually (in some cases) turned to poetry itself as a possible absolute and wrote poems about the theory of the imagination, or poems about poems.

The gist of all this is that the poets of the 1920's and 30's, although they might disassociate themselves from the public utterance and communication of the nineteenth century, nevertheless had a similar though frustrated aspiration, hankered for absolutes, hankered for a universality of appeal, and hankered for a meaningful relationship between poetry and life. Their habit of irony and understatement is a strong indication of this.

Since the war, however, there has been a marked change. It could not be expected that the poet would wish to maintain his ironical attitudes for ever. Sooner or later, it was inevitable that he would accept a situation in which there are some things he can have, some things he can not; some things that he can know, other

things that are out of his reach. It is not necessary to be totally impounded by introspection, scepticism, fear. They are the stuff of existence, but not, as in the "Waste Land", the limits. It is not necessary to be kicking against the nineteenth century for ever, like a boy who wants the luxury of running away from home more than once, in fact every week-end, when there is time to think about it. It is not necessary to think of poetry only in that esoteric, Symbolist, Pre-Raphaelite, early Eliot manner, as though a poem would be disreputable if it did not aspire to be independent of any meaning except its own, or as though the pose that nothing is valuable except what the poet makes valuable could be infinitely sustained. There is in central Greece a geological formation which consists of innumerable, high, isolated, spindly rock pinnacles, which rise sheer from the terrain, which have room on top for only one man, and which have for centuries been the retreat of hermits whose only communication with the world is by rope and tackle. Some early twentieth-century poems are like this. The poet is remote, taking his own view, superior, never condescending, a high visionary and a remarkable sustainer of his own point of vision, seeing things as no other person could quite be expected to see them.

But one does not need to live in the past, to be waving and beckoning over one's shoulder, or shaking one's fist. Least of all does our thinking about poetry need to be confined by narrow principles of taste, or the wry fetishes of our grandfathers.

There have been, if one can attempt to face a change, more modest poems, more varied and flexible, more in accord with the facts. There has been the sacrifice of the grand manner of Irony. There have been poets who have been of the twentieth century properly speaking, not men reacting against the nineteenth. In England, for example, there are poets like Larkin and Hughes whose domesticity might make one cry out for the excitement of the Old Pose, yet who have a kind of honesty which could make one hopeful for the future. They write of what they know and when the need to write arises look for a method that is appropriate to the need, not to a grand theory of Art or a master principle. Whereas Eliot in his borrowings, for example, or his relationship with Pound, moved from theory to fact to poem, they move simply from fact to poem without, for the moment, aesthetic or "literary" theory of any kind. In the States there are poets like Jeffers, whose view of the world is too strong for it to be cluttered by aestheticism, and whose poems, even when excessively stark or brutal, have a greater validity and power now because closer to fact: that is, closer to what it feels like to be alive at this time. And one can feel

this, of course, without accepting or wholly accepting his view of life, as in the case of that bitter poem, "Original Sin":

The man-brained and man-handed ground-ape, physically
 The most repulsive of all hot-blooded animals
 Up to that time of the world: they had dug a pitfall
 And caught a mammoth, but how could their sticks and stones
 Reach the life in that hide? They danced around the pit, shrieking
 With ape excitement, flinging sharp flints in vain, and the stench of their bodies
 Stained the white air of dawn; but presently one of them

Remembered the yellow dancer, wood-eating fire
 That guards the cave-mouth: he ran and fetched him, and others
 Gathered sticks at the wood's edge; they made a blaze
 And pushed it into the pit, and they fed it high, around the mired sides
 Of their huge prey. They watched the long hairy trunk
 Waver over the stifle-trumpeting pain,
 And they were happy.

Meanwhile the intense color and nobility of sunrise,
 Rose and gold and amber, flowed up the sky. Wet rocks were shining, a little wind
 Stirred the leaves of the forest and the marsh flag-flowers; the soft valley between the
 low hills

Became as beautiful as the sky; while in its midst, hour after hour, the happy hunters
 Roasted their living meat slowly to death.

These are the people

This is the human dawn. As for me, I would rather
 Be a worm in a wild apple than a son of man.
 But we are what we are, and we might remember
 Not to hate any person, for all are vicious;
 And not to be astonished at any evil, all are deserved;
 And not fear death; it is the only way to be cleansed.

Yet this poem does not exactly free itself from attitude and pose. An alternative would be a poem by Seferis, "The King of Asine".

It is a very simple poem without attitudinizing, without attitudes. It is not off the beaten track, as are the socialistic poems of Spender or C. Day Lewis, nor mock-modest, like the "academic" poets—perhaps Wilbur or Jarrell—who know what not to say or what cannot be said, nor involved in the mail-order myth, the do-it-yourself heritage, which saves some North-American poets not only from the banality of the contemporary English domestic style, but also from the difficulty of saying anything at all. The Greek poet enjoys advantages which are denied the English poet: particularly, he is not impeded to so great a degree by the use to which

the language has been put. The English language has been devitalized over the course of a hundred years not only by newspapers, advertising, bureaucracy and so on, but most of all by literary people and critics who use the language, as do linguistic philosophers, to make remarks about other remarks, or verbal or intellectual assertions not about what a poet is writing about, but in terms of the god, Art, about the way in which he writes about it: Words about Words. No language is free from abuse; but demotic Greek, as it has been adopted by modern Greek writers, has the vitality of a spoken, non-official, a "used" language which polite people and bureaucrats, who use the other "official" language, have not yet destroyed. Seferis is not impeded by negatives or by his own knowledge, which is great. Secondly, Seferis has profited from French Symbolism, through Eliot, without becoming enslaved by it as a system. In his poems, particular things, the appearance of things, are not only the objective correlative of inner states, moods, tensions, but are still things in their own right, as Rilke writes of those "tellable" real things in the ninth Duino Elegy. In other words, Seferis moves from introspection to the outside real world, and from the real world, freely, back to his own introspection, meditation, anguish, speculation; and this freedom is a mark of his "modernity", not enjoyed by that other generation whose poets were caught in their own constructions, their symbols, myths, patterns, and theories of Art. Thirdly, perhaps it is that the Greek poet can live with the consciousness of the past as a present reality, as Pound and Eliot desired, without affectation or strain. Whereas there is something artificial in propaganda for Provençal poetry, or dependance upon a work of purely literary anthropology, like *The Golden Bough*, Seferis walks over the land, the same land as Homer wrote about, and is puzzled or teased by a reference in the *Iliad* to this King of Asine, which, though only the slightest reference, is part of his past, his real recollection, his literature and now his query and thought, as though the land while he searched for some clue might give up its secret, or his thoughts as he follows them lead to some real understanding both of the past and of the present.

This poem may be read in English translation in a book called *Six Poets of Modern Greece*, by Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard, and in Rex Warner's translation of the poems of Seferis which has just been published in England by the Bodley Head. In English poetry there has been the superstition that musicality is suspect and that only a guttural, vernacular speech can be genuine. This is another "attitude" not needed now, although the extreme musicality of this poem, "The King of Asine", has not been held by the translation.

The poet has come to see the ruined citadel of Asine on a headland near Nauplia. Whereas in Valéry's "Cimetière Marin", in the heat and the glare of light,

there is conjured up a dream-like atmosphere, remote and cerebral, here one is with the poet, on the site, not as Valéry says for a consideration of art which "required the potential poem to be a monologue of self" or a recollection of the Mediterranean coast which "suggested the theme of pure thought", but for the interest of the thing itself, the castle, the living past, a single word in Homer, the archaeology, the actual day. "We looked all morning round the citadel", where the sea "accepted us like time without a single gap", and where the poet remembers the King of Asine, "a void beneath the mask":

and his children statues
and his desires the fluttering of birds, and the wind
in the interstices of his thoughts, and his ships
anchored in a vanished port:
beneath the mask a void.

Behind this mask, though, there is a consciousness of something more:

a dark spot which you see travelling like a fish
in the dawn-like quiet of the sea

but also of regret, the whole gamut of possible experience, the turn of generation, and the knowledge of pain,

And the bird that flew away last winter
with a broken wing
the shelter of life,
and the young woman who left to play
with the dogteeth of summer
and the soul which screeching sought the lower world
and the country like a large plane-leaf swept along by the torrent of the sun
with the ancient monuments and the contemporary sorrow.

There has not yet been a poet, in the twentieth century, with the vigour, the accomplishment, and breadth of mind, to have these—both the ancient monuments and the contemporary sorrow—vital as an actual and unavoidable reality and understanding in the poem. That necessarily long poem has still to be written. However, in this poem of Seferis, there is such a concordance between the occasion of the poem and the poet's understanding as takes it altogether away from the trivial, the domestic, or the artificial. Nor is it only an idea. The poem as a whole, but particularly the second part of it, expresses, without rhetoric, the experience of being fully and presently alive, nostalgic for pleasure, aware of doubt, involved and puzzled, sensitive and yet realistic: the poet a void. In one respect this word, "*hena kalo*", is the same negative as that "Nulle" of the Narcissus of Valéry—it means that you cannot expect

an answer to some questions. It means you cannot credit individual existence with absolute meaningfulness, and it means that you cannot express an absolute in terms of individual experience only. It is a negative which ends the romantic fallacy, or assumes the allurements and delights of the existentialist "human condition", as an absolute panacea, to have been adequately exposed. In another respect, it is not the same. The mood is modern, without strut or bravado, without that self-pitying, self-conscious Irony of the earlier introverts. And it ends, not with that simple negative, but with a fine ambiguity like Stevens' "Sunday Morning". As Stevens said,

At evening, casual flocks of pigeons make
Ambiguous undulations as they sink
Downward to darkness on extended wings.

Here, more firmly, the sun, which perpetuates all this, but in appearance only, a shieldbearer, rises above the sea:

Shieldbearer, the sun climbed warring,
and from the depths of the cave a startled bat
hit the light as an arrow hits a shield:

—a perpetual query and a perpetual delight. Of this at least the poem speaks strongly for itself. Here are the last twenty lines:

And the poet lingers, looking at the stones, and asks himself does there really exist
Among these ruined lines, edges, points, hollows, and curves
does there really exist
here where one meets the path of rain, wind, and ruin
does there exist the movement of the face, shape of the tenderness
of those who diminished so strangely in our lives,
those who remained the shadow of waves and thoughts boundless as the sea
or perhaps, no, nothing is left but the weight
the nostalgia of the weight of a living being
there where we now remain unsubstantial, bending
like the branches of an awful willow-tree heaped in the permanence of despair
while the yellow current slowly carries down rushes uprooted in the mud
image of a form turned to marble by the decision of an eternal bitterness:
the poet a void.

Shieldbearer, the sun climbed warring,
and from the depths of the cave a startled bat
hit the light as an arrow hits a shield:

"Asinen te, Asinen te . . ." If only that were the king of Asine
we have been searching for so carefully on this acropolis
sometimes touching with our fingers his very touch upon the stones.

To say that the scrupulousness, the desire for accuracy, and the level tone of

these last lines are modern would unfortunately be an over-simplification. Not all poets write poetry that is central, even by intention. Not all poets feel a poem, amongst other things, to be a chance of expressing, with some kind of hardness of form, all that is meaningful and vital at a particular moment. Indeed, it is a mark of this withdrawal from the Grand Theme that it is even more easy than usual to be a minor poet. Having in mind the poets of these two twentieth-century generations, the first are felt to fail if they do not align themselves to the major issues of the day; the second also fail if they content themselves with the trivial. The difference is that they are not immediately criticized for this: they aimed much lower. During the years since the war there have been few magnificent failures, few desperate attempts; but there has been a multitude of short, inoffensive, unambitious, confined, intellectual poems, in unassuming verse—fragments of experience not seen in the light of an overall vision, but, rather preciously, given a hard form of their own, like a temporary housing scheme. A few have accepted the prefabrication of myth. Others, like the New Poets of England and America, Elizabeth Jennings, Nemerov, Wilbur, James Wright, Robert Lowell, whose virtues are wit and control and refinement of sensibility, have created a professional man's suburbia, where Thom Gunn, with his shiny black leather jacket, roars about on his motor-bike and Philip Larkin browses in the local church for a remnant of feeling. For them there would be something ostentatious in rhetoric, something rather vulgar in a delight in words. Others still, whose tenting ground or trailer site of private meaning, away from the main flow of traffic, is a last and feeble stand for individuality, amuse themselves with indecent remarks at passers-by, and, like Dylan Thomas, sometimes sing through the night. The poetry of any age is not to be represented fairly by two or three examples, and of the recent poets it is impossible to say which will continue to write and sustain their writing beyond their local, confined, personal, and academic interests. No one is at present doing so.

If, however, there were such a man it might be argued that circumstances are favourable and the sun sits smiling. More easily than the previous generation he can find for himself a congenial poetic world where the imagination is not so held by the vice of a former age that everything seems or has to be reaction; where the poet's mind is free from attitude, and can be honest at least; where objects are not constrained by Symbol, but exist in a poem in their actual and exact brilliance; and where language is not that public language whittled down by bad usage, but one which arises naturally in its spontaneous forms from the necessity of speech. A comparison of Philip Larkin's "Church Going" with Stevens' "Sunday Morning" would make this difference clear, for it could be said, though there is slight comfort indeed

in borrowing metaphor from finance, that while the poets of the twentieth century's first generation lived beyond their means, those of the second are living more austerely at subsistence level. We may have to live through a few more years of make-shift and borrowing. After that, the colour which the town should be painted will be a matter of choice.

HOMAGE TO A PATRIOT: Niccolo Machiavelli

William Corrington

Who strode cool, undisturbed, through squalid reams
Of paper blood and incarnate misdeeds,
Cared nothing for the sullen noble gangs
That raped his country with provincial schemes.
Who saw that Principles were only steeds
To seat the strong, to ride them past the fangs
Of peasants who might almost grasp the wrong
That brute dynastic power used to part
The common state, the natural consent
That history had acknowledged for so long.
Who saw new ends implicit in the start
Of Alexander's method, Caesare's bent,

Who trapped gaunt truths within a verbal cage,
Then stepped aside—pallbearer of an age.