

Poetical Essays

Poethood

The Poetic Trinity

The Epic Tradition

The Triptych

Modern Poetry

Poetic Apostles

Poethood

As I stand at the threshfold of a new millennium, I am contentedly reassured that in a thousand years from hence poetry shall thrive still, for wherever there is human existence, there remains, as always, the sovereign art of Poetry. She, for surely the poetic spirit is of the fairer sex, exists perpetually from age to age, in ever differing forms, the verve of life, & the ebullience of an age. When Hazlitt commented, "*She is not entangled in cobwebs of her own making, but soars above all obstacles, she cannot be constrained by mastery, she has the range of the universe, she traverses the empyrean, & looks down on nature from a higher sphere,*" he seemed to be talking about some entity possessed of omniscient powers, but indeed, *poetry itself is divine!* As man invented boats to cross the oceans of the world he invented poetry to cross the waters of the soul. The Chilean poet Pablo Neruda said, "*Poetry is a deep inner calling in man, from it came liturgy, the psalms & also the content of the world's religions.*" She has a deeper law, an inner aim which has best been defined by the Indian mystic Sri Aurobindo, "*Neither the intelligence, the imagination nor the ear are the true, or at least the deepest or highest recipients of poetic delight, even as they are not its truest or highest creators; they are only its channels & instruments : the true creator is the soul.*"

But what exactly *is* poetry? Observe the secret ingredient which raises ordinary writing to true poetry. Let us take a football...on its own not a very poetic thing. But put in the back of the net in the last minute of the World Cup Final... there is your poetry. She can be found in actions, events, emotions, thoughts, places... she can be found in the hills & lanes of nature; from a flight of dragonflies dancing cross your path to the ruins beneath smoking Vesuvius, from the gardens at Giverny to Scott's last frostbitten entry in his snow-sprinkled diary, poetry is everywhere. She lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world, shedding her elysian light upon those secret chambers of the brain, giving an expression to many unsaid things. Through the blossom, fragrance & golden cadence of her elegant words, Man is taught best how to articulate the particular rhythms & diction of his birthright, the language of his mother & their native land.

Her province is the creative imagination, a superb palatial hall, resplendent in the mind, where reside, '*The best & happiest moments of the happiest & best minds!*' & poetry should, "*Strike the reader as a wording of their own highest thoughts,*" (Coleridge & Keats). She is a glue which binds together many differing things, at once at the centre & the circumference of humanity, commingling together by passion and knowledge the vast empire of human society, some vast repository of truth. Like a tangible & grandiose mirror she reflects past ages like some profound gateway, recording the language of men & their actions upon the Earth. She is a fossil which stores the once living zeitgeist within the stony pages

of her poets, procuring for the present new colours thro a light which they cast upon the past. Who remembers the Merovingian kingdoms of the Franks? They had little culture to speak of & so this great empire has slid into forgetfulness. Yet, the ballads of Iolo Goch, Owen Glendower's partisan poet, contributed to & recorded the Welsh rebellion against British rule, which has subsequently raised that prince to the mantle of national hero.

She is music, philosophy, painting, maths, language, science, geography... & at the same time a mystery on the edge of man's reason. She is an inspiration of art... for without the German epic poem, *The Nibelungen*, would Wagner have ever perceived the grandeur of his majestic operatic cycle. Even then, without the poetry of his libretto, could he have ever put words into the mouth of Siegfried. It was when as a young man, sat in the magnificent opera house in Vienna, listening to Parsifal sung in an unfamiliar tongue, that I first sensed power of my art, for poetry of a foreign language is still poetry, the true meaning less understood & more *felt*.

The highest achievement of poetry is to paint a sequence of images in the malleable mind, a narrative of the imagination, connecting the receiver one-by-one to a variety of human emotions, inviting us to create pictures to the words supplied - in short, a cinema of the mind. The twelfth century Arabian poet Averroës stated that poetry's function is *takhyil*, the invoking of wonder-arousing images in the mind of the listener. Sidney summ'd up this chief function when he said that, "*Poetry has the power to reproduce an ideal golden world!*" To assist the receiver these images are wrapp'd up in the music of poetry, the hypnotic rhythms of the words which lull the listener into an open state of mind. This is known as the CHAUNT, & from the sonneteer reading a sonnet to his beloved by a stream or the mass Mushaira readings of Pakistan, a poetry recital is poetry in its natural state. It has a unique tone & the reader will change their voice accordingly in the same manner as we change it to speak to elegant ladies, students or babies. Recitation casts a spell over the audience, the animal magnetism of the reciter lending their own will & faculty to the original sense of the text as voices like Coleridge's rise, "*Like a steam of rich, distill'd perfumes.*" The listener exists, for a time, in the dilated sphere of the poet's intellect, listening to their personal music in a meeting of souls. Thro this power she is also the natural arbiter of speech & over the centuries the efforts of her champions have enriched, refined & deepened the way we talk to each other, preserving our languages within her folds, often in the twanging dialects of the poets. However, in this modern age of digital television & playstations, where everything is done for the imagination, the glory of poetry, this great power of the human mind, has fallen into neglect.

Then what of these champions of poetry, the poets themselves, or in Shelley's words, those, '*Minsiters of a beneficent power seated on the throne of their own souls.*' To these errant knights the spirit of Poetry is a fire that burns within the psyche, sometimes fiercely, sometimes embers, but always there. As Wordsworth said, they, "*Cannot chuse but feel,*" testament to the hold this symbiotic creature has over them. Imagine a tree reflected in a river... we all can see the image shimmering on the water, but the poets possess the ability to reach into the water, pluck a leaf & place it on a page. They blend & fuse existence thro an innate energy that delivers their inspirations in an elaborate & noble diction. The language they have adopted affects a certain uniform & harmonious recurrence of sound that can at once be recognized as poetry, the province of those whose thoughts are deep, who can form grand conceptions & transfuse proper sentiment into them - instantly & innately knowing what would be worthy of immortality. Their works belong to all time, an onion of inspiration - with each subsequent generation adding another skin - when each poet aspires to emulate the words of the Roman poet, Horace; '*Exegi monumentum aere perennius, Regalique situ pyramidium altius,*' (I have completed a monument, more lasting than bronze & loftier than the majestic plan for the pyramids).

According to Indian poetics the principle cause of poetood is *Pratibha* (genius) which is a gift received from birth. "*I have discovered I am a poet, it is not my fault at all,*" said Rimbaud, & to be a poet is not a vocation, but a life, from the first feeling of affinity to the art, when the young, fertile mind is, "*Fired at first sight with what the muse imparts!*" CS Lewis noted this poetic awakening in his poem *Dymer*,

*"For nineteen years they worked upon his soul
Refining, chipping, moulding & adorning
Then came the moment that outdid the whole*

The ripple of rude life without a warning!"

In his Prelude William Wordsworth has excellently described the early energies of Poethood when he *'wanton'd in wild poesy... with fancy on the stir from day to day & all my young affection out of doors.'* The young poets are drawn by beautiful music to the foot of Parnassus itself, to enter a dark labyrinth of tunnels where a silvery stream flows in perpetuity. As their eyes adjust to the light they come across magnificent palaces & simple caves, relics of poets long gone. Each poet is the inheritor of a great tradition, interpreting it for succeeding generations. It is as tho a mystical engraved baton is passed down from poet to poet, each making their own individual notches in the wood. The stream that runs through Parnassus is eternal in nature, in whose waters can be tasted the essence of all the major poets of the Pantheon. Eventually they shall find an untouched spot beside the stream & begin to brew mead of their own - adding the ambrosia of their inspirations & the herbs of their own mind to produce a new flavour, where they become, in Shelley's words, *"A portion of the loveliness which they make more lovely!"* Or as Voltaire summ'd up, *"Poets of genius make a completely new path thro Parnassus that never existed before, into a region where no man has yet trodden, & there seeks out & explores the unknown."* However, *"You must require a great deal of talent & maturity before contributing something of your own,"* said Rilke, for a poet is not only born, but made.

"The first study for a man who wants to be poet, continued Rimbaud, is the knowledge of himself, complete... As soon as he knows it he must cultivate it." They must daily attend the university of life in order to produce experiences with which to fill their memory banks, creating a stock of images to draw on when their rhyming manua is roused. Longinus connects poetry directly to the life of the poet and lays down the principle that nothing short of sublime living yields sublime poetry. Indian theory lays distinct emphasis on scholastic training (Vyutpathi) and steadfast practice (Abhyaasa) to fortify and regulate the gift of genius. The poet must be both industrious & a master of technique for only a natural spirit backed up by artful skill, exploration of new methods & solid learning can produce a work to treasure to possess as Mary Shelley noted, *"The complete enginery of a poet."* More metaphysically, Coleridge said *'The poet must have an ear of a wild Arab listening in the silent desert, the eye of a North American Indian tracing the footsteps of an enemy upon the leaves that strew the forest & the touch of a blind man feeling the face of a darling child.'*

A larger portion of the poet's task is directed to the assimilation of poetic experience. The accumulation of these will increase the abilities... for as they multiply so shall a poet see the whole more accurately. To define the true poetic experience one must perceive it as a moment of exultation, the drawing together of aspects of existence in an epiphany of feeling. How was Spenser as he laid the Faerie Queene scrolls at the feet of Queen Elizabeth... how was Keats as he wrote a sonnet at the summit of Ben Nevis... how was Owen as he composed to the roar of the Kaiser's shellfire... how was Byron as he swam the tantalising waters of the Hellespont betwixt Asia & Europe... how was Wordsworth as he took a first walk beside Rydal Water with his sister Dorothy... how was Coleridge when he envisioned the metaphysical metaphors of his phantastic Kublai Khan... how was Dante as wrote, *'Abandon hope all ye who enter here,'* a moment before entering the cantos of his Inferno.

Very few poets dwell are married to their muse for a lifetime & inevitably their will come a time when, following a gradual estrangement & diminishing of power, the muse abandons the poet. Sir Walter Scott perfectly captures the sensation of losing his inspiration with;

*Receding now the dying numbers ring
Fainter & fainter down the rugged dell
& now the mountain breezes scarcely bring
A wandering witch-note of a distant spell
& now tis silent all...*

When Byron noted, *"My task is done, my song hath ceas'd, my theme has died into an echo!"* For being a poet is akin to writing a poem itself. The first onrush of poetry in youth, the calm & mature thought as the poem is polish'd, & finally the final product as the poem is set in stone, the reign of fancy over, like the epitaph above a dead poet's grave. It is now that the true Parnassian prize awaits - a slow-moving posthumus accession to the eternal pantheon by the agreement of futurity. Yet, even Shakespeare was slow to permeate into society, for the court of posterity is measured in centuries & not years, although throughout his life our bard could surely sense the immortality that awaited him with lines such as;

*Your name from hence immortal life shall have,
Though I, once gone, to all the world must die:
The earth can yield me but a common grave,
When you entombed in men's eyes shall lie.
Your monument shall be my gentle verse,
Which eyes not yet created shall o'er-read;*

As the poet passes away time sits in judgement upon their contributions to the art. As the years pass by their posthumous fame becomes more solid, until they have earn'd a place in the *Immortal Arena*. This is a metaphorical place upon the summit of Parnassus, where the pantheon of poets are gather'd. Each *gladiator* is arm'd with a weapon consisting of their great works & contributions to the poetic stream, with which to fend off the attacks of the slaving beasts that roam the arena, which we shall call *Critics*. Some poets are so firmly lodged in the higher ground of the arena that none of the beasts dare attack them, but others can soon be pounced on & finish'd in a flash. Then it is to this fierce war of words that the poets shall send their reputations, hoping to defend themselves long enough to establish their poetry among the great. This lust for posthumous fame can be beneficial to a living poet, being the reward, object & animating spring of all their efforts. As Hazlitt said even Milton was, "*Deeply impressed with a feeling of lofty emulation, & a strong desire to produce something of lasting & equal reputation.*"

"*There are some poets whose every line has a unique value,*" said Elliot, "*There are others who can be taken by a few poems universally agreed upon. There are others who need be read only in selections, but what selections are read will not very much matter.*" Ever since poetry first flourish'd on the earth it has been observ'd that no two poets are equal in powers & there has evolved a natural hierarchy to the bardic order. At the bottom of the rung is the *Poetaster*, the 'poet' who knows little or nothing about the art. By putting pen to paper & creating something upon the page with the appearance of poetry, they claim for themselves the divine title. Ben Jonson noted that with them the art, "...*appears in many, poor & lame, patch'd up remnant & old worn rags - half starved for want of her peculiar food - sacred invention!*" The final say on the matter must go to Lord Byron... "*Swans sing before they die, 'twere no bad thing...that certain persons died before they sing!*" The next step up from the poetaster is the *Minor* poet. They can be seen as raw poetic talent but lacking in the deeper truths of the art. In them the poetic faculty is awakened & they find it possible to compose some very excellent poetry. However, this is often of a rare & one-off quality, an angelic visitation so to speak. As Sri Aurobindo remark'd of this supreme poetic utterance, "*A little of it is enough to save the rest of their work from oblivion.*"

Of the higher ranks, the *Master* has a thorough understanding of poetry. They can express thought in a variety of forms & styles that have come to them with exercise & the study of the art. To them the nature of poetics is fully understood & the work of the master shall always bear a certain authority, tho not necessarily poetic excellence. Above them the *Major* Poet is a Master poet whose work has had an influential effect upon the Poetic Stream. Within them the poetic faculty is widened to an excellent degree, in this way differing from the master as, altho needing mastery to express, they are more poetic in output. This can be witnessed as they sustain a poetic quality through a usually volumous amount of composition.

At the top of the tree are the Great poets, & it is in the higher echelons of the art that the true genius of poetry lies, akin to schools of art being defined by the great artists like Van Dyck, the future of poetry rests. They are supreme masters of the expressive word, intertwining sound & sense with majestic wordsmithery. By the Romantic era the Dante - Shakespeare - Milton axis was acknowledged, when Coleridge said, "*In the truly great poets... there is a reason assignable, not only for every word, but for the position of every word,*" & Wordsworth added, "*It is almost painful to think how far these surpass all others.*" Their works break beyond the art & into the bosom of civilisation itself. Entire cultures & peoples will be inspired by the works of the great, for their poetry is like a bomb that goes off in the halls of civilisation, the aftershocks rippling down the years. How best to describe this magic state of mind, that intoxication of the intellect? It would take a man forty years to build a castle which a genius stumbles across on a leisurely morning walk, hidden among the undergrowth of a wood.

What of the works these poets bequeath to the world in their literary legacies? Like Law, the corpus of poetry is based on procedure & precedent. What one poet once discovered to be right is taken for granted

by subsequent generations. A perfect example is the universally acknowledged majesty of the sonnet, which to the senate of the poets is as definite as *"Thou shalt not kill."* Poetry is a steadily evolving entity that can never be readily explained, she is like snake, always shedding skin that has grown old & tatty. The new creature is the same as the old, but with a nicer & shinier coat. Originality in poetry is difficult, as Anne Bradstreet said, *'There is nothing that can be sayd or done, but either that or something like it hath been done and sayd before'*. However, each generation of poets is compell'd to record the common issues of poetry for his day - love, death, war, etc.. As Rimbaud said *"The poet would define the amount of the unknown awakening in the universal soul in his own time"* - i.e. recording the poesis of a particular zeitgesit for posterity. The books these poets then leave behind are, to the voyagers of poetry, islands to discover. When a reader arrives at them they will casually skim along the shore. Then venturing deeper into the 'vegetation' of the text they begin to explore inland, becoming familiar with the indiginous mountains & streams.

When studying the art you must realise that a lot of writing may appear like poetry, but is actually far from it - you must learn to tell the difference. With an individual poet, the essence is contain'd in more than just the poetry left behind. Minds & souls are reflected in their prefaces, letters, influences, life, libraries & those pencil mark'd footnotes that litter the books therein, for poets comment upon role even as they perform it. When studying an individual poem the best way is to walk thro the poet's shoes & gather the mimesis analeptically, then reason why they chose the words they did to bring the ideas to life. Try not to listen to the voices of the ages too much but decide for yourself - as Elliot said *"The less I knew about the poet, before I began to read, the better."* By reading criticism of a poet before the actual works you will enter the reading with preconceived attitudes, diminishing the pleasure of discovering the jewels for oneself. *"At least it is better to be spurred to acquire scholarship because you enjoy the poetry,"* remark'd Elliot, *"Than to suppose that you enjoy the poetry because you have acquired the scholarship."*

Then, If the reader believes themselves to be a poet, be certain that writing is in fact your calling, & as Despereux said, *"To know your particular talent & to practice only that genre to which you are suited... & above all to aim to please the reader."* The art of Poetry is a well-oiled machine & as the car mechanic must understand the nature of every component that drives the engine, so must a poet be steeped in the lore & aspects of the art. As all the arts contain the spark of divine fire, when placed upon the page every line of true poetry offers a version of the poetic impulse that should glimmer before the eye & upon intonation rapture the mind. This is known as analeptic mimesis & it is up to the poet to be able to identify these moments which drive the art. When composing for yourself, find or invent forms you feel most comfortable with, then continue your personal conversation with the muse until your gift is spent, channelling your powers as you do so into subjects suitable for your temperament. You will see in these works of art your own precious & appropriate inheritance, a piece of your own life which speaks with your own voice, a voice that can speak down the ages.

The Poetic Trinity

To many people, including the poets themselves, poetry is the mysterious force which guides their pen. Then how does the process work? What is the product of the matrimonial union between the poets & their art? These are the poems themselves, the literary legacies of the *Poetic Trinity*, ruled by the formula;

$$Poet + Poesis = Poem$$

Then what is POESIS, the true source of poetic inspiration? The world exists in an eternal state of flux, constantly generating this electric charge that drives poetic inspiration. Our poets are the beacons which attract this poesis, that laser-like burns their thoughts onto the page. As clouds diffuse sunlight over the world, so does a poet spread poesis through a poem... a little in each line. Poesis blankets poetic sites & scenes, such as bluebell woods & wide open plains in the early morning mist. Note how the spectacular Lake Averno penetrated the works of Virgil as he resided by it's volcanic crater when writing his Aenid - in the poem itself the lake becomes one of the entrances to the underworld.

From whence does this poesis spring? As Rimbaud said "*The poet makes himself a seer by a long, prodigious & rational disordering of all the senses - every form of love, or madness he searches himself, he consumes all the poisons in him & keeps only their quintessences.*" This quintessence is the poesis which he retains for future use. It can be gained from society, that interaction of people, such as deep friendships & intimacies, company & conversation. Perhaps the strongest producer of poesis is when the minds of two poets meet. How were Shelley & Byron, Coleridge & Wordsworth, & Sidney & Spenser enflamed in each others company. Within the poet himself, poesis bubbles forth from the ferment of his emotions; Passion, Grief, Lust, Dejection, Love, Anger & Joy can all move a poet. The constant barrage of stimulation that comes with travelling is pregnant with poesis as does a hearty diet of culture. Immersion in the arts, such as ballet, music & theatre leaves a lingering hint of poesis in the poet's soul. Whenever Lord Byron would come to a new residence his first transaction would be the purchase of a box at the Opera House. From a more intense course of study... history, philosophy, religion, politics, etc... comes a wealth of ideas, each one succulent with the images & feelings that mark poesis. Of these, the richest source are the old poems themselves, still containing a portion of that poesis once channelled by the poet of origin.

The state of the poet's inner self also has an important contribution; Stability, Confidence & Ambition can all stimulate their art. One of the most important, & perhaps essential, sources of poesis available stems from solitude. These moments of tranquil communion tap the poesis latent in their psychic store rooms as the poet converses with their soul & art, whereby through deep thoughtful musing they gains fresh insight & projects. However, if poesis is allowed to build up too much, & is not channelled out properly, this can cause madness & perversion in the artists work. Many poets have had periods of madness, from the asylum-bound John Clare to the breakdowns of Sylvia Plaid. Even the great work of the twentieth century, TS Elliot's Wasteland, was composed in a sanatorium in Lausanne. With all this poesis swimming about the psyche the poets have always been treated as 'mad' & this may be true - but it is a finer sort of madness.

Then how is this poesis assimilated & used? The poets drift along until, from some divine perch, the Pegasus of Poetry swoops down before them. Picture if you will a lightning flash, a grand epiphany that sparks off the creative process. At this point of INSPIRATION, the poet is taken beyond the mortal coil... it is a visionary moment, where an image, a word, a line, or even an entire poem is laid before the eyes. "We," said John Dryden, "*Who are priests of Apollo, have not the inspiration when we please, but must wait til the god comes rushing on us, & invades us with a fury which we are not able to resist, which gives us double strength while his fire continues, & leaves us languishing & spent at his departure.*" A poesis-pregnant poet often feels ready to write, but does not know what about. They will think of several

topics, looking around them frantically until, like a child finally fitting a square peg into a square hole, their psyche connects with the subject & the poem may flow. In Mallarme's words "*The poetic imagination is a series of creative acts corresponding to the incessant creativity which furnishes the starting point of poetic activity.*" This starting point, the inspiration-trigger known as the CATALYST, forms a bridge that links the world to the poet's deep psyche. It can be anything - the daffodils that lined Ullswater as Wordsworth walked by them are a prime example. The Nightingale Ode of Keats contain a number of feelings which have nothing to do with the bird - it is as if her sweet warblings suddenly sparked of an onrush of sentiment that had been building up within him. In this way an individual catalyst may provoke differing responses... to one poet a mound of earth could be a Roman Hill Station, to another a Faerie Barrow & to yet another a Saxon burial ground. A good example is the French poet, D'Aubigne, who conceived his great epic poem *Les Tragiques* whilst lying wounded by the road after an attempt on his life. Another can be found with Charlotte Bronte, who wrote little poetry after completing her excellent novels. However, when her sisters died in swift succession the events formed a catalyst for her to once again converse with her muse & she wrote some beautiful poetry, for the emotions conjured by her grief had found an outlet. From these moments, eventually, like an oak from an acorn, a poem shall develop.

From the catalytic starting point follows the most mystical moments of the art - the act known as composition. The vehicle for this is the mind, or PSYCHE, made up of the creative imagination & its memory banks. To these is added REASON, which forms the balance & the bind between the two. When the psyche is operating at a compositve level it is an act of CREATION, where in the poem's world, the poet is omnipotent. There can be found a unique pleasure in composition, for when the mind knits all together in this way, surely the poet has made a connection with the infinitesimal. But is the poet the true originator of the poem or some agent to a mysterious force. Plato declared that "*In the act of creation the poet becomes a passive mouthpiece of a god, unable to understand and explain afterwards what the god had done through him.*"

It is very rare that an entire poem is truly inspired, for the poetic faculty is by nature an evanescent mist that arrives unexpectedly & dissappears just as quick. This purely inspired poetry is known as muse poetry, composed wildly at the back of the artists mind from some mysterious source. As the German poet Rilke said of his Sonnets to Orpheus, "*They were most mysterious in the manner in which they arrived & imposed themselves on me - the most puzzling dictation I have ever received & taken down. The whole of the first part was transcribed by me in one breathless act of obedience - with not one single word in doubt or needing to be changed.*" Whether the muse exists or not is open to discussion, but I believe that if the poet feels heady enough to acknowledge her existance & summon her to his psyche with the prayer-like incantations of an invocation, then she exists at least in the imagination, & as poetry springs from this recess of the mind, the surely she must be real.

Composition is an intuitive sensation, that is to say it is driven by the poet's suspicions as to what is good, containing a sense of the chase - the poems 'vision' is a stag to be hunted down. Before they begin, the first pre-requisite is an open mind, free from clutter & focuss'd on the matter at hand. The French word for this openness was *vertueux*, & without this state of mind no poesis can be drawn into the psyche, nor chanell'd outward onto the page. Entering the poetic trance can be compared to an eastern mantra, & it is during this trance, akin to the reverie that shamans enter when drawing on their incantations, that the poets will produce the mystical essence that encapsulates their work. The most genuine poetry has been written spontaneously & immediately in this state, some poems often arriving fully blown in the poets mind, testament to the gigantic powers a poet can command when under the poetic trance. Certain dedicated poets are able to maintain & sustain this state over great periods of time, in order to complete their longer compositions.

The Islamic word *Baraka* means sudden divine rapture & represents the religious exstasi that many poets feel when entering the trance. As Wagner had his raptures so did the ancyent Greeks enter a collective muse trance at their lunar festivals. The sensation is akin to becoming sexually aroused & can leave the artist both drained & exultant. This trance-like state of self-hypnosis, this nascent existance in the twilight of imagination, perches just on the vestibule of consciousness. When poets enters this trance they seem to be sleepwalking in a heighten'd sense of relaxed receptivity. A powerful atmosphere envelops the spirit as a period of vivid & violent activity engages the mind. Words & ideas of great intensity & clarity are

flung from the psyche to the forefront of thought as a series of excitable images issue forth, their curious & peculiar syntax transcending the emotional force of even the most consider'd rhetoric. These images were given the name MIMESIS by the ancients, & it is upon these poetical thoughts that the poets stamp their signature.

Since the tribal shaman of the North American Plains regularly took peyote to help their spiritual celebrations, the elevation to the trance has been assisted by narcotic stimulation. From a sip of the Pierian spring to the electric flush of an ecstasy tablet taking drugs helps push back the barriers of the mortal mind & leads the poet to regions of his psyche hitherto unexplored. If strong of mind they can return from these journeys as though they had travelled abroad, a wiser man for a now wider understanding of the world. The relaxing effect alcohol has on the personality is the first stimulant among the senses of the poets. From the Whiskey of Burns, the Brandy of Coleridge to Absinthe of the Van Gogh this nectar has been the friend of many an artist & writer. Many poets, including Yeats, were smokers of Hashish, but few have moved onto the heavier drugs... for poets prefer to live their lives rather than give it up. However, opium has been the inspiration of poets for millennia. The most famous was Coleridge, whose dalliance with the drug at first inspired then destroyed his art. Taken as Laudanum, a readily available counter drug till recent years, it would soothe the poet & help conjure wildly poetic visions. On one occasion only have I sampled this myrtle syrup of the poppy flower myself, upon a tour of India. I was offered & bought the drug in the city of Madurai & partook of its effects on several occasions over the subsequent weeks. It spreads a very spatial cushion around the vision whilst raising & concentrating the thought. When composing poetry it helped present an ornate feel to my lines, & I seemed a different poet as I composed. However, it is with Wine that the poet rests his favours. Its mellowing effects have seeped into poetry over the ages, indeed the kings would always present their poets with free wine, to help with their inspiration. Alcohol also has its downside, contributing to the early deaths of many poets, such as Robbie Burns & Dylan Thomas. The Chinese poet *Li bai* also drown'd trying to capture his reflection in the Yangtze river & Christopher Marlowe was stabbed in the eye during a drunken brawl.

Then the poet is vertiginous & ready to compose. Imagine the creative process as igneous rock pouring from the volcano of the psyche. At first it is malleable as the lava pours onto the page, & may be worked by the poet. Then this '*molten verse*,' as Alfred de Musset called the poetry of Racine, will slowly cool & then be sculpted into shape until it is a finished article set in stone. Michaelangelo said his sculptures were already immured in marble... & were slowly brought to light by chipping away the encasing marble. The more the poet opens himself up to this visitation of celestial forces, the more mystical quintessence the poem shall contain. Some poems may fly onto the page & some are wrestled, but in the end they will be born, for as Sri Aurobindo said, "*All great poetic utterance is discovery.*"

Coleridge once said that, "*Poets diffuse a tone & spirit of unity that blends & fuses; each into each, by that synthetic & magical power of the IMAGINATION.*" Picture the imagination as an eagle flying through the vast skies above the swampy subconscious, whose waters become a boiling ferment when the poet's mind is on fire. The better the eagle the better the prey as it swoops & snatches this 'thing' from the ooze, dripping in gunk, ready to be treated with mead. This mimesis is a stimuli, some vision, sound or emotion, ready to be given a recognizable conscious existence with words. Although all men possess the subconscious, it is only the poets who have command & control enough over these birds of invention to regularly fetch this substance from the mind. As Neruda said, these, "*Words, sounds or images buzz past us like bees - they must be caught quickly & put in one's pocket!*" Other poets have described the process in their verse;

*The poets eye in a fine phrenzie rolling
doth glance from Heaven to Earth,
from Earth to Heaven,
& as imagination bodies forth
the form of things unknown,
the poets pen turns them to shapes
and gives to airy nothing a local habitation & a name...*

*A thousand fantasies
Begin to throng into my memory,
Of calling shapes, & beck'ning shadows dire,*

*And airy tongues that syllable men's names
On sands & shores & desert wildernesses*

*The heightened awareness of life & sound
Twin focus of energies light & space,
Then a more refined moment gathers round,
Calms the cortex, with a deft touch of grace
All settles in that sweet, especial place,
And thoughts of poets turn to poetry...*

Victor Hugo once said, "*Poetry uses a language composed of special ingredients out of reach of normal education.*" Imagine if you will a cauldron. The imagination mixes the poesis by a 'thinking' act of invention, creating the poetic mead that shall be used during composition. To this ambrosial mead are added the herbs, representing the poet's skill with the art. Further thinking heat is added til the moment the mead is fully cooked, when it shall be poured & strained through the poet's persona, that mask through which the personality is projected. Another name for this persona is the *voice*. A pleasant example of an artist's voice would be listening to the unique & highly polished lilt of Vivaldi's string quartets. This liquid inspiration is then used to coat the mimesis, bringing it into a recognizable shape & thus to life! As Rimbaud noted, the poets must, "*See to it that their inventions can be smelt, felt, heard. If what they bring back from 'down there' (the psyche) has form, he brings forth form, if it is formless he brings forth formlessness (untreated mimesis). A language has to be found for that matter, every word being an idea...*"

The greatest influence to any poem is the poets themselves & the experience, both technical & spiritual, they bring to the act of composition. Auden once said, "*Even the most 'occasional' poem involves not only the occasion but the whole life experience of the poet, who themselves cannot identify all the contributing elements.*" That is to say, every line, every word, a poet writes depends upon their own particular set of circumstances that brought them to the moment when they sat down to write. Yet there are other extraneous influences that can effect composition. The place where poets compose is important, each conjuring a unique atmosphere. Many poets choose to do their work in a sublime setting - enjoying the bracing air of the seaside while others prefer the prehistoric splendour of the mountains. When entering nature a pleasurable warmth comes over poets... their pace slows & they begin to jabber with the trees... it is in these places that they work best for mankind inherits a quiet of mind from uncontaminated scenes. Shelley preferred to be beside water, Byron behind his desk & Coleridge preferred to walk over rough, unbroken ground. It is an amazing quality of poetry that natural habitat can seep into a line, influencing the work. Neruda buried himself, "*Deep in nature's woods, before a rock or a wave, far from the publishing houses, far from the printed page,*" where "*In whose ennobling stir,*" Lord Byron would "*Feel myself exalted.*" Write a poem in daisy-peppered meadow in May & your lines shall be heady with the rejuvenative joys of Spring. Come late November the line will burthen a more sombre feel. Keats timed the composition of his *Endymion* to tie in with the Spring & Summer of 1817... read through the poem & you should taste the sun. Later, when involved in his weightier *Hyperion*, he knew he "*must wait for the spring to rouse me up a little.*" Certain nations are blessed with an excellent combination of poesis springs, & it is no surprise that in Italy, poets of every era have found inspiration to write very wonderful poems.

Poetry also retains a magical element. In the modern world the supernatural is treated sceptically, but in poetry it can still be seen as a reality, where the poet is a kind of magus that weaves spells that lead to illumination. It is the placing of words in a 'magic' order which gives the poem its special feel, the recitation of which is something of an incantation. Many medieval poems were hermetic, containing references to occult systems, & the protagonists thought that the great poets were powerful enough to resurrect the dead religion of magic. The poet can be seen as priest of Apollo, who unlocks the gateway to that omnipotent godhead. Willaim Butler Yeats was an especially esoteric artist. His poems were often the product of semi-occult practices, he admitting that he had his *Instructors*. The composition of Coleridge's *Kublai Khan* - where the text was dictated in an opium haze - is a fine example of magic at work. With the greater poets there dwells underneath the surface a sense of Sublimity, that mysterious factor X & concentration of the mind's magic. The sacred waters of the Poetic Stream itself seem to be flowing through the words. They invoke the fear of the unknown in the reader & carry the echo of a noble mind, grandeur of style, that eminence of discourse, & source of distinction that defines true poetry.

The scientific branch of poetry that is its *Poetics* has been employed by the poets since classical times. It can be defined as the action the poet takes upon the mimesis that comes to him from the psyche, or how he handles the words. It is the technical side to poetry, the nuts & bolts if you will. Coleridge said, "*Poetry, even that of the loftiest &, seemingly, the wildest odes, had a logic of its own, as ever as that of science; & more difficult, because more subtle, more complex, & dependant on more, & more fugitive causes.*" Of its institutions *form* is a major part & *verse* is highly ranked as it falls easily on the ear & knits the memory together for future recital. Only thro' select industrious reading of the canon & a rigorous course of study will the poet sharpen his poetic ability. This ability can be called technique, formed over time & exercise, which is demonstrated thro' various Media. Learned devices influence how the pure mimesis that arrived at the threshold of the consciousness will finally appear on the page & should be handled, as Ezra Pound said, "*As a musician would expect to know harmony & counterpoint & all the minutiae of his craft.*" From abbreviation to macaronics, from metaphors to epic similes, from conceits to hypercatalectics, from the Dyfalu & Cyghanned of the Welsh bards, there are many spices that give a piece its taste & texture. However, even if the poet possesses a great wealth of lore, this is no guarantee to writing *true* poetry, for as Sri Aurobindo commented, "*The poet least of all artists needs to create with his eye fixed anxiously on the technachalities of his art. He has to possess it, no doubt, but in the heat of creation the intellectual sense of it becomes a subordinate action or a mere undertone in the mind.*"

Following composition the mind entertains a subconscious process of creative correction or improvement - to remove the unsightly & ungainly from the text, correcting & polishing words according to '*critical intelligence.*' What is created is very much a mosaic, where the moments of pure inspiration are connected by artifice. This editorial may take place immediately, as in the frantically revised worksheets of Dylan Thomas, or fifty years later as in the evolving Prelude of Wordsworth. This form of poetry is known as *Appolinian*, an ornate tapestry composed by a conscious artist. In ancient times Pindar proclaimed the superiority of natural inspiration, but the Hellenistic poets stressed the importance of art. Yet as Horace noted the poet needs both skills & the very best poems will mix the two, a ying & yang of guided spontaneity, combining sonorous aesthetics with deep inspirations. This would provide a pleasing overall effect, & the greater the poet the harder it should be to notice the seams between the pegasus & the alchemist, to distinguish calculation from spontaneity.

Then like a child that is nursed from the world to adulthood, the poem is ready, the end product of the many strands of the art, the culmination of cultivation, the tips of icebergs & the flowers of plants. They are little caches that store moments of creativity within their own confines. They are similar to the mythological gryphons, part animal & part bird. The poem's *form* can be seen as the animal, grounded to earth by the laws of gravity. The *content* is the bird, representing the wings of imagination. Once these gryphons are born, they leave the poet's nest & fly into the world for judgement. As the ancient Greeks held spots of ground where lightning struck as sacred, building fences around them, so do we hold the great poems of inspiration wonderful by surrounding them with acclaim & praise. Poems are independent entities in their own right, a mysterious presence whose life endures long after our own perishable ones.

4-12-06

The Epic Tradition

In his '*Discourse de la Posie Dramatique,*' Denis Diderot said, "*Poetry wants something enormous, barbarous, savage.*" It is only with epic poetry that this ideal is realised. The Epic sits on a lofty pinnacle of poetry, observing every facet of humanity & encompassing every genera of poetic utterance, from the love lyric to the dramatic battle scene. If one was to put all the world's epics on a bookcase... & they would only need a couple of small shelves... you would find so much human existence in so little a space. They are the mountains that jut out of the clouds of time - the great peaks of literature, towering over the valleys & the lower hills where reside the lesser lights of poetry & prose.

The true epics are the literary representatives of a nation as the lore, legends, & language of a people pass

onto the page. As Tasso said, "*The theme of epic is best taken from history.*" They grew from an individual tribes desire to record its history at a time long before writing was invented. The first of these poets, I believe, were the shamen of the primeval peoples, the namers of things. In some bizarre firelit ceremony I imagine them to utter strange & new sounds, teaching the tribe to speak as they recanted their epic tales. As man evolved into the higher cultures of the Bronze Age, so did these shamen, who had now taken on the role of bard, or tribal spokesman, a living treasure trove who would memorise the annals & traditions of the tribe. As time strode further & history got deeper, the tales these bards would sing became larger & more complex. They would be called upon to entertain a king & his court with these tales, often accompanying his words with music. The tales were oral, that is to say never written down, & would be preserved in the memory banks only - passed down from poet to poet over the ages, who would each tap into their poetic facilities & enhance the action with sweet phrases & interesting embellishments of the plots. As the Roman Tacitus noted in 98AD "*The Germans celebrate their gods in ancient songs which are the only kinds of records & annals they possess.*"

It was from this repository of imagination & legend that epic poetry was born, & with one tribe in particular. It first flourish'd in the minds of the Greeks, who were determined to analyze man, the cosmos & our role in it. They were the first to offer the concept of poetry as an activity of its own, and made statements about its aim and inspiration. They felt poetry to be an "art," a part of man's activity by means of which he alters nature or even adds something to it, inspired by their twin mountains of Helicon & Parnassus. Of them, it is with the swift-flying epics of Homer, whose wine-dark words issued the language of the gods from his mortal mouth, that the Western mind finds its first expression. So much so that he has been translated into every Western language, the colossus of poetry. He was also the first to convert the oral stories into literature - a poem - enacting a process known as the 'Diaskeue,' which would be repeated over the centuries; the Sumanguru of the Sudanese, the Finnish Kalewala, the Estonian Kalewipoeg, the Shah Nameh of Persia & the Niebelungen of Germany would all use this process. His two masterpieces, the Illiad & the Oddysey, are the standards to which all epic must be valued, whose influence on the literature of the world is unmeasurable. Following Homer came the great flowering of literature in Greece, as under the benevolent gaze & inspiring oratory of Pericles, Athens would prosper to great literary heights with the foundation of the theatre & many beautiful lyrics. Poetry had become a public art - supported by the state & prizes. The poets claim'd to be not only creators of beauty & entertainers but also spiritual teachers and leaders: "*to make men better in the cities,*" said Aristophanes. The store house of all this ore was the great library of Alexandria, founded by Philetas of Kos - collecting the plays of Sophocles & Aristophanes, the poetry of Hesiod, Kallimachos & Sappho & all the other literatures of the ancient world, passing all this knowledge down to futurity.

The ancient Greeks visited many parts of the world, & perhaps it is their traders, or Pythagoras on his own visit to those sultry lands, who brought the homeric tradition with them to the Indian courts, regaling the Hindu courts with the heroic tales of Troy. However the Indian poets were inspired, over the period between 900 BC & 500 AD the three great Hindu epics were created, composed in the voluptuous Sanskrit language. The Vedic cycles are collections of ceremonial lyrics & hymns, of kingdoms & migrations, of legends & history, compiled by poet & priest. Of the three - The Ramayana, The Upanishads & The Mahabharata - the latter, standing at 90,000 couplets, is the largest poem in the world. Within its gigantic scope you can find the Bhagavad Gita, the source of Hindu doctrine, whose influence on modern India is vast & a further proof of the nation-unifying power of epic poetry, a power that can create national religions & languages.

After the legions of Rome marched into Greece, closing the country within the folds of empire, that ancient culture was absorbed into the Latin psyche. The poet Andronicus translated Homer's Oddysey in order to teach his Latin-speaking children the wonders of the Muses. Thus from the Hellenic spring did the poetry of the cornerstone of our modern languages draw its inspiration. The Greek models were used for Roman affairs creating a literature worthy of the greatest empire ever to grace the Earth. Through this empire, the new plant of Latin literature would grow into a mighty tree, its boughs & leafy branches sheltering Europa from the savage weathers of under-civilisation. As we have seen it is through the mirror of Greece the Romans perceived man & nature, even adopting the same gods under different names. The empire produced many great poets, from Horace to Ovid, but the laurels of epic tradition are reserved for one poet only, Virgil. After learning Greek & studying Homer, indeed claiming possession

by that ancient poet, he settled under the shadow of Vesuvius in the Bay of Naples & began his great poem, The Aeneid. Drawing from the lost epic poem by Gnaeus Naevius for its content his poem concerns the foundation of Rome, tracing the lineage back to the walls of Troy, containing a harvest store of mythology & legend that was soon to become the 'bible' of Rome. The poem consists of twelve books; the first six mirroring the voyages of Odysseus & the last six echoing the Illiad. Through this process the epic formula put down by Homer was imitated & turned into a tradition which would echo down the ages.

While the gods of the pagan Roman Empire sat masterful upon the world, the voice of another began to be heard by the masses. It was through the mouths of the prophets that the 'Word of God' was first uttered in Hebrew across the dusty palm-tinged lands of Palestine. The five books of Moses were written down by Ezra in 458BC & formed the Torah, the basis of Jewish faith & subsequently the bible. After him the twelve prophets of the Old Testament began to preach the word of this new god, from Solomon to Micah, & can be seen as the first devotional poets. Later on came the life of the prophet Jesus, an epic poem in itself, which made up the bulk of the New Testament. Amidst these books one can find the opus of biblical poetry, composed a few years after Jesus' death by an elderly Saint John the Divine. Retreating to exile & hermitage in a cave on the small volcanic Aegean island of Patmos, he composed a piece of poetic propaganda to cheer the Christian through the dark days of Roman oppression. This took the form of the prophetic Book of Revelations, containing a treasure store of wonderful visions, heroic action & fantastic images that are worthy of any great epic.

As the Gothic hordes surged from the Teutonic forests in the 5th century AD, Europa was covered in gloom. The legionnaires were recalled to Rome to avert disaster, but to no avail. The culture of a thousand years would soon become a distant memory as the Roman Empire dissolved into hundreds of nations & the Classical age drew to a close. Outside of Italy knowledge of Greek and Greek literature nearly disappeared. Much of Roman literature was lost too, but the great classics were fanatically preserved from the barbarian flames, as did a certain number of rhetorical and grammatical writings. Through them and through such summaries of ancient learning as the Etymologiae of Isidor of Seville (ca. 560-633), a scanty knowledge of classical poetics was preserved. However this was enough, for as Sri Aurobindo remarked, "*The poetic mind of Greece & Rome has pervaded & largely shaped the whole artistic production of Europe.*" However, with the Roman fall went their high-minded poetry & places such as Britain found herself a wasteland of culture. Only the ancient Celts would rise above the wilderness with their lyre-lilted tales of heroism as in the heroic tales of Urien in the Mabinion. These were composed by a poet called Taliesin, who along with the famous Myrddin (Merlin) began the great tradition of the Celtic bards, where singers & poets would preserve the tales of magic & heroism in the same way the Illiad was passed down to the pen of Homer, maintaining an oral history of the world for the annals of posterity. Elsewhere on the island, the seed of English literature was planted in 657AD as an illiterate herdsman named Caedmon picked up a harp & spontaneously began to sing a nine-lined hymn to the wonder of God. Later still, as Alfred the Great fused the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms into an early England, poetry & learning were promoted beyond the traditional ranks of the Clergy. It is the anonymous poet of Beowulf, that brilliantly captures his time's spirit & literary stylistics. Because of the poem's size, scope & weight of feeling it is rightly considered the first epic poem in English, albeit one hardly recognizable today. Through this poem, & other scattered remnants rescued from the clutches of the marauding vikings, we can see the birth of the English language, for many compounds were coined by inspired runemasters as they would write (to cut or engrave) boc (tablets of beechwood).

It is then like a phoenix that the spirit of poetry would rise up from the ashes of the defeat of Rome. Perhaps this is all down to one man, Charlemagne, first soul of the Holy Roman Empire. It is his gift of the golden coasts & verdant massifs that bless Provence to the musicians & poets that gave modern poetry its true foundation. Here, the Jongleurs would compose their poems in Provençal (langue d'oc) under a starry sky before wandering from court to court, spreading the joys of their inspirations. They would use increasingly intricate forms, such as the rondeau & chant royal, but almost from the beginning of the movement was the epic tradition reborn. The poems these troubadours sang at the great courtly feasts of Europe are known as the Chanson de Geste (songs of deeds), a lyrical-epic concerning tales of heroic action. The oldest extant epic in French is also the greatest of the era, the Song of Roland. The anonymous poet records Charlemagne's defeat by the Moors at the Pass of Roncevaux & the subsequent

slaying of Roland, the emperor's son. The poem has been found across Europe, translated into many languages, its four thousand lines resuscitate the complex plots, fiery clash of arms & stirrings of humanity in a way that would have made Homer proud.

It was also in the early centuries of the last millennium that the Persian poetic tradition took root. Like their contemporaries, the troubadours of France, the Persian poets would wander from court to court, through Egypt, Damascus, Mecca, Turkestan & India, ever seeking patronage for their studies. Though producing many fine works, such as *The Confederation of Birds* by Farid Ud-Din Attar, the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam & the exalted verses of Rumi, they would not produce a true epic. However, their contribution to the tradition cannot be underestimated. It was in the East that poetry was once again begun studied as a facet of man's genius. With the recovery of the texts of Aristotle & his classical peers there emerged new kinds of grammatical study & poetics, nursed back to life by Arab scholars such as Al-Farabi. There now arose a new & profoundly influential genre of criticism called *al-muwazana*, "comparison," which shifted the emphasis of criticism to the meticulous analysis of poetry, especially its imagery and metaphors, & to demonstrations of the influence of one poet over the other. During the twelfth century, these Arabic treatises were transported to Europe on this new vellum (parchment) & translated into Latin to provide a firm bedrock for the studies being made by the early medieval world.

As the violin-twanging Jongleurs wander'd beyond the courts of Provence they took their poetry with them, reaching all the corners of Europa. It was in Sicily, half-way to the Arab world, that they would meet the stream of texts on poetics, & fuse into the Sicilian School. This was a body of high & like-minded poets, who served the brilliant court of King Frederick the second at Palermo. It was here that the sonnet was first invented & an innovative attitude steered the poet to original pastures of thought. These poets in turn would influence the Tuscan school of the thirteenth century, chief among whom was the poet Dante Alighieri. It was from his majestic poetry that the Italian language was born - to this day the legacy of his 'sweet new style' can be heard upon the tongues of all Italians. It is no surprise their country would become a mother of Western poetry, for as Neruda said, she, "*Holds the voices of the ancient poets deep within her earth, where it is purest...*" Following political exile from Florence, Dante went to work on the first great religious epic. His Comedy (three centuries passed before the Divine was added), would take him from the gates of Hell, up the mountain of Purgatory to the halls of Heaven & the beatific vision itself. Guided on his journey by Virgil & his muse, Beatrice, he excelled in his artistry & succeeded in capturing the sentiment of the age that only the epic poets can. He is the bridge thrown between the ancient & modern worlds, the true rediscoverer of the epic tradition & all its nuances. He was the writer of the first 'literary' epic - that is to say not one passed down from mouth to mouth, but born solely from a poet's mind.

In the fourteenth century another Italian would be crowned poet laureate in Rome. His name was Petrarch, & though never writing an epic, his exploration of new forms would widen the global literary horizon & his intensified study of the classics forged a new and deeper knowledge of ancient poetics. In his later years he met a young English poet named Chaucer, who returned home under the spell of Italian poetry. This is a symbolic moment, for the superstructure of English Literature is based upon materials of Ausonian invention, as Neruda said of Italy, "*She gave English poetry form, sound, grace & rapture!*" Chaucer would be the first to move away from the traditional verse romances which dominated English poetry, such as the 13th century *Flores & Blanchefleur*, & securing a pitcher of wine a day from court he would embark upon his *Canterbury Tales*. This was a work similar to Boccaccio's *Decameron*, that series of tales where a group of Florentine nobles entertained themselves whilst hiding from the plague in a castle. His own collection of stories concern a pilgrimage to the shrine of Thomas Beckett, which he undertook himself in 1388, he rode with thirty fictional personages drawn from the society of his day. Though not precisely a poem in the epic tradition, from the Knight through the Nun's Priest to the Pardoner the tales would encapsulate & preserve his age in the same fashion as a formal epic.

By the time of Chaucer's death, throughout the British Isles poetry was flourishing. In 15th century Scotland an unknown scribe would collect the two great poems of Scots literature into one folio, namely John Barbour's *The Bruce* & Blind Harry's *Wallace*. Together they make up a great epic, written in heavy Doric Scots, but containing the first true epic poems set upon the British isles. They celebrate heroism, military achievement & a moral yet violent victory over the English, finding a welcome home in the Scottish psyche, helping to forge a national identity. The ancient oral tradition of poetry had also

maintained on the islands by the colleges of the Welsh bards. It is through them that the *Magibbidod* was written down & their work with the harmonious *cynganned* is as rich & integral part of British poetry, a poetry that would soon, thanks to Caxton's invention of the printing press - dominate European poetry. Every great nation expresses itself in art. The Italians painted, The Germans made music, the Russians wrote novels, the orientals engaged the martial arts & the Americans made cinema, but it is the British genius that fully realised itself in its poetry. An early pioneer was Surrey, who helped to bring the sonnet to England &, while translating the *Aenid*, introduced two stalwarts of english poetry. Firstly, to retain the true beauties of the original Latin, he dispensed with rhyme, thus creating Blank Verse. However, to endow these unrhyming rhymes with music, he gave them the decasyllabic pulse of the Iambic Pentameter - that '*strange new metre*' of contemporary opinion. As we shall see, both would change British poetry for ever & enable the epic tradition to flourish majestically.

The sixteenth century was a time of great intellectual endeavour, known as the renaissance. Science & the arts were heavily scrutinised & driven forward by a lofty array of genius. Poetry would also be swept up in this fervour, when the epic was seen as the supreme model of the art & its composition the ultimate goal of a poet. An excellent example is the *Lusiads* of Camões, detailing Vasco de Gama's voyage to India composed at the height of Portuguese empire, the literary flower of that civilisation. The *Gerusalemme Liberata*, by Torquato Tasso, is a perfect representation of this mode of renaissance artistry. Welding together classicism with romance, he told the story of the first crusade with a distinct & excellent style, fully aware of the epic tradition & stylistics. Tho a humble man he was proud enough to appreciate the grandeur & importance of his endeavour & wrote to all Italian men of letters & the church for guidance in the completion of his work. He would soon inspire his near contemporaries in England, whose magniloquent tone would resonate with Milton, who said of his idol, "*From first to last he blew the trumpet.*" Another acolyte was the honey-tongued Sir Edmund Spenser, who embarked upon the first proper English epic, the delicious, sensuous & complex *Faerie Queen*. Believing Chaucer's soul had entered his own body, the effeminate poet undertook the manufacture of a new British mythology. For years he travelled around Britain & Ireland before finally appearing at Hampton Court, there laying the poem's scrolls at the throne of Elizabeth, the Gloriana of the poem. Her court was the bedsoil of a golden flourishing of literature, where blossomed a new form of poetry, that of the dramatic play. This brought the art out of the pages of books & into the mouths of actors as modern theatre (from the Greek *theatron*) was born. The epic promise of the age was to be realised thro the work of one young man, William Shakespeare, who breathed in the same consciousness that inspired the *Faerie Queene* & the thundering heptameters of George Chapman's translation of the *Illiad*. His plays are one of the glories of mankind, their elaborate wordplay chiefly concern being the conversion of human actions & drama into poetry. His myriad mind could vividly bring life to kings & beggars, witches & faeries with an equal sophistication, handled with an unparalleled artistry with words. Upon his death the poetry of England, which 75 years previously had been the poorest in Europe, was now the richest, his own dramas now an aspect of the greater world in the same vein as the *Illiad* or the *Divine Comedy*.

As the boat of time left the sea that lapped against the radiant Tudors it entered the murky waters of the Stuarts. A time of religious & social upheaval it's poets began to think probingly about the world. These poets were known as the *Metaphysicals* & with the sun now Phoebus & the rivers nests for Naiads poetry was now expressed in dazzling wordplay. Of these poets, the great John Milton was born into a tumultuous & momentous period. With great schisms occurring in religion & the crown itself in jeopardy, our poet must have sensed the importance of his time, enough to warrant a first class epic poem. Indeed, *Paradise Lost* & *Paradise Regain'd* echo the death of Charles I & the Restoration, those chief events of the poet's lifetime. From an early age he knew of his task - the great epic that he was to write. After travelling to Italy to conduct studies in Latin & the mechanics of epic, he set up at Christ's College in Cambridge & immersed himself in the acquisition of a wide & curious knowledge. His reading was so intense, however, that he studied himself blind, his daughters taking on the task of writing down his dictations. In a strange way his disability was a blessing. With the imagination taking on a larger role he could bring to life things he had only read about in books, truly envisioning Eden & Pandemonium. *Paradise Lost* is the opus & in it he elevates his 'voice' to a lofty & sustain'd pitch, like the drone of some majestic Minster organ. Modelling his title on Tasso's *Jerusalem Deliver'd*, the style of his poem on the *Aenid*, his oetro on the *Comedy*, his form on Shakespeare's Blank Verse & his theme upon Genesis he wove together a highly stylized masterpiece, realizing the Renaissance epic ideal. It's body is pregnant

with excellent artistry & deep lore & is an amazing achievement that he could draw on such depth of allusion from memory. Tho he has borrowed more than any other writer he is perfectly distinct from every other writer - a perfect example of a thorough poetic training. Soon his poem would be second only to the bible on the bookshelves of Britain, but it is sad to think he he would never have been able to sit down reading in his chair, breathing in the orchestral beauty of his lines.

Milton's great poem marks the end of an era. Never again would religion inspire the highest flights of artists, such as the Divine Comedy or Michaelangelo's Sistine ceiling. There began a period of reflection in the art, whose poets found it difficult to rise to the great levels of Shakespeare & Milton. On the threshold of the Georgian age, man found himself a more mature beast. Finally he had managed to throw off the shackles of the Dark Ages & his knowledge was growing by the hour. Mankind hankered for the 'Classical,' that time in history when life & society seem'd perfect - in order to furnish his own time with that ancient splendour. The first exponent of this new school was John Dryden, a courtier & poet. In his critical essays he was the first to comprehend a notion of poetry as a historical sequence stretching back to Homer. Like Milton he was a disciple of Virgil, & proceeded to translate the Aeneid, the best we have in English, perfecting the couplet as he went about his work. From the gossipy coffeehouses of London, which slowly replaced the courts as a meeting place for men of culture, sprung Alexander Pope. His great poetic efforts resulted in the polished translations of the Iliad & the Odyssey. Both poets would also write Mock-Epics, using the traditional devices in a satirical setting. However, this neo-classicism soon had an adverse effect on poetry, as the 18th Century became a shadow of imitation, whose "*ten low words oft creep in one dull line.*" Yet there was one great poem in the epic tradition, an astonishing production of the Ossianic poems by James MacPherson. He proceeded to conduct a perfect poetic swindle, blending highland songs with his own material & crediting them to a fictional poet called Ossian. The materials were gathered on a tour of the Highlands, collecting MSS from scattered parts & weaving the fragments into longer poems, with Macpherson heavily embellishing inbetween. Suddenly Scotland had an epic literature, written down in the 4th century by the poet Ossian & handed down from clarsach to clarsach. However, doubts soon arose to its authenticity & eventually Macpherson would be tarred with the name of a fraud. Yet, his work has many truly sublime moments & would soon inspire the romantics - Napoleon himself never let a copy leave his side!

But from winter comes spring, & from the Georgian Decadence exploded the Romantic Movement like a blossoming Clematis plant in May. The German phrase, *Sensucht* (romantic longing) became the centre piece of poetic ideology, when men were inclined to, '*Toss off an epic or two,*' a time when the poet would range & search his very soul. It was with the anonymously published Lyrical Ballads that the Romantic Age was truly announced. William Wordsworth & Samuel Taylor Coleridge discarded the artifices of poetic diction & began to experiment with a new language, painting lovely images on the imagination's canvas. It was with Wordsworth that the epic tradition rested, surrounded by the solemn splendour of the Cumbrian Peaks. Their lofty summits imbued him with a deep power & reflective pathos, which he distilled into the lines of his epic '*The Prelude.*' In it he explored his own development as a poet & marked the dawn of a new type of epic - not the national but the personal. The next great advocate of this style was Lord Byron. In the history of European literature as much significance has been attached to the legend of the man as his work, but never more so than with him. His life seemed like a great epic poem, & he the hero acting out its myriad scenes, & this was reflected in works such as *Childe Harold*. He would eventually live a life of self-imposed exile in Italy, where his poetry would soar. He introduced to English literature the Italian stanza form, *Ottava Rima*, & used it for his *Don Juan*, a rambling & unfinished mock-epic. His equally brilliant peers, Shelley & Keats, would also try their hands at epic. Both had a great understanding of the poet's task, but were plucked from Parnassus half-way up the slopes by the angel of death before they had realised their full promise. However, Keats' *Hyperion*, tho unfinished, remains a perfect example of the loftier realms of epic thought.

The Romantic Age was a great flowering of poetry, yet would only live for a short time & with Byron's death was suddenly brought to close & *Don Juan* would remain uncompleted. The next to take up the epic baton were the Victorians, & though Tennyson attempted with his *Arthurian*, they would never rise up to the true level. The public taste was now turning to novels, which slowly began to usurp the position that long & epic poems had monopolised. Charles Dickens & *Jane Eyre* far outsold their versified rivals as prose began to supercede poetry as the mouth piece of the author. Thus more & more were the poets

disinclined to write long poems, great artists like Rimbaud, Baudelair & WB Yeats preferred to write smaller pieces, pregnant with symbolism.

However, the essence of epic, that is to define nations & epochs, would not die, especially in America, where the benchmarks of that fledgling nation's literary traditions were put in place. With the new & easy running verse of his Hiawatha did the dramatic poet Longfellow give America their first epic. He borrowed from the Finnish Kavela & many other moments of European poetry & fused them with the spirit of the North American Indians to produce an excellent poem. It was also thro his translations, such as the divine comedy, that European culture would be filter'd thro to the American people. His contemporary Walt Whitman is also consider'd a national poet of America. His 'poem,' or rather series of poems, called 'The Leaves of Grass,' is akin to the egocentric epics of The Prelude & Don Juan. They contain many allusions in the epic style, & as an early exponent of free verse, his poem may be seen as the first modern epic.

So where did that leave the epic muse. The general sentiment of the twentieth century was that it was impossible, that poetry had become too personal. For a century or more poetry was consumed by a passion for free verse, a difficult form to maintain the focus of epic thought. Ezra Pound's Cantos are epic in style & prjection, but too chaotic & rambling to be considered alongside the great epics of the past. Critics have almost unanimously observed modern poems such as Elliot's Wasteland have epical qualities, but have drifted away from the stylistics of the epic, where form & content have no common field. The modern epic poet has become less a story-teller, more some metaphysical thinker holding his poem together with a rag-tag of writings. Only the Oxford educated Indian mystic, Sri Aurobindo, has, remained true to the tradition. However, his epic Svarati, tho containing the most pure & enlightened Blank Verse since Milton, is mostly unknown by the western world.

Taste for epic poetry, even poetry has dwindled heavily. However, the epic tradition is like a rare orchid that only flowers once a century. As long as there is human life there shall be, tho all of a scarcity, the capability within the human mind for epic poetry. If let us say that in the human brain there is one percent attuned to poetry, then within this one per cent there is again a very small percentage capable of epic poetry. Then, because of the dispropensity of human nature to carry on with the very difficult nature of composing epic, then this percentage is again divided. However, eventually the epic poet will rise, infuse themselves with the tradtion & create an epic poem, for the epic is the phoenix of poetry. They live gloriously then die... but when they rise again, the epic tradition ensures they do so upon pinions of golden fire. In the future, there will be a poet who first writes an epic concerning the great journeys into the stars - then one who will write the great poems of a newly-colonized planet. To them, William Oxley, in one of his excellent essays of the early 1980's, William Oxley sheds light upon the nature of the task;

"The concept of the modern epic cannot be properly understood without an accurate grasping of the true nature of tradition. For without such understanding of the full implications and accretions attaching to the word "epic," it cannot in its turn be understood. It would be as foolish as thinking of modern sex – just as though no one had ever copulated before! Once, however, tradition is properly understood, and the word "epic" placed within that context, it is possible to begin to think of a modern epic. And I think it fair enough to jump in at the deep end – assuming all that has been said hitherto has been grasped and is now firmly borne in mind by the reader – and say that for an epic to be modern it must first and foremost, in Daniel Pearlman's expression, "nucleate" the information and experience of contemporaneity. Which means, remembering the earlier idea of a poem of epic proportions integrated in a continuing tradition, that while the poet's art will nucleate the contemporary data, it will at the same time draw in this information to an already existing centre composed of past accretions. Which further means that the successful modern epic (as any successful modern poem of whatsoever proportions) will be an engrafting of new branches on an already existing tree. "

Then what constitutes an epic poem? Epic poetry can be seen as the first of the poetic generas, the grandfather of the art, whose circumambience of existance would give birth to all other aspects of poetry. They usually concern an event or series of events, & seen thro the eyes of one or two main 'heroes,' from Virgil's Aeneas to Wordworth's himself inThe Prelude. Through them & other carachters the entire glut of human emotion should be experienced & played out. The epic tradition can be seen in the increasingly complicated television shows of recent years, where the view must follow multiple plot threads, which often weave among themselves, a device that Homer used long ago in his Illiad.

Over the centuries many 'devices' have been recognized as characteristic of epic poetry. One of the first rules of epic is to plunge *In Mens Rea*, that is half way through the story, the earlier parts being told in flashbacks. The Invocation is a prayer to the muse by the poet, requesting her assistance in the composition of the poem. The Epic Simile is a grand descriptive device, concerning some event from history, usually beginning, 'As when...' There are lists of kings, catalogues of warriors & their equipment, battle scenes, descriptions of heroes, grand geographical sweeps, speeches & soliloquys, literary allusions, morality, unity of action-time-place, the proper treatment of historical sources, verisimilitude, brave deeds & grand speeches, epithets & inversions, religion, descriptions of natural scenes, & words both new & resurrected. There should also be a strong 'immortal' influence, where the actions of the gods & monsters influence those of the mortal, from the Cyclops of Homer to the 'books' of Wordsworth. In many epics a trip to the underworld also occurs, & other encounters with supernatural agents. But its main purpose is to elucidate the ways & actions of man. Most of all, an epic should capture the moment, the spirit of an age, something to record a nation's zeitgeist for its future citizens to reflect on &, if it is good enough, inspire.

5-1-07

The Tryptych

The art of poetry is still evolving, as it has over the millenia when a number of distinct poetical forms have been introduced, exemplified & set in stone by the senate of the poets. If poetry is a mead then it is poured into the goblet of *form*. Form is physical... that is the actual shape the composition shall take upon the page. If poetry is music then each individual form is an instrument to play it on. When played properly certain instruments create unique effects, such as the piano crescendo. In the same fashion certain forms produce different effects, such as the pulsing rhythm of a limerick. I feel the need for form in poetry is as natural as swans coming to a lake. As a poet awakening to the art I felt that the cultivation of vers libre had blown its course. It had moved far from its original *raison d'être*, as an alternative to form, & had now claimed the empire of poetry for itself. But by doing so I felt it had placed shackles upon the poet & only by returning to form would any progress be made in the art. I began to write & experiment in many of the forms, enjoying them all. The Tryptych was born from my desire to use a large stanza capable of handling the many nuances & changes of pace that comes from dramatic poetry. Blank verse could suffice, but my personal preference was for a more aesthetic design, & the solid block of text that both blank & heroic verse were completely against this sentiment, as was the Free Verse used by Ezra Pound in his Cantos was also in contrast to my desire for a harmonious aesthetic. There was also the sonnet, but I found this form, altho excellent for episodic sequences, was not really geared for a dramatic poem. The only form extant at the time which I felt close to my particular needs was the stanza John Keats had employed for the use of his major odes;

How widely scatter'd is the mother tongue
As words of Shakespeare's world & Milton's mind
Shall celebrate, thro story, verse & song,
The legacy of England & her kind

From Mona's hills & Orkeney's breakers roar
Thro Jamaica & Essequibo's banks,
To Aden, Tasmania & Bombay,

One noble little island's growing shore
Steps from the babel of the lingual ranks
Victorious, upon global display.

However, as Keats had himself found the sonnet form not quite suitable for his poetry, & invented the ten-lined stanza above, I too felt ready to develop a form perfect for my own style of writing. The first step in this process came one autumn day as I roamed the museums of London. Calling on the national gallery & admiring my favourite paintings of the napoleonic wars in its entrance hall, I was struck by the beauty of art. This led me further into the museum & onto a selection of medieval tryptychs - my first encounter with the form. A tryptych is a story told in three pictures. They usually have a religious turn, especially for the crucifixion. The first image would see Christ carrying the cross, the larger central painting would be the crucifixion itself, & the last would be the resurrection. I was suddenly inspired & realised I got divide a larger stanza into three small ones & form a literary Tryptych of my own! I began to sketch several designs, each one improving on the last in my principle desire - that is for aesthetics. I recognize that poetry comes first thro the vision & I wanted to present a stanza which would go easy on the eye. To this effect I created a stanza which appear'd to me as a candlestick. Below is the first ever tryptych I wrote, which seemed at the time to be a blessing from the muses themselves, as they found delight in wandering through a wholly new form;

There is a glade of an ancient forest
Where pools lie glitteraund molten azure,
I wade within the one most moonbeam blest
To bathe in blissful dreamtimes gleaming pure;
Attended by
The nine naked maidens
Like a lost lullaby liltng thro' love's garden.

She harps a song, she summons stars,
She waltzes round the waters,
She treats these tender battlescars,
She paints the floating lotus,
She strums the summergold guitars,
O loxian daughters!
Whispering as one grips my dripping hand,
Soul cleansed, slow led, we tread the mossy land.

Whereby the silver pane upstood
Twin muses clad in white,
Pure thro' the wood was cast a flood
Of star-garlanded light,
I pluck'd a reed, dipp'd in the pool & sat me down to write.

Indeed, as I was writing the tryptych it seemed they were guiding me through the poem, setting the parameters & line-lengths at each turn. The final stanza is twenty lines, twice as many as Keats' stanza which was, in retrospect, also a tryptych. However, the variation in line-length & stanza size gave me more flexibility as I set about writing my new dramatic poetry. The stanza Frankenstein's, monster if you will, for I have dissected parts of other forms & used them to create my own. It is divided into three different stanzas; the Head has seven lines, the Tail has eight lines & the Thorax has five lines - named after the ancient trilobites that swarm'd thro the oceans millions of years ago. Within each of these stanzas there is a further sub-division. Each has a ceasura, & the lines above it are known as the *Bust*, & the lines below are known as the *Plinth*. The former is the many body of the stanza & the plinth is there to sum up & conclude what the body has said. Also, in the aesthetic aspect of the poem, the last line of the plinth is always the longest in the stanza & appears to be supporting the stanza - as indeed it is meant to.

The seven-lined *Head* is a Heptet, which have been used by many poets since medieval times. One of the more popular variations is the Rime Royal. The Head of the tryptych consist of seven lines of varying length, looking like this;

The Battle for France is truly over,
The Battle of Britain hath now begun,
The Royal Air Force face the Luftwaffe,
Her nine hundred outnumber'd three to one;
The lines are drawn,
Two cross'd cautious fencers,
The first few flights are flown probing for weaknesses.

The first four are what is known as a quatrain. There are many kinds of Quatrains, from those used by the Gaelic bards to the Rubai of the Arabs. This version as known as the heroic quatrain, that is to say a stanza rhyming ABAB, whose line length is the ten syllabled iambic pentameter. This is used to set the scene for the poem. Then comes the caesura, a change of direction for the poem. The plinth comes in the form of a tercet, three lines of varying length. The first is a sharp four-syllabell'd line which I borrowed from a number of Odes I had been writing at the time, in particular William Wordsworth's 'Intimations of Immortality.' The sudden halt in the line emphasises the caesura & shift in the poem. This is immediately follow'd by a six-syllabell'd line, which leads to an alexandrine, beloved of the French & made famous in England when Pope wrote

"That like a wounded snake, draws its slow length along."

The curious rythm of the alexandrine is founded on it being really two six-syllable lines with a slight pause inbetween. For the tryptych I engaged a rhyme at the end of these half-lines; so the plinth would rhyme AB(ab). Its power as a concluding line to had been discovered by Edmund Spenser for his Faerie Queen. Growing familiar with the eight-lined French Ballade through his immersion in works such as Chaucer's The Monk's Tayle, he simply added an Alexandrine at the foot of the stanza to create his wonderful & endearing form which would later employed by the Romantic poets to masterly effect.

*ST. Agnes' Eve--Ah, bitter chill it was!
The owl, for all his feathers, was a-cold;
The hare limp'd trembling through the frozen grass,
And silent was the flock in woolly fold:
Numb were the Beadsman's fingers, while he told
His rosary, and while his frosted breath,
Like pious incense from a censer old,
Seem'd taking flight for heaven, without a death,
Past the sweet Virgin's picture, while his prayer he saith.*

The *Tail* is the central part of the Tryptych, where the main action of the poem should unfold, the scene having been set by the Head. It is an eight-lined octet, a form immesnely popular down the centuries. The Tail of the Tryptych looks like this;

Ev'ry man should have a river
Ev'ry man should have a hill,
So when death does him deliver
At the moment of the kill
He can thank life & forgive her
For beating his heart still -
So many dying men now think of Greece
That those alive fly home in search of peace.

The stanza is a subtle variation on the eight-lined Ottava Rima of the Italians. It was first introduced into English by Lord Byron with his epic poem Don-Juan.

So the two brothers and their murder'd man

*Rode past fair Florence, to where Arno's stream
Gurgles through straiten'd banks, and still doth fan
Itself with dancing bulrush, and the bream
Keeps head against the freshets. Sick and wan
The brothers' faces in the ford did seem,
Lorenzo's flush with love. They pass'd the water
Into a forest quiet for the slaughter.*

The original form is a sestet, six lines of ABABAB, followed by a summary couplet of CC, all in iambic pentameter. However, I had decided to make the Tryptych as lyrical as possible, & so dispensed with the original metre at this junction. In its place I opted for a more rhythmic 8-7-8-7-8-6 syllable count for the first six lines. Only after the caesura would I return to the iambus, for a heavier two-lined plinth to support the bust. This takes the form of a couplet, an ancient form where the first line states an impulse & the second concludes. This 'punchline' effect proved to be the perfect vehicle for Shakespeare in his sonnets, satirists such as Pope, or in Byron's *Ottava Rima*. They are bound together by rhyme & are a perfect example of Pound's maxim that, "A rhyme must have in it some slight element of surprise if it is to give pleasure." The couplet's cousin, the Epigram, is an often witty & meaningful one-off 'poem' of but two brief lines. The Greeks compared it to a bee, possessing a sting, honey & a small body. In the context of the tryptych the couplet can be both - as a conclusion of the rest of the tail, & as a mini-poem all of its own.

The final stanza of the Tryptych is the *Thorax*, named after the bony part of a trilobite that juts out from its tail. It is a cinquain, a stanza employ'd excellently by Matthew with his *Empedocles on Etna*. However, the most famous form of cinquain is the Limerick, made popular by Edward Lear in his *Book of Nonsense*. My own cinquain looks like this;

From the Blue waters of the Nile
To swelt'ring Tripoli,
Mile after mile of Afric trial,
The surge thro Sicily,
The Eighth army has finally set foot in Italy.

The bust of the thorax is formed from the balladic quatrain. The traditional ballad filled the place soap operas have in today's world, a shared insight into the lives of common folk, & many a 'penny broadside' was sold in the streets of Britain for centuries. It is a simple, popular story told in an easy yet lyrical verse - crude in rhythm & rhyme with a fondness of repetition, yet immensely pleasurable to read or hear. One type of balladic quatrain, popularised by Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner*, rhymes AB(cc)B. The c rhyme is repeated twice in the third line, such as, "*We sailed the sea, we merry three!*" The syllable count of each line is 8-6-(4-4)-6;

The Knight rode on into the west
For all the gold god made,
Yon Budapest onto the crest
Of Christendom's crusade

After the caesura, the Thorax & indeed, the entire Tryptych, is completed by one single line of thundering heptameter which must rhyme with the B rhyme of the Thorax. The fourteen-syllable'd Hexameter was first used by the early Greek poets for their epics, a suitable way to end the tryptych.

The spectres of those splendid ships more crops which locusts blight.

However, despite there being only one line to work with, this gives the poet a chance to work within the confines of the rules that drove Blank Verse; alliteration, internal rhymes & the placing of a slight pause will produce music & rhythm. With this plinth the Thorax & thus the Tryptych are drawn to a close. The poet should now have used a total of nine rhymes, being; ABABCD(cd) - EFEFEFGG - HI(hh)II, & if Free Verse was a wild reaction to formal rhyming verse, then perhaps the super-formality of a tryptych is as just as wild a counter-reaction. However, it still falls far short of the intricate & complicated forms known as the *Trobar Clus*, used by the French Troubadors, such as the *Setsina*, *Rondeau Redoubled* & the

Modern Poetry

Modern poetry began rather much at the same time as the modern world. The romantic age had been a great salute to the classical energies of poetry, but enacted out only by a few forward thinking poets. They are the bridge, then, between the old 'expansive' poetry & the modern 'introverted' style of writing; that is, in former days poets wrote to entertain & in later times poets write to 'explain' - to explain what is going on in their mind & soul. The Post Romantic-Era has a symbolic dawn. Upon hearing the death of Lord Byron in Greece, a nine year old Alfred Tennysson wept uncontrollably. To him the romantic 'baton' would be pass'd, & he was seen as the link to Keats & Shelley just as they were beginning to be properly appreciated. However, by the time of his death poetry would have set sail on its journey to modernism, its purveyors unshackled by the conventions of the past - the Liberty poets.

Toward the end of the 1820's the world that Byron left was changing at a great rate of knots - industrial advancement, social reform & empire building the issues of the day. Those same fields at Peckham Rye walked by the boy Blake were now grimy centres of industry. What once took three weeks to journey by carriage could now take three days by the railways springing up virtually overnight. Above all this, matriarchal in her splendour, sat Victoria, England's greatest queen. Among her poets, including the laureate, the first stirrings of the coming 'liberty,' began to be felt. When Robert Browning met Elizabeth Barrett a merging of two poetic spirits occurred similar to that which created the Lyrical Ballads. Together they created a new form, the dramatic monologue, which in essence was a blank verse novel, such as his *The Ring & The Book* & her *Aurora Leigh*. This reflected the essence of the Victorian period, when prose began to supercede poetry as the mouth piece of the author. The novels of Dickens & Jane Eyre far outsold their versified rivals & are still read widely to this day. Their contemporary was Matthew Arnold, whose understanding of literary criticism so keen that it would soon be brought to the forefront of literary thought. He broaden'd & elevated the role of criticism in order for it to shape the creative epochs of literature., & by doing so gave birth to the modern critic. He felt that criticism, "*Obeys an instinct prompting it to know the best that is known & thought in the world,*" & provided the theory of touchstones of poetic excellence - where the lines, expressions & formulaic ideas of great masters are the defining moments of the art.

As the heyday of French painting was blazing glorious, across the Channel there was rising a thirst for a literature of the sentiments in that intellectual & ambitious land. The French Romantic movement was a late starter, but would burn its brightest toward the end of the century. The grandfather of the movement was Victor Hugo, whose cloud-capped thundering rhetoric & tinent of verse shock'd French poetry back to life. This would be heavily inspired by the romantic figure of Lord Byron & a grotesque form of orientalism that would realise itself fully in Baudelaire, the true voice of the age. He was very much inspired by the renaissance symbolism of the *Oysters Pearls* by Bellau & took on many of its messages as he concocted his *Fleurs de Mal* (Flowers of Evil). Painting not the thing but the effect it produces he took the dark metropolis of Paris as his muse, as much opium as he could find & with the doctrine of 'Art for Arts Sake' ringing in his ears produced a morbid romanticism whose musical, mysterious, Parnassian symbolism translated the disgust, apathy & decadence to be found in a modern, decaying city. Full of visions of dilapidated rooms, moustached harpies, boudoirs of rotting flowers & attention to the minutest detail this supreme representaion of the poetic art would begin the poetic decadence that would inspire the surrealists & on into Twentieth Century.

Of his peers Verlaine would actually begin the school known as symbolism, & also forge a passionate, homosexual relationship with a teenage poet named Arthur Rimbaud. The latter is one of the curios of the art, who produced some amazing poetry & ideas in such a short period of time. However, he would renounce literature at the tender age of twenty to become a gun-runner in Abbyssinnia. Not long before he had fallen out with his lover fallen out after an absinthe-soaked night in London, where Verlaine shot at Rimbaud with a revolver, who then testified to have his friend thrown in prison. However, Verlaine would go on to preserve Rimbaud's name & works, for he had recognized his genius ever since that first

letter had arrived on his door mat from a sixteen year old wannabe - providing the world with some of its most imaginative poetry. Later, the poet Mallarme would take up from where Verlaine's symbolism had left off & attempted to bring the page to life, dispensed with punctuation & champion'd *vers libre* - an acorn that would grow into the mighty oak of the free verse century.

With the dawn of the twentieth century the art had reached a cul-de-sac. Apart from a few brave innovative souls, it seemed the poets knew that the old days were over, but there was no-one to lead them forward & so remained paddling in a romantic pool. Of them, William Butler Yeats was endowed with a great poetic power, whose finest poems are a glory to the art. Yet he can be seen as the last in a long line of romantic poets, & though many of his peers would begin with a romantic sentiment - Wilfred Owen's early poem, *The Little Mermaid*, was influenced heavily by Keats - come the terrific bloodletting of World War One both them & the art was hauled kicking & screaming into the twentieth century.

Gallant poet-soldiers such as Siegfried Sassoon & Robert Graves would meet up in the trenches in between the slaughterous bouts of mayhem & begin to reflect on the day, which began to seep out into a very fine & noble verse. "My God, what poetry we'll write," said Graves to Sassoon just before the Somme offensive. The most famous of them, & perhaps deservedly so, is Wilfred Owen. Finding himself a poet serving in the trenches the poesis of those ghoulis days of carnage soon began to flow onto his page. While convalescing at Craiglockhart in Edinburgh he met Sassoon, who was also at the hospital. The older soldier took Owen under his wing & began assist his development. Back in the dark trenches he set to work on a number of emotional & disturbing dreamlike poems, bringing the reality of war to the world. In his 'protest' he somehow combined wonderful imagery, language & emotion in poems such as 'Dulce et Decorum Est' & 'Anthem for Doomed Youth' that their words still send shivers down the spine to this day. Befitting his tragic muse but one week before the end of the war Owen would die in Flanders & with him the last sliver of Romanticism, warped by the maelstrom of war. Poetry had found new material & a new way of saying it & in those bloodsoaked fields the 'Liberty' poets were truly born.

As the court of posterity is yet to take seat it is difficult to allocate positions in the poetic pantheon to the poets of the last century. At this point in time the combatants are still duelling & the critic-beasts still pouncing. However, throughout the century there seems to have occurred a certain drive, led by the goddess Liberty, that has culminated in the conquest of Free Verse. To perceive the cultural iconism that reign'd thro the century it is best to look at garish paintings of Dali, Feininger, Grosz & Picasso. The harbinger of this period of poetry was the American master-critic TS Elliot. Acknowledging the century was profoundly different from any gone before, when the *art* of poetry was in decline, he half-jokingly published his *Old Possums Book of Practical Cats* & the profoundly influential *Wasteland*. Befriending Ezra Pound, who himself admitted his epic, encyclopediacal, choleric *Cantos* lacked cohesion, they together embraced the symbolism of Baudelaire...& Vorticism...& Surrealism...& Imagism. It is with Imagism that the modern revolution kicked into a higher gear. Coinciding with the course of the first world war, a handful of poets, including Pound & DH Lawrence, applied themselves to the imagist manifesto. Inspired by the symbolist poetry of the French salon's, they concluded that the image must be painted as it is seen, & to do away with the verbiage, the circumambient gas that fills up traditional forms. As Pound declared, "*Use no superfluous word, no adjective which does not reveal something.*" Metre was dispensed with, & replaced by, in one of the founder's words, "*As regarding rhythm: to compose in sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome.*" The greatest achievement of these poets was the introduction of a flexibility on the page & to herald the kingdom of Free Verse, which is reigning to this day. Poets such as E.E. Cummings experimented intensely with word trickery & aesthetics as the traditional Forms of Poetry were banished to the dusty halls of academe.

In our modern age the art has splintered to such a degree, from the fridge magnet to the poetry slam, that any worth is difficult to capture. Yet the medium of popular music has offered a new & lofty public podium to the poet. On certain occasions since the genre was born the lyrics that accompany the music have risen to poetry, accentuated by the music to infiltrate the senses. It is possible to trace two distinct lines through this, the ages true poetry. The first began with the blues lyrics of Robert Johnson in the 1930's. Both these & his guitar playing would heavily influence the bands that sprung up in the hey-day of Rock n Roll, the 60's. Here, drugs-fuelled artists like Jim Morrison & Jimi Hendrix were more poets

than musicians. An avid reader, Morrison could be considered as America's Baudelaire while Hendrix is almost Shelleyan in his lyrical output. The Poet-art of the Beatles is a fine example as are the operatic songs such as The Rolling Stones' *Sympathy for the Devil*, Queen's *Bohemian Rhapsody*, Led Zeppelin's *Stairway to Heaven*. In recent years the lyrics of The Stone Roses all seem imbued with a poetic sensibility of the highest order. The second line began in the same era as Johnson, with Woody Guthrie's folk songs, aired to the people over that new medium, the radio. From him came the protest singers of the 60's, foremost of which was Bob Dylan, a founding father of rock music whose genius combined political & poetic feeling with his music. As he married significant words to music he was influenced by the Beat poets of the 50's, Allen Ginsberg himself appearing in the video for *Subterranean Homesick Blues*, a lyrical explosion & the first of a new breed. This honest 'Beatnik' poetry of the 1950' & 60's rejected the cultural phenomena that ravaged the times & the Americans have supplied us with the best voices of the century, fuelled on a cocktail of drugs; Bukowski, Burroughs & Keruac. It can be seen as the high-water mark of the poetic revolution & the popular crowning of Free Verse.

The Beat poets would also formally introduce the Haiku into Western poetry. Despite it being one of the world's oldest surviving poetic forms, the English-speaking world did not learn of its existence until after 1868 when Japan opened its shores to the West and envoys from England started to translate the form. A short while later, French visitors to Japan took up writing haiku and by 1910, two anthologies of Japanese literature in translation were published, one in France and one in England and both included haiku. These little books caught the attention of luminaries such as James Joyce, D.H. Lawrence, Ezra Pound & William Carlos Williams, & thro its practice the form began to flourish, especially in North America. This was down to the American enchantment with Japanese culture following World War II & the stamp of approval given by the influential Beat Poets. They were attracted to its Zen-like activity, the focus that the mind attains at the brief, but beautiful, moment of composition. Once rooted, the vigorous North American haiku has spread its seeds throughout the English-speaking world and beyond, resulting in heavily attended Haiku congresses & competitions, & is today undoubtedly the most popular form of poetry in the world.

The haiku was born in the medieval courts of Japan, where a new poetic form had developed named *Renga*. Here several poets alternately add verses of seventeen syllables & fourteen syllables to an ever growing poem. From this seed over the next two centuries developed the individual Haiku, which would be perfected in the hands of Basho Matsuo (1644 ~ 1694). He was the first to attach importance to the role of thought in the form, himself being heavily influenced by Tchouang-tseu, a philosopher in the 4th century B.C. While Basho & a few other outstanding haiku poets were Zen monks, they all treated haiku as poetry first, and, if at all, as Zen second. Tho comparisons have been made the haiku is, first and foremost, a form of poetry, not a vehicle for philosophical or religious expression, a form of poetry quite separate from Zen Buddhism. Yet despite having reach'd some sort of plateau of creative ideal with this short but sumptuous form, it would be several centuries before the rest of the world would know of its existence.

Of all the modern poets, in England the kudos has gone to Ted Hughes & Sylvia Plaid. Like the Brownings their poetic spirit is very much intertwined, with their reputations growing at the same pace to become two of the centuries leading lights. They were married at an early age, with Hughes at first being the famous poet while Plaid stayed at home with the children. However, their domestic life became strained, resulting in a separation & Plaid turning to poetry to channel the dark forces that dwelt within her already volatile soul. These forces finally came to the surface with her suicide in 1962, which set the seal on her volume of doom-laden electric poetry called *Ariel*, telling of her relationship with Hughes. He did his best to proclaim these wonderful poems to the world & from that point on they both grew in stature, one with his living poetry, which eventually led to his laureacy, & the other to the pinnacle of posthumous fame. In fact her death really helped to widen his own readership & Hughes lay testament to the poetic quality of their love with his, 'Birthday Letters,' published only a few months before he died of cancer, the last production of this united poetic spirit. Together they can be seen as the ultimate beacons of the Liberty School, both writing in free verse at the height of its evolution, both quality wordsmiths & both in love.

The greatest poetic achievement of poetry of the twentieth century was the growth of its banner of

criticism, for as the weight of ages has grown then so has its objective analysis. It is a sublime irony of the modern age that a poet can make more money writing about his art than actually practicing it. Now, as the taste of the world is slowly, but surely fashion'd, the reader is assisted by thousands of educated voices wanting to elucidate & help them to make their own judgements. The modern world & its multi-faceted literary modes of operendum have also given poets many fresh angles in which to investigate the art, such as psychoanalytic criticism, where the poem is considered a reflection of the innermost workings of a writer's psyche rather than as a creative production. The field is becoming ever more creative, yet often comes across to the reader as elitist gobbledegook. Perhaps this concentration of human talent in one field has neglected the essence that began it all, the spirit of poetry. Yet it is only with those who possess this spirit that true criticism lies. When a non-poet attempts to criticise poetry it is rather like a Spaniard teaching French to an Englishman. For as Robert Graves commented;

*Bullfight critics ranked in rows
Crowd the enormous plaza full
But only one is there who knows
& he's the man who fights the bull*

For the critics, in Rilke's words, *"By the pretence that they are nearly-art, injure & defame all true art."*

The poetry of most recent times is mainly an age of anthology. Most new books are collections of poems by various old poets on a certain theme. Those few living poets who are published will release a slim volume every few years or so, a photographic representation of their poetic stance at the time. The very best of these poems are then released will eventually be published as an anthology, the very best of which are released in an anthology of modern poets, & so on. The audience is also slowly dwindling, as Neruda said, *"Poets will publish only for other poets - each will pull out his little book & put it in the others pocket."* Modern poems seem to have lost the music of the art, a far cry from the poems of Spenser, Dante, Milton, Byron et al. Perhaps this age of anthology represents the final death throes of the poetic organism - but as Charles Abraham Elton once said, *"Taste is a capricious & variable standard,"* & is she set to rise once more as her phoenix has before?

8-1-07

Poetic Apostles

There is a tradition among budding poets that they look up to a forebearer with a respect verging on hero-worship. In most cases the elder poet will be long dead, like Spenser's Chaucer & Elliot's Shelley, but from time to time a poet is lucky enough to meet their idol & engage in conversation with them. These moments contain a deep-seated poesis, springing up from the bubbling soul of the young poet, & falling like rain from the spirit of the god-like elder. Now, the younger poet is no longer grasping blindly at some spirit in the dark, but the way is lit by the experience of his master. This essay is concerned with one such occasion, when the soldier Frank Xaver Kappus engaged in a series of letters with the German poet, Rainer Maria Rilke.

The younger poet had the fortune to attend the same military school as Rilke, & on discovering this was compelled to send a letter, containing some youthful musings & poetry, to Paris, where Rilke was staying at the time. What followed was a series of ten letters, written by Rilke on his subsequent travels across Europe, from France, Germany, Italy, Sweden & Paris once again. In effortless & beautiful prose Rilke

engraves a 'life-blueprint' for the younger poet to follow - & in doing so created a universal standard. "There is so much, dear Herr Kappus, going on in you just now," wrote Rilke, the voice of experience recognizing a kindred spirit, who would now listen intently, for as Kappus himself wrote, "When one who is great & unique speaks to us, it is for lesser men to fall silent."

As Rilke wrote it seemed as he was walking along the path which he had taken himself many years previously - the path to poethood. When describing those early moments when the young poet will wrangle with his heart, mind & soul over the decision, Rilke wrote, "Imagine each individual destiny as a greater or lesser space, we shall see that few people come to know more than a corner of their own room.... Examine the origins of your own life; that is the source at which you will find out whether or not you are called on to be a maker.... There is no-one who can advise or who can aid you; no-one. There is only one way - You must go inside yourself! You must seek for whatever it is that obliges you to write. You must discover if its roots reach down to the very depths of your heart. You must confess to yourself whether you would truly die if writing were forbidden to you. This above all: ask yourself in the night, in your most silent hour - Must I write? If there is an affirmative reply, if you can simply & starkly answer 'I must' to that grave question, then you will need to construct your life to that necessity."

To the young spirit determined upon a life of poetry, Rilke said, "You must accept this destiny & you must bear it, enduring both its burden & its greatness." With the fires of poetry now burning within them, the poets can turn their attention to writing, when "You will require a great deal of talent & maturity of your own before you can contribute anything of your own to a tradition that has, already, so many good & sometimes brilliant exemplars." He urged Kappus to, "Depict your sorrows & your hopes, your ever changing preoccupations; your faith in some kind of beauty; depict it all with quiet, humble, passionate sincerity & use the things all around you to express it: the images of your dreams, the objects you keep in your memory." Rilke said that daily life is a rich source of poesis, & hoped the young soldier would be, "Poet enough to evoke its riches."

"To be an artist means that you cannot enumerate or calculate but must grow as the trees grow - letting the sap flow at its own pace, standing firm through the gales of spring, never fearing lest there should be no summer. For there will be summer. But only for those who stay as patient as if all eternity lay before them, expansive, steady, unperturbed.... If you keep close to nature, to all that is simple in nature, to the small things which scarcely anyone notices & which can for that reason invisibly lead to what is great, what is immeasurable, if you truly possess this love for lesser things & if, by serving them, you can quietly win the trust of things that seem humble - then everything will grow easier for you, more unified, somehow more reconciling, not necessarily in your mind, which may hesitate, amazed, but in your deepest awareness & watchfulness & understanding... stay patient with all that is unresolved in your own heart - try to love the very questions just as if they were locked up rooms or as if they were books in an utterly unknown language. You ought not yet to be searching for answers, for you could not yet live them... do not watch yourself too closely... do not be over-hasty in drawing conclusions from your experience; simply let it happen to you... What matters is to live everything. For just now, live the questions. Maybe you will little by little, almost without noticing, one distant day live your way into the answers."

When ready to write, when, "you do possess inside you the potential to create images & forms." Rilke compared poetic creation with sexual procreation; "The impulse to create, to beget, to give form, counts for nothing without its powerful & lasting confirmation.... For the act of begetting is a kind of giving birth & , surely, man also gives birth to whatever things he creates out of his inner riches.... To give birth is everything. To allow each thing its own evolution, each impression & each grain of feeling buried in the self, in the darkness, unsayable, unknowable, & with infinite humility & patience to await the birth of a new illumination. These creations are the poems, which he said should be, "Things in their own right," & "independent entities... Works of art whose mysterious presences, whose lives, endure alongside our own perishable lives."

Further elaborating on the extant necessities of poethood, Rilke emphasised the powers of solitude, when "Your solitariness shall be a quiet place, a homestead for you, however strange the circumstances that may surround you, & by its means you will always find your true path... Think of the world you carry inside yourself & give those thoughts whatever name you please - but pay attention to what grows up within you & give it precedence over the things you are aware of all around you... what goes on deep within you is deserving of your love: it is upon that you must work, at whatever cost."

Rilke also commended the use of a good library, actually naming the books in his letters, but the sentiment intended can be utilised by any budding poet; "You should live for a while in these books & learn from them whatever seems to you worth learning. But first & foremost learn to love them. They will repay your love a thousand times over & , whatever paths your own life may take, I am certain that these books will remain among the most important threads in the fabric of your living , of all your happenings & of your joys & disappointments." He also warned Kappus of the perils of literary criticism when he wrote, "Endeavour to read as little aesthetic criticism as possible. Things of this sort are either received

opinions, opinions grown petrified & meaningless, insensitive & far-removed from anything alive; or else they are clever word-games in which one view may prevail today & the converse view tomorrow.... almost all criticism is nearly-art - which injures & defames all true art... You should always trust yourself & your own intuitions against that kind of analysis or argument or presentation."

Toward the end of the series, which had continued sporadically over several years, I believe that Rilke sensed the poetic importance of this particular dialogue, in the same way that Shakespeare sensed his sonnets were destined for immortality; "*Whether my letters are truly of any assistance to you - that is something I sometimes wonder.... let us wait & see what may come of them.*" I believe this was an open invitation for Kappus to make a record of their private conversation with an eye to future publication. This indeed happened in 1929, three years after Rilke died, which the world would come to know as "Letters to a Young Poet." They contain many splendid insights which can only benefit the poets of the future when, upon realising they are a poet... "*Something unfamiliar enters into us, something unknown: our senses, inhibited & shy, fall silent: everything within us shrinks back, there is silence, & at its centre this new thing, strange to us all, stands mutely there.*"

10 - 1 - 07