POETRY: A Magazine of Verse

FORM IN MODERN POETRY

THE PROBLEM of form is one which continues to vex readers, critics, and writers of verse. In a survey of current verse written a year or two back, Stephen Spender made the acute and necessary remark that the poets under review were "sharply divided into those for whom technique exists and those who have no sense of it," adding that certain of the poets considered were distinguished from the rest in their possession of a sense that a poem should be formed, and "that even in the freest verse the ear should act as a rein, curbing and checking a runaway line."

Mr. Spender went on to make the following observations:

"There is no such thing as completely free verse. Merely there are two views of the interior order of a poem. One is that the poem should be poured into a mould: the other is that by great concentration on the idea of a poem the poem can create an organic form of its own. Every idea in words has a shape in the mind of the poet, which it is possible to discover and create as a unity. The dangers of relaxed writing are obvious. The careless writer, not having to 'live up' to a form in which past masters have excelled, is able to get away with a medium in which there are no set rules, and which it is difficult for the reader to judge, except by the total impression which the poems produce on his mind."

These, though in no way original, are timely observations. It is apparent to any discriminating reader that current English verse is remarkable for its confusion of styles. The obsolescence of structural conventions has left every poet, good and indifferent, in a position of quite unprecedented freedom, and it is little
Form in Modern Poetry

wonder that in many cases this freedom is abused and turns into license. The inferior poet is permitted by the prevalent laxity to make a virtue of his defects, and to write in an intolerably careless fashion, under the apparent protection of the example of those genuine poets whose work, possessing an inner form of its own, has no need of conformity with outward conventions.

The distinction, however, between the true and the inferior poet, is a categorical one, and there is, after all, little use in urging upon inferior poets the desirability of a greater effort towards the achievement of form: for that is the same as to ask them to make a qualitative change in themselves. That, indeed, may not be inherently impossible: but this is a question which takes us out of the region of immediate criticism. All that the critic can do in the present situation is to attempt, as best he may, to establish in the minds of readers of verse some sorts of principles by which they may the better be able to distinguish the inferior article from the superior one, and so establish some kind of order among their responses to what is being written by contemporaries.

The view that form is the outward structure imposed upon a poem according to convention or rule is one which will not stand up to any serious examination. Form in poetry is an inherent quality, manifesting itself from within and determining the outward structure, and where form does not exist poetry cannot exist either—or any art for that matter. It is indeed the communication of a vision of form within the confusion of experience through the technical medium of words that is the poet's essential business.

The question is, though, how may the presence or absence of form in any poet's work be recognized? And it is at this
point that the inferior poet, depending upon the absence in the general reader’s mind of any touchstone of form, is able, in Mr. Spender’s words, to “get away” with his production of an inferior article. But while it is quite true to say that form in poetry is an interior quality, nevertheless that inner quality must have some outward expression which can be seized upon as, to some extent, representing or embodying it. “Form” is an elusive quality, and ultimately its existence can be grasped only by a total act of apprehension on the part of the reader. Still, there are certain rough guiding signs whose existence may help to indicate the presence of form in a poem. Form as a total quality manifests itself partially as rhythm: it is the persistence of rhythm throughout the poem that is the primary agent in the creation of form. And rhythm shows itself externally as meter. It is a fact, easily confirmed by investigation, that, of the serious poets writing during the last twenty or thirty years, the best have achieved a high degree of formal integration throughout their work and that this has revealed itself in a certain structural regularity, or at least in the absence of marked structural eccentricity: and that this in turn is not unconnected with an acknowledgment of the four or five basic measures of English verse. From this first rank of poets, there is a descending spiral of accomplishment, passing through various degrees of integration and finishing among the least interesting survivors of the “free verse” movement and its auxiliaries, and the academics who express lofty sentiments in mechanically stereotyped forms.

II

It is not, of course, possible in any way to identify form with meter. All that it is possible to say is that in a good poem there
is rhythmical form which expresses itself in a certain metrical consistency, and that this distinguishes it from poems in which there is apparent a formless confusion of meters or a total absence of meter.\(^1\) An example of a poet whose verse is, in the true meaning of the word, formless (although it has an extrinsic, outward arrangement intended to disguise the lack of inner form) is to be found in Marianne Moore. Here is an example of her work:

\[
\begin{align*}
\ldots & \text{door. There are no banyans, frangipani, nor} \\
& \text{jack-fruit trees; nor an exotic serpent} \\
& \text{life. Ring lizard and snake-skin for the foot, or crocodile;} \\
& \text{but here they've cats, not cobras, to} \\
& \text{keep down the rats. The diffident} \\
& \text{little newt} \\
& \text{with white pin-dots on black horizontal spaced} \\
& \text{out bands lives here; yet there is nothing that} \\
& \text{ambition can buy or take away. The college student} \\
& \text{named Ambrose sits on the hill-side} \\
& \text{with his not-native books and hat} \\
& \text{and sees boats} \ldots
\end{align*}
\]

There would seem nothing except exhaustion to prevent the poet from writing on continuously in this flat, loose manner. Miss Moore's verse is "tasteful" and inoffensive; it cannot be called bad, but only neutral and uninteresting.

A contemporary whose verse shows an equal formlessness, though of a different sort, is Sacheverell Sitwell, who writes in this style:

\[
\begin{align*}
The \text{tumbrils slowly creaking under pyramids of grapes} \\
& \text{That ran down their life-blood on these boards and on the oxen} \\
& \text{Took home the husbandmen,}
\end{align*}
\]

\(^1\)This, of course, is not to consider verse of a type in which a heavy, mechanical meter is used to bludgeon sound and sense into a totalitarian conformity.
Maddened by these fumes and by the pulsing sun;
This shadow-life of drunkenness, this mocking of the fire of health,
Gave birth with its mirror to a world of ghosts,
The theatre and its actors began at that stained trestle
And masks to keep the mirror truth and hide the living difference
Were born in that blue autumn. The mock children
Of fine shepherds and their bearded goats were shown;
And the goat-god in dark rocks once seen.

This sort of thing, although even more verbose, is less like prose
because it is written upon a confused variety of meters rather
than an absence of metre, expressing a strained effort to be color-
fully "poetical." Neither Marianne Moore nor Sacheverell Sit-
well has a marked inner sense of form and this lack finds expres-
sion in the structural looseness of their verse as well as in a lack
of that inner tension in which each word can be dwelt on and
its separate significance extracted for the sake of the organic
unity of the poem. It is important to note in both these ex-
amples the preponderance of merely decorative description. The
verse is flat and has no depth or solidity. For a further example
of a formless verse, lacking metrical continuity, and limited to
the descriptive level, one might turn to such a writer as H.D.:

The light passes
from ridge to ridge,
from flower to flower—
the hepaticas, wide-spread
under the light
grow faint—
the petals reach inward,
the blue tips bend
toward the bluer heart
and the flowers are lost . . .

All writing of this order is in fact nearer to prose than to
poetry. But where verse which obeys no marked structural rules
raises itself above the level of prose and approaches the condition
of poetry, it is always because of a tightening and emphasizing
Form in Modern Poetry

of the meter and a resolution of formlessness into form. An example of verse which appears to be "free" in that it follows no strictly regular structure, but which nevertheless is really poetry of a highly integrated character, is to be found in T. S. Eliot's *Rhapsody on a Windy Night*, which begins:

> Twelve o'clock,
> Along the reaches of the street
> Held in a lunar synthesis,
> Whispering lunar incantations
> Dissolve the floors of memory
> And all its clear relations,
> Its divisions and precisions,
> Every street lamp that I pass
> Beats like a fatalistic drum,
> And through the spaces of the dark
> Midnight shakes the memory
> As a madman shakes a dead geranium....

For a further example, one might take Isaac Rosenberg's *Dead Man's Dump*, which begins thus:

> The plunging limbers over the shattered track
> Racketed with their rusty freight,
> Stuck out like many crowns of thorns,
> And the rusty stakes like sceptres old
> To stay the flood of brutish men
> Upon our brothers dear.

> The wheels lurched over sprawled dead
> But pained them not, though their bones crunched;
> Their shut mouths made no moan.
> They lie there huddled, friend and foeman,
> Man born of man, and born of woman;
> And shells go crying over them
> From night till night and now...

*An examination of either of these poems will show that despite possible appearances to the contrary it moves within a taut, controlled rhythmic pattern, in which the verse is continually brought back to the basic octosyllabic meter:*

35
POETRY: A Magazine of Verse

Dissolve the floors of memory...
To stay the flood of bruitish men...
The variations from this basic meter, and the continual curbing of the verse and its return to it, emphasize the tense, hurried motion of the poet's mind in its efforts to grapple with an experience to comprehend which subjects the mind to an almost intolerable strain. (In each case, it will be noticed, incidentally, the experience has a quality of nightmare, and yet of inescapable reality: it is a nightmare reality which the poet is faced with the task of recording.) It is quite obvious that such writing as this is vastly different from the fanciful playing with words which characterizes poets of the Moore-Sitwell type. Both in Eliot and in Rosenberg there is description, but there is also thought and feeling, and in each case the poem is informed throughout by a powerful emotional impulsion, in which thought, feeling and description (not decoration) are fused into a solid, complex unity.

III

"Free verse" being a phrase with very little meaning, I suggest that for verse of such a kind as that written by poets of the genre of Moore, Sitwell and Pound, the name "loose verse" be used. Loose verse, then, is poetry which is not integrated; it turns out always to be verse that is not informed by emotion, and which lacks a center. And it is here that we reach the crux of the problem of form. For, if a poem is to have form—organic, inherent form—it must, quite obviously, have a center to which all its peripheral elements of description and reflection are polarized. Form is always the effect of rhythm, and rhythm is the expression of emotion, which is the energy radiated by the poet's
mind when it is working at high tension, faced with the inner necessity of grasping and comprehending experience. When it is working thus, his emotion provides the center around which the various elements of his thought and observation cohere, each element being polarized to the emotion and transfused with its peculiar quality. This accounts for the concentrated nature of authentic poetry and also its effect of inevitability: everything is eliminated except that which can transmit the central emotion. The absence of such a center, by opposition, accounts for the flat, loose, exterior quality of much inferior verse.

To illustrate at all adequately this concept of a central impetus of the poem, with its accompanying field of sensations and ideas, is not possible here. Nevertheless, the existence of such an impetus may be recognized by certain subsidiary features of a poem which in practice are usually found with it. Such an impetus presumes a degree of necessity, of psychological compulsion, in the poet, directed upon his experience. The poet's urge, in fact, which drives him towards the act of creation, arises from a profound need to comprehend his experience, to discover within its apparently haphazard disorder an inner significance, an inner wholeness—in fact, form. There are poets who are without this central (and I shall term it a religious) compulsion; and they are precisely those whose work lacks such a center as that of which I am speaking, and which consequently achieves only a low degree of formal organization.

Further, because the poet's need is to discover an inner significance in his own experience, we shall expect to find that the work of the authentic poet is closer to the actuality of experience than that of the writer whose work lacks a strong central impetus. The genuine creator is not tempted, like the writer of weak in-
ward impulse, to stray off into random pleasure cruises among the decorative, the exotic, the bizarre. He is not tempted to be, in the extreme and derogatory sense of the word, a romantic.

A good example of the "professional" poet, who for lack of a central impulse directed towards the comprehension of experience, turns his art upon itself and falls into dilettantism and eccentricity, is Ezra Pound. In his early work, Pound darts from period to period, from country to country, from character to character, assuming like a chameleon the color of his momentary background, but nowhere achieving a coherently personal outlook and attitude. For the most part his verse is, as a consequence, formless pastiche. Ambitious, however, to achieve a masterpiece, he turned to the production of the notorious *Cantos*, which, when completed, were to show a coherent and continuous vision of world history. The *Cantos* have not yet been published as a whole, but quite enough have appeared to show the disintegration of Pound's frail talent under the disproportionate burden he has placed upon it.

The absence of a central impulse to his work, and thus of an emotive center to the poems themselves, around which they could formally cohere, is found in the earlier verse of Pound as well as in the latter. Nor is it a very surprising departure from such early writing as this:

*Sail of Claustra, Aelis, Azalais,*
As you move among the bright trees;
As your voices, under the larches of Paradise
Make a clear sound,
*Sail of Claustra, Aelis, Azalais,*
Raimona, Tibors, Berangèrè,
'Neath the dark gleam of the sky;
Under night, the peacock-throated,
Bring the saffron-colored shell,
Bring the red gold of the maple,
Form in Modern Poetry

Bring the light of the birch tree in autumn
Mirals, Cembelins, Audarda,
Remember this fire . . .

to the chaotic, dismembered writing of the later Cantos (to select a representative specimen):

1622 January, assigned on the Paschi
Off de Paschi
March 1622 Donna Orsola of wherever removed from the book of the Sienese public women (motion approved by the Bailey)
March 24 again appeared black money from Florence
Monte di Firenze, vacabile, 1591,
payable every two months had been 8 and $2
gangsters admitted.

1621 to provide WORK for the populace.
register, rescript,

0

razio della Rena to be recognized
as illegitimate father of the bastards of Pietro de Medici
at 100 scudi per annum
if you follow me, not as the
legitimate father of Pietro's illegitimate offspring

Orbem bellis, urbem gabellis, Urbanus octavus.
implevit . . .

This is sorry stuff indeed, but it shows, no less clearly than the example I have quoted from Pound’s early work, the typical features of loose verse in its formlessness, absence of rhythm and metrical coherence, lack of central seriousness and consequent failure in the actualization of experience and the straying off into romantic exoticism. Pound may be taken, indeed, as summing up in himself all the faults and shortcomings of the “brilliant” second-rate poet, the poet who is led, owing to the absence of a fundamental religious seriousness and consequently of a central emotional impulse to his work, into dilettantism, expressed in an incoherence of subject matter and an exaggerated, self-
The true poet, by contrast with such a versifier as Pound, is one who is driven by an inner need to comprehend experience, upon which he brings to bear the character of his own particular insight, feelings, obsessions, so that, while each poem derives from a central emotive impulse, there is an inner coherence, a continuity, running throughout his work; which, again, however limited and imperfect, is always of a distinctively organic character, and is never a haphazard collection of miscellaneous impressions and observations. It is one of the paradoxes of poetry that, while the authentic poet will be the one whose technical mastery is the most complete, he will also be the one least concerned to push to the surface of his work his preoccupation with "technical problems" and "experiment." It is easy to see that for the "professional" or dilettante poet of the Pound type, "technique" may easily become an end in itself—for what is "technique" but the playing with words, and what is a dilettante but one who plays? The authentic poet, however, has no need or desire to "experiment" in this way. His concern is with the communication of a vision of experience; for him, therefore, the technical problem is contained within the problem of communication. If he becomes, by accident, an innovator, it is simply because that which he was impelled to express necessitated the breaking-through into new verbal modes, not for the sake of those modes, but for the sake of that which could only be expressed through them.

At the opposite pole to Ezra Pound we may place such a poet as Thomas Hardy. In Hardy we find an authentic vision of experience, the result of a deeply serious searching and questioning of life. Although not all his work is on the same level, the
Form in Modern Poetry

profoundly personal quality of his preponderating attitudes, thoughts and feelings as they direct the images and rhythms of his work is to be seen in everything he wrote. This, from Beyond the Last Lamp (Near Tooting Common), will serve to indicate something of that quality:

I
While rain, with eve in partnership,
Descended darkly, drip, drip, drip,
Beyond the last lone lamp I passed
Walking slowly, whispering sadly,
Two linked loiterers, wan, downcast:
Some heavy thought constrained each face,
And blinded-them to time and place.

II
The pair seemed lovers, yet absorbed
In mental scenes no longer orbed
By love's young rays. Each countenance
As it slowly, as it sadly
Caught the lamplight's yellow glance,
Held in suspense a misery
At things which had been or might be.

III
When I retrod that watery way
Some hours beyond the droop of day,
Still I found pacing there the twain
Just as slowly, just as sadly,
Heedless of the night and rain,
One could but wonder who they were,
And what wild woe detained them there...

Caught in such lines as these, with their heavy, implacable rhythms, their imagery of rain and lamplight, is the essential quality of Hardy's vision, the same which binds together the rhythms and images of all his poems, and especially those in which he attains his most complete utterance. The poem has a microcosmic character.
POETRY: A Magazine of Verse

IV
Though thirty years of blur and blot
Have slid since I beheld that spot,
And saw in curious converse there
Moving slowly, moving sadly,
That mysterious tragic pair,
Its olden look may linger on—
All but the couple; they have gone.

V
Whither? Who knows, indeed... And yet
To me, when nights are weird and wet,
Without those comrades there at tryst
Creeping slowly, creeping sadly,
That lone lane does not exist.
There they seem brooding on their pain,
And will, while such a lane remain.

This is apparently a simple poem, which describes a simple everyday incident. Why, then, does it move us, impress itself upon our minds, and stubbornly assert that it is true poetry? Because, certainly, it expresses, in its imagery, rhythm and phrasing, Hardy's unique vision of life. But how does it do this? To answer this question, certain features of the poem must be remarked on. First, the episode is not arbitrarily selected from many other possible episodes, for the sake of the opportunity it provides for the exercise of artistic virtuosity. Although it is an episode of an "external" character, it is apparent that the poet's emotions are intimately engaged. Several statements are implied in it: there is a statement of human solidarity in suffering—of a companionship between persons who are outwardly unknown to each other. There is a statement of the persistence of memory, and a suggestion of the symbolic or visionary significance of commonplace occurrences. There is a statement of the enigmatic nature of time, and of the mysterious relationship between mind and the external world. And there are other state-
Form in Modern Poetry

ments. The poet's recollection of the incident itself serves as a crystallizing agent for a multiplicity of disparate feelings and ideas, which result from the activity of a mind seriously bent upon the comprehension of the meaning of life. And at the center of the poem may be discerned the impulsion of the "I" to which everything is related, whose presence is the major feature which distinguishes poetry originating from a central impulse from verse which does not.

It is such a vision, with its different emphases, its different groupings of attitudes and ideas, which characterizes the work of Hopkins, of Edward Thomas, of the earlier Eliot—of every poet who is finally serious and not, finally, a dilettante—who is "human" before he is "poetic," and who directs his poetry upon his humanity, and not upon itself. And, because it is a vision resulting from an intense struggle for meaning, for order, it demands form for its projection.

D. S. Savage

REVIEWS

"THE MIND'S IMMORTAL, BUT THE MAN IS DEAD"

The Giant Weapon, by Yvor Winters. New Directions.

WINTERS is a scholarly critic with a passion to be remembered also as a poet. He has enlisted in the grand tradition of the minor classics: Gascoigne, Ben Johnson, Greville, Raleigh, Donne, poets he considers "tougher":

Poets who wrote great poems, one by one,
And spaced by many years, each line an act
Through which few labor, which no men retract.

But this passion to seek greatness in the mirror of the poets of