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I

INTRODUCTION

'The poet makes poetry, the metaphysician makes metaphysics, the bee makes honey, the spider secretes a filament; you can hardly say that any of these agents believes: he merely does.' This statement of fact by Eliot (*Selected Essays*, London, 1953, p. 138) draws approving astonishment from every abecedarian teacher of the rudiments of poetry. For we as teachers never turn to Dante for a résumé of Aquinas' thought nor do we run straightway to Aquinas for an explanation of the concept of sin when we are reading the *Inferno*. The former is a poet, the latter a theologian, and Aquinas' dismissal of poetry as 'infirma inter omnes doctrinas' was shared by all the scholastics who moralised and didacticised about the non-philosophical arts. Still less do we leaf through Aristotle's rules for drama when we are reading a tragedy. He had a brilliant intellect, but he was not a poet.

The metaphysical assumptions of a poet are, of course, important if we are examining the climate of ideas that produced such and such a poem, in order to explain part of the historical context in which the poet was working. This is a perfectly legitimate procedure for the reconstruction of various elements that went to the making of a poem, and any aesthetic analysis must, if it hopes to illuminate a particular work, function through the particular literature, born in a particular context, not outside or against it. But there is no *need*, strictly speaking, to know first of all the poem by Petrarch which is a relevant source for a dizain by Scève. A knowledge of Petrarch's poem may well add to our understanding of it. But poetry is written and read at several levels. Dylan Thomas described his falling in love with nursery rhymes in this way,

> I had come to love just the words of them, the words alone. What the words stood for, symbolized or meant, was of very secondary importance; what mattered was the sound of them as I heard them for the first time on the lips of the remote and incomprehensible grown-ups who seemed, for some reason, to be living in my world.
>
> (*The colour of saying*, ed. R. Maud and Aneurin Talfan Davies, London, 1963, p. xix.)

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At this level – which is perhaps the lowest – we can enjoy the sounds of the words pirouetting, as it were, in the air, playing symphonies together or merely vibrating as a pattern in our minds; and, like children, we gasp with delight as the sequence of words becomes a glittering catherine-wheel bursting against the backcloth of our sensitivity. The act of enjoying poetry is slightly different from the act of understanding it. At this stage, we may not understand the poem. How many of us savoured sensually the sound of the Psalms years before we knew what, for instance, this meant?

> The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me...

It is with the imagination that we enter the universe of the poet, and that universe is totally different from the ordinary one we live our daily lives in. Furthermore we are different people when engaged in reading poetry. And we do not judge the poem on first acquaintance.

Many scholars insist that a reader must have an immense apparatus of scholarship before he can read a poem. But this is to bypass the first essential step in dealing with literature, which is intelligent, close, critical, active reading. Professor I. A. Richards said in 1929,

> We speak *to say something*, and when we listen we expect something to be said. We use words to direct our hearers' attention upon some state of affairs, to present to them some items for consideration and to excite in them some thoughts for these items.
>
> (*Practical Criticism*, London, 1929, p. 181.)

We read poetry not because we have the scholarship to reconstruct the poet's intention (we may never understand that more than partially, and what is perhaps more relevant in the present instance, this critical procedure itself was not applicable in the Renaissance, when most critics were looking at what poetry achieved in the mind of the reader rather than what any particular poet felt or intended) but because we feel certain human emotions in their intensity and have a certain appreciation of the artistic process by which they are presented in the poetry. Indeed, we are energised by a spark of fire in a

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particular poem, which generates heat in our intellect, emotions, senses, memory. Perhaps later we may be driven into scholarship to make the implicit appeal of particular effects more explicit and to redefine continually our personal conception of poetry; we may be urged by our own re-reading of the poem to tease out bits of syntax, to unravel the meanings of a word, to follow through the clues of a complex structure, or to suck out the marrow of a poet's imagery. This deepening of our awareness of a poem starts a two-way process in us: our experience helps us to unravel the meaning of a poem and conversely the poem helps us to appreciate our experience. Reading the poem becomes a network of criss-cross relations. Our impressions of human love are disorganised and, in one way, we do not realise that we have to be taught how to be free to appreciate it. And literature comes to our aid and shows us how many things co-ordinate between life and art. We associate the poems we read not so much with the men or women who wrote them: we associate them indirectly with ourselves and directly with other poems we have read.

One problem that faces us immediately in reading Scève's poems is their difficulty. On a simple level the purely phonetic impressions are felt with particular vividness when we are approaching a foreign language. We delight in French words like *opoponax*, *popincourt*, *brouhaha*, *croquer* and so on. Childish fantasy, perhaps, but serious when we are considering a language. On another level Scève would be regarded a difficult poet for syntactic, grammatical, semantic, symbolic reasons. But let us get at the problem by examining three poems from three different periods of literature: a sonnet by Mallarmé, an ode of Horace and a dizain of Scève. Let us approach these three poems first through the sensory quality of words, through imagery and metrical, rhythmic movement without thinking on evaluation, judgement or what they have in common. We shall take Mallarmé's poem first:

A la Nue accablante tu
Basse de basalte et de laves
A même les échos esclaves
Par une trompe sans vertu

Quel sépulcral naufrage (tu
Le sais, écume, mais y baves)

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Suprême une entre les épaves
Abolit le mât dévêtu

Ou cela que furibond faute
De quelque perdition haute
Tout l'abîme vain éployé

Dans le si blanc cheveu qui traîne
Avarement aura noyé
Le flanc enfant d'une sirène.

(*Œuvres complètes*, Pléiade edition, Paris, 1945, p. 76)

When this famous sonnet is read aloud a strange feeling of incomprehension paralyses us. We do not understand it. The language seems straightforward but the syntax is difficult; the absence of punctuation (except for the two very emphatic commas in line 6) means that the reader does not know which word goes with which other word. The logical syntax of non-literary prose has been shattered. Language is playing tricks. The very harmless word *nue* could be an adjective; as it is feminine it could mean a naked woman or a naked girl; but on the other hand it could be a noun meaning, poetically and rather archaically, a high cloud or, collectively, clouds. *Furibond faute* (line 9) at first suggests an adjective followed by a noun, but on second glance the adjective does not agree with the noun. The rhyming position of *tu...tu* suggests that they are different words; the second person singular and the past participle of *taire*, but there is no way of telling which is which. Whole phrases might be in apposition to a single word, and the tone of a rhetorical question underlies the poem. It is a visual representation of words on the page with, seemingly, an emphasis not on the sequence of ideas but rather on arbitrary aesthetic concepts. Arbitrary, because so far the reader is unable to see reasons for them. However, he is excited by the sheer linguistic difficulty and the sonorous musicality of the words, and he feels that he must get something to bite on in this smooth-polished artefact. The internal rhymes in the first line, the alternation in the octave between *tu...vertu...tu...dévêtu* with the heavy *laves... esclaves...baves...épaves* thudding the rhyme, the alliteration in line 2 between *basse* and *basalte*, the sound of *Abolit le mât dévêtu* and the insistently recurring *a* sounds (e.g. lines 1, 2, 13) the diphthong *au* (lines 9 and 10 in the rhyme) – all stir the reader's musical sensibility. The first eight lines are a piling up of words with hardly any visual dramatization, simply an

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abstract pattern of notes around the *Quel sépulcral naufrage* of line 5. The speed of reading is painfully slow: consonants split up the lines into laboured fragments which, perhaps, imitate a visual impression of a shipwreck. One sinuous sentence, enunciated with difficulty, brings to mind, perhaps, the weight and blackness of storm clouds preceding or following the wreck. Complex, disorientating, astonishing. We are excited by the poem.

Now let us read aloud an ode by Horace to see whether we can make as little out of it as we have done for Mallarmé.

O fons Bandusiae, splendidior vitro,
dulci digne mero non sine floribus,
cras donaberis haedo,
cui frons turgida cornibus
primis et Venerem et proelia destinat.
frustra: nam gelidos inficiet tibi
rubro sanguine rivos
lascivi suboles gregis.
te flagrantis atrox hora Caniculae
nescit tangere, tu frigus amabile
fessis vomere tauris
praebes et pecori vago.
fies nobilium tu quoque fontium,
me dicente cavis impositam ilicem
saxis, unde loquaces
lymphae desiliunt tuae. (*Odes*, III.13)[1]

Latin, being an inflected language, lacks articles, but its case endings define the relationship between subject, object and modifiers. The first words are in the vocative so that we hear an *I* talking to a *you: o fons Bandusiae* seems to be an address to the fountain in the vocative. The immediate impression is that it is a hymn, it is almost as if the fountain were subsumed under a

[1] O spring of Bandusia, more shining than glass, deserving of sweet wine and flowers, tomorrow you will be presented with a kid whose forehead, swelling with the tips of horns, gives promise of both love and battles; in vain: for he, the offspring of a playful flock, shall stain for you your chill waters with his red blood.

The black hour of the flaring Dog-Star knows no means to touch you: you provide pleasing coolness for tired oxen and the straggling herd.

You also shall become one of the famous fountains, since I describe the oak-tree planted over your hollowed rocks from which your chattering waters jump down.

(Translated by Gordon Williams in *The Third Book of Horace's Odes*, Oxford, 1969.)

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god's name. As we note the number of times *tibi, te, tu, tuae* enter the poem we come to feel that it is a dramatic monologue, in which the poet has used the 'I' who speaks and a second person singular to whom he talks. In line 14 *me dicente* suggests that the 'I' is singing of the glories of this fountain in Bandusia, echoing perhaps the Greek poets who were always singing of fountains; perhaps this fountain will be greater than any other because this 'I' is singing of it. Our first reading of this Horatian Ode will have demonstrated that there are some clues, like the musicality – the slow start to each line and the falling cadence of –◡◡–◡– in the first, second and fourth lines of each stanza – which imprint themselves on our memory. But again we do not yet understand the poem.

Finally let us listen to a poem by Scève.

> A si hault bien de tant saincte amytié
> Facilement te deburoit inciter,
> Sinon debuoir, ou honneste pitié,
> A tout le moins mon loyal persister,
> Pour vnyment, & ensemble assister
> Lassus en paix en nostre eternel throsne.
> N'apperçoy tu de l'Occident le Rhosne
> Se destourner, & vers Midy courir,
> Pour seulement se conioindre a sa Saone
> Iusqu'a leur Mer, ou tous deux vont mourir? (dizain 346)

Again, there is a feeling of not understanding. The first six lines are syntactically difficult, but certain lines have embedded themselves in our mind, like the splendid 'A si hault bien de tant saincte amytié'. The last four lines are simple; they convey their meaning more clearly than Mallarmé's sonnet or the Horatian ode. Yet, reading these three poems is much more difficult than enjoying a poem by Ovid, or by Verlaine or one of Marot's chansons. We are in a state of baffled astonishment; there is a sense in which something is working to get hold of our minds.

All three examples are difficult and they are difficult in many different ways. But they share certain qualities and values. Mallarmé is difficult syntactically and in the way the metaphors work – and that is like Scève. Horace represents the domestication of a foreign literary tradition, and that, as we shall see later, is like Scève. But they have something else in common. We realise that each poet is going to make us work. The three poets share the same attitude towards the reader; he is not a member

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of the *vulgus;* he can be expected to tease out the syntax, the vocabulary, the images and sound patterns of the poem, precisely because his emotional sense has been aroused. He knows that the points are going to be made more by implication than explicitly. The emotional reaction to the three poems is tied to sound. The reader may have a tremendous emotional uplift in being carried hither and thither as dictated by a phrase, a musical line or by whole sentences.

On our first reading our sensibility as well as our intellect is fired. We can say that foreign languages do not prevent us from 'feeling' certain things in word-patterns and sounds and that we are in the same position as the child who savours sensually a psalm without understanding it fully.

Therefore it is not so much that difficult languages face us when we read the three poems; it is more a feeling of the complexity of the artistic process. The difficulty of Scève lies more in the working out of a rich and allusive arrangement of words than in the words themselves. Commentators on Scève from Brunetière to McFarlane stress the difficulties. Brunetière put forward a theory purporting to explain the architecture of *Délie* by means of the number symbolism of the Cabbala; Saulnier saw Scève as a forerunner of Valéry; Odette de Mourgues saw the intellectual content behind the emotion; McFarlane took scrupulous pains to ease the linguistic difficulty for us.[1] But it is the reader's enjoyment, his elucidation and ultimately his participation in the fullest sense which must work with all three poets. By reading the poems again we can try and work out something of value (even though it will not be a full understanding) without relying at this point on the knowledge, the background and the tradition in which each poet was working.

We shall start with the Horace poem – because for many reasons it is the easiest and clearest. The word *fons* generates a number of related words. The water is so clear, so perfected by nature that it seems far 'outsplendouring glass'. Its transparency is so bright that it seems to take on the brilliance of the

[1] McFarlane, in the notes to the dizains in his edition and in 'Notes on Maurice Scève's *Délie*', FS, XIII, 1959, pp. 99–111; F. Brunetière in 'Un précurseur de la Pléiade', *Études critiques sur l'histoire de la littérature française*, 6e série, Paris, 1899; V. L. Saulnier, *Maurice Scève*, Paris, 1948–9, 2 vols; O. de Mourgues, *Metaphysical, Baroque and Précieux Poetry*, Oxford, 1953, pp. 12–22.

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midday sun. With the comparative adjective *splendidior* Horace expresses the sparkling nature of the water in its quintessence. In the second verse, he has *gelidos...rivos*: we have passed from the fountain's outward semblance to something which evokes for the reader the sense of touch; for it is icy, very, very cold – a mountain stream on a hot day. This icy transparency is then contrasted with the poet's sacrifice of the warm blood of a kid (*gelidos* implies *tepido*, *rubro* implies *liquidos* – an economic device of complementarity that Horace is fond of in descriptive contrasts). With the word *haedo* Horace suggests a pathetically young animal (contrast the other two words for goats – *hircus* and *caper* – which he might have used); and this has one association, which is the right one here – the wantonness and lasciviousness of a young goat, and especially the poignancy of these qualities unfulfilled (note *destinat*). The next verse guides the effect of icy by using *frigus*, which is slightly less cold than *gelidus*, in combination with *amabile* to evoke a pleasant sense of taste and touch – the cool, refreshing loveliness of a stream on a hot summer's day. The last verse has the sound of the fountain: *loquaces/lymphae desiliunt tuae*. *Loquaces* means 'babbling'; *lymphae* is a poetic synonym for *aquae*, and carries the underlying association that Roman poets would make between *Lymphae* and *Nymphae*; *desiliunt* means leap down, tumble and fall. (See Ronsard's rendering of this in *A la Fontaine Bellerie*, Odes, II, 9, where everything that has been implicitly suggested by Horace, is brought out in the open and made explicit e.g. the *Nymphes*.) The sensations in the images impinge on the reader's mind, and through their artistic patterning remain there underlying the poem after one has finished reading it.

Let us look at the content. There is a balance of two verses and two verses; the first half conveys the offer of a sacrifice, the second half extolls the spring's benefactions. The contrast between today and tomorrow is identified with that between icy-coldness and blood-heat; the young kid will be sacrificed. The explicit contrast in the second half is between the labour of the oxen as they pull their ploughs and the pastoral herds which provide milk, wool and meat. And there is an implied contrast finally between *me dicente* and the non-articulate *vulgus*.[1] Horace

[1] I cannot agree with N. E. Collinge, who says (*The Structure of Horace's Odes*, Oxford, 1961, p. 106) that this last stanza is 'self-advertisement for the poet'. That seems a rather crude interpretation of a suggestive and only implied intimacy with the audience.

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was ready to acknowledge that, technically, he was the offspring of the lyric poets of Greece, and this is implicit in the choice of an Asclepiad metre. But for Horace it was important that he should bring all his technical excellence, his own personality, to this complex work of art. When we look for the unity of the poem, it is true that we can see the separate elements, the parallels, the contrasts and the comparisons; but ultimately everything is brought together by the poetic character into a little scene, where the poet seems to be talking rather casually about springs, sacrifices and wanton young goats. When we read it we are struck by the way he interweaves sensations, ideas, common everyday things from nature, almost as if there was no art in it at all. The poet is giving us an experience or several experiences in a seemingly simple form – *ars sine arte.*

The core of our response to a Mallarmé sonnet lies in the state of suspension of the intellect while all the possible suggestions of the imagination are stirred, allowed to run their full course, interacting with one another, and then blotted out. The glories of this imaginative activity, though illusory, are intensely exciting, and in the best poems they are pushed to their extreme in a spectacle of intense light. This is not the same process as in Scève or Horace; for one thing, in the nineteenth century the imagination is the centre of the poetic universe.[1]

The long phrase of the tercets, hinged on the subject, *Tout l'abîme* suggesting an alternative to the shipwreck image, culminates in nothingness, all the weight in the sky, all the violent forces of sky and sea converge to conjure up the illusory child of the siren. Mallarmé's negative technique, precisely because it makes greater demands on the reader's intellect, his powers of imagination and association, takes us actively rather than passively through the poetic experience. At its logical extreme, this negative technique would lead to an impasse of non-communication between the poet and his reader. In the best poems the reader *has* to co-operate, because his emotions and sensibility are moved and demand a resolution. The effect of Mallarmé's syntax is initially disorientating, but instead of leaving it unresolved, the reader has to work out the kind of

[1] This will be clearer later on, especially the beginning of Chapter 3. But see the fine article by J. M. Cocking, 'Imagination as Order and as Adventure', in *Order and Adventure in Post-Romantic French Poetry. Essays presented to C. A. Hackett.* Edited by E. M. Beaumont, J. M. Cocking and J. Cruickshank, Oxford, 1973, pp. 257–69.

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multiple reaction the poet describes in *Crise de Vers*. The resolution depends on intellect: the reader has to piece together the words, in order to see whether the first *tu* is indeed the second person singular or the past participle of *taire*; he has to repeat the process when he comes across the second *tu*. Mallarmé's effort at compressing multifarious threads through syntax reveals an approach which demands that the reader do a great deal of the work: the juxtaposition, the appositions may be whole phrases, they may be little words; the imagination is involved through association. For example, *basse* in the second line has its musical associations confirmed by *trompe* in line 4; so that *basse* might mean that weighting of sound in an orchestral score which the bass-parts provide; *sans vertu* would have as one sense distant or faint, scarcely reaching the hearer; yet *trompe* makes the musical element explicit. Mallarmé's trumpets characteristically *announce* things. The series of *a* vowels describes the low, heavy black cloud – but also the sounds that are scarcely identified; a heavy, crushing silence is implied by the first *tu* which is isolated and has the whole weight of the line pressing on it. The metaphors are so tenuous that they almost do not function: e.g. *les échos esclaves*; or personifications like *écume...baves*. At the end of the poem even the metaphorical siren has only a chimerical child, and from this intense abstraction comes our feeling that we must start again and see more.

Let us now look at the Scève dizain. It is the finest poem of persuasion that he wrote. He sets out to convince Délie of the sacred necessity and worth of their union. He proceeds at first by abstract argument: in the first four lines he argues from *debuoir*: it is her duty to obey a decree of nature or love, first from *honneste pitié* which should spring from her heart and affections, her sympathy for his suffering, and finally because of *mon loyal persister*, his perseverance, which should be capable of breaking down her resistance. The syntactical anomaly, the inversion of subject and verb and predicate, places the emphasis on the sacred worth of their friendship. So *A si hault bien de tant saincte amytié* properly comes first in the poem. Lines 5–6 suggest the goal to which they would aspire, or the reward that this friendship would bring:

> Pour vnyment, & ensemble assister
> Lassus en paix en nostre eternel throsne.

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