

# HYPNOTIC POETRY

*A Study of Trance-Inducing Technique  
in Certain Poems and its  
Literary Significance*



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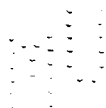
With a Foreword by  
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## PREFACE

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THE first four chapters of this volume propose and support a certain idea about poetry, while the remaining chapters make practical applications of the idea to individual poems and to topics of a more general nature. I hope that people who read poetry for the sheer love of it, as well as those who are teachers and professional critics, will welcome this study of the trance-inducing effect that a few poems seem to exert on the reader, and will share my interest in extending the study to poems that are less obviously hypnotic.

Since Mr. Leuba has suggested in his Foreword both the nature of this study and its possible significance, I need not do so. Instead, I take this opportunity of thanking him for his kindness in reading the manuscript and in making many valuable suggestions. I should be ungenerous if I did not warn readers that, should they rely on the fact that so distinguished a psychologist as Mr. Leuba has, so to speak, guaranteed the soundness of the principal psychological views here set forth, they must not hold him responsible for such errors as may have crept in despite his warning. I must also thank all others whose interest in hypnotic poetry, or whose friendship, has enabled me to benefit by their helpful criticism—particularly Mr. Elias

Lyman of Northwestern University, Mr. Christopher Morley, Mr. L. Arnold Post of Haverford College, Mr. Arthur B. Perry of Milton Academy, and my sister, Miss Alice D. Snyder of Vassar College. Permission to quote various passages of prose and verse has been given through the courtesy of several publishers, to whom my indebtedness is acknowledged in notes to the passages quoted.

EDWARD D. SNYDER.

Haverford College,  
September 22, 1930.



# I

## SPELLWEAVING POEMS

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I SUPPOSE almost every lover of poetry has been impressed by the ease with which a good reader is occasionally able to put a roomful of people under a sort of spell by reading certain poems. It is a spell not merely of silent attention but of intense emotional sympathy with the poet and the poem in question. As likely as not the listeners have no texts with which to follow the reading; some of them may even be sitting with eyes half shut. To many poems they are cold and indifferent, but unexpectedly they yield themselves to some one poem with an emotional abandon that leaves them in complete agreement with what the poet has said, and their mood in perfect harmony with that of the poem.

On a little consideration this fact becomes the more striking because these spellweaving poems often contain phrases, lines, and even long sentences that are not understood by the people who respond to them so completely. An audience may be put under such a spell, for instance, by the reading of *To Be or Not to Be*; and later it will develop on inquiry that few, if any, of them have a clear notion of "taking arms against a sea of troubles" or of "fardels" or of "the native hue of resolution" or of "the pale cast of thought." Intellectually, these spellbound peo-

ple seem to be dazed. Many of them have no exact idea *why* Hamlet shrank from suicide, and some few do not even know *that* he shrank from it; but every one of them is likely to recall with absolute exactness the phrase, "the undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveller returns."

It is also of interest that the person doing the reading is not always immune to the spell. If he enjoys the sound of his own voice, as most poetry-readers do, there are likely to be occasional moments when his eyes grow dim with tears, and other moments when he feels a suggestion of the ecstasy that betokens the sublime. And perhaps he has encountered the sublime. But oftentimes he realizes with becoming sheepishness, after the experience is over, that the passage by which he has been thus moved falls far short of the usual academic standards of poetic excellence. Perhaps he has even been reading Tennyson or Longfellow or one of the other poets in whom the younger generation of critics find no virtue whatever! Here of course is a paradox: theory and fact do not agree. The theory is that such a poem is of no literary or artistic interest. The fact is that its obvious power to rouse the emotions suggests a concealed artistry which may be of the greatest interest.

Let us put aside for the moment the question as to whether these poems should be recognized as "great" or even as "good," and turn our attention to distinguishing them from another group, which do not, under ordinary circumstances, exert such a spellweaving power. In doing

this, it will, accordingly, be of no interest for the moment whether Longfellow's *Ship of State* is a better poem or a worse poem than Lowell's *Commemoration Ode*. It will, however, be important to note that when the *Ship of State* was recited in Faneuil Hall before an audience of three thousand people, it gave them an emotional experience which, even after we have made due allowance for the patriotic fervor of the day, has seldom been equaled; but that when Lowell recited his *Commemoration Ode* under equally favorable conditions, the audience was not moved to any considerable pitch of emotion. It will likewise be significant that when, at the meetings of the *literati*, Poe used to turn down the lights and recite his *Raven*, his audience felt an ecstatic thrill which they could never forget. If the word "spellweaving" fits one type, perhaps for the purposes of this study the word "intellectualist" may be used for the other.

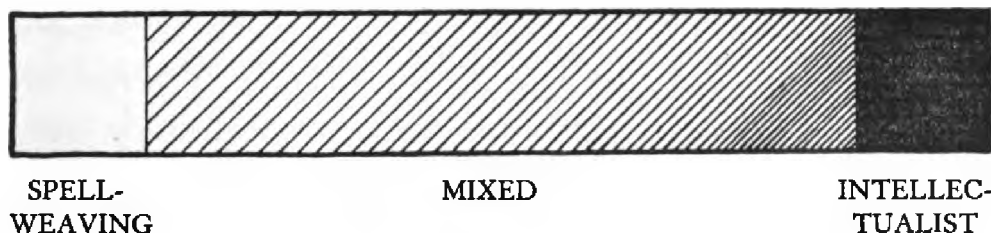
Thus we may distinguish one clearly spellweaving poem of Browning's, *Love Among the Ruins*, from another of the contrasting intellectualist type, which he wrote more frequently—say *My Last Duchess*. My meaning may be clearer if I suggest that one of the simplest tests of the "spell" to which I refer is the test of interruption. If one interrupts the reading of one of these spellweaving poems, the emotional continuity of the listeners' experience is broken in a way that is for the time being irreparable; even if one interrupts to explain or comment favorably on the passage concerned, there is a distinct sense that something has snapped. On the other hand if one interrupts the read-



ing of an intellectualist poem, the intellectual continuity is broken, to be sure, but the break is of little importance; one can stop, discuss, interpret, and then pick up the thread again with no special feeling of loss. Browning's *Love Among the Ruins*, for example, will suffer tremendously in its effectiveness if thus interrupted. *My Last Duchess*, on the other hand, loses little and may gain a good deal if the interruption is pertinent; it is evident that whatever emotion may be aroused at the climax of *My Last Duchess* is largely the result of little increments of intellectual stimulus. But the "spell" with which I am concerned is something more nearly akin to what listeners experience when a piece of music is played with especial effectiveness. If a poem under consideration retains virtually its full effectiveness in spite of interruption, it is presumably outside the class of what I call "spellweaving poems."

Now, if one is sufficiently fond of poetry to keep a mental or written record of the effect which he himself has been able to produce by reading various poems, he will have material available which may be of value in getting at certain little-recognized psychological facts about poetry; and it is with a simple classification on this basis of effect produced that I wish to begin this study. I am aware that, in formulating any theory of poetry, one must always guard against the danger of inventing facts to support one's theory; it is a strong and in some cases irresistible temptation, but in the present instance my conscience is clear on that score, for I encountered the facts first and am merely seeking a theory to explain them.

If we attempt to classify poems psychologically according to the amount of the spellweaving power which they possess, it soon appears that we have a small group at one extreme which are patently spellweaving, and another small group at the opposite extreme almost purely intellectualist. Between them, of course, we have a mixed group, by far the largest, of which we need not speak until a later chapter.



The poems at the extreme left in the diagram are dreamily persuasive; they arouse the listeners' emotions through no obvious process of thinking. Those at the extreme right rouse the emotions, if at all, largely in response to careful study and mental alertness.

It is with some hesitation that I give the titles of specific poems which I have found to be spellweaving in this way, because there are at least three variable factors which make a rigid classification impossible. The first of these is of course the varying ability of different readers. One man has a rich sonorous tone, a leisurely manner, and perhaps a dignified bearing, that enable him to do full justice to Gray's *Elegy*, while another, though excellently equipped for dramatic reading, will invariably fail at anything of the "graveyard school." Similarly one reader will manage always to make Keats's *La Belle Dame Sans*

*Merci* carry, while another, just missing the trick of holding the monosyllables in the last line of each stanza, will do the poem scant justice. Yet this first difficulty is not insuperable; at least a person can listen to his own reading day after day and year after year, until he is prepared to say that such and such poems, as *he* reads them, are the ones most likely to produce the peculiar response to which I have referred.

A second variable which makes rigid classification difficult is the relative sophistication of different audiences. Particularly where an audience is so well read that it knows both the poem under consideration and various parodies of it, as must often be the case with Poe's *Raven* or *The Bells*, it is obviously impossible to get the same reaction that one would get in reading to a less mature group to whom the poem was new. Longfellow's *Wreck of the Hesperus* may be tiresome to one group but thrilling to another. Again, some listeners with no musical background may hear Shelley's *Indian Serenade* merely as a poem; others may instinctively associate it with a tune to which they have heard it sung, which will modify their psychological reaction to hearing it read; while still others may find their minds distracted from the poem proper by the question as to which of the two tunes that they know is better suited to it. Such conditions sometimes introduce perplexing variable quantities into the equation. Yet here again if the reader happens to be a teacher, or a public lecturer appearing continually before people of about the same level of intelligence, he will find himself gradually

getting interesting facts which enable him to foretell, often with almost scientific exactness, what effect a poem will produce.

Finally, there is the variable of the mood in which the audience is gathered. For instance, if people have come together in an hour of national crisis, any patriotic poem is apt to take on a special spellweaving quality; if the gathering is a funeral, a religious poem automatically gains force in proportion as it gives comfort and promise of immortality. In general, where an audience is already experiencing a strong emotion before the reading begins, the effect of a poem which further stimulates that emotion must certainly be discounted. But here again in the college classroom, where similar groups of students gather day after day under similar conditions of more or less voluntary attendance, stimulated perhaps by occasional pressure from the office of the dean, we find at least one convenient place where "average conditions" may be said to obtain. At least the professor will not have to make so great allowances for the varying moods of his listeners as does the occasional reader.

With such cautions and reservations as I have indicated in the three preceding paragraphs, I now venture to give a few representative titles of familiar poems which my own experience suggests belong to the contrasting "spellweaving" and "intellectualist" groups respectively. To facilitate the reader's understanding of the inherent contrast between the two types, I have limited my lists to the best-known examples of each.

## SOME WELL-KNOWN SPELLWEAVING POEMS

Browning

*Love Among the Ruins*

Burns

*Auld Lang Syne**John Anderson, My Jo*

Byron

*The Isles of Greece*

Coleridge

*Kubla Khan*Much of *The Ancient**Mariner*

Fitzgerald

Many long passages from

*The Rubaiyat*

Gray

*The Elegy*

Keats

*La Belle Dame Sans Merci*Most of *The Eve of St.**Agnes*

Kipling

*The Long Trail*

Longfellow

Many long passages from

*Evangeline*

## SOME WELL-KNOWN INTELLECTUALIST POEMS

Browning

Representative poems such as *Cristina**My Last Duchess**Andrea del Sarto**The Glove*

Mrs. Browning

*Sonnets from the Portuguese*

Byron

*English Bards and Scotch**Reviewers.* Many satiricpassages from *Don Juan*

Coleridge

*France: An Ode*

Kipling

*An Imperial Rescript*

Masefield  
*Sea-Fever*

Poe  
*Annabel Lee*  
*To One in Paradise*

Seeger  
*I Have a Rendezvous with  
Death*

Shelley  
*Indian Serenade*  
Other representative lyrics  
such as *My Soul is an En-  
chanted Boat*

Swinburne  
*Hymn to Proserpine*, and  
many others

Tennyson  
*Break, Break, Break*  
*Crossing the Bar*, and many  
representative lyrics  
such as *The Bugle Song*

Whitman  
*O Captain! My Captain!*

Wordsworth  
(See page 84.)

Masefield  
*Dauber*

Pope  
*Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot*  
*The Rape of the Lock*  
*Epilogue to the Satires*

Shelley  
*Ozymandias*

Swinburne  
*Cor Cordium*

Tennyson  
*Northern Farmer (Old  
Style)*  
*The Higher Pantheism*

Whitman  
*When I Heard the Learn'd  
Astronomer*  
*A Noiseless Patient Spider*

Wordsworth  
*The Tables Turned*  
*The World is Too Much  
with Us*

To isolate some of these markedly spellweaving poems and study them intensively, is an occupation that will assuredly be pleasant and perhaps be profitable. Their very popularity with millions of readers in different countries over a considerable period of time suggests a hidden something that has thus far eluded criticism. And the fact that many of them have been openly decried of late by certain contemporary critics seems to me rather to challenge than to discourage a closer investigation, for even so opinionated a man as Dr. Johnson recognized that "by the common sense of readers uncorrupted with literary prejudices, after all the refinements of subtlety and the dogmatism of learning, must be finally decided all claim to poetical honors." In conclusion I would only suggest here a theme to be treated in a later chapter: if the psychologists are right in telling us that human conduct is conditioned less by intellect than has been supposed, and more by emotion, then the student of literature who should focus his attention chiefly on intellectualist poetry would be likely to find himself sadly out of date.



## II

# AN ILLUMINATING HYPOTHESIS ---

REVERTING to the two contrasting lists of poems on page 8, we see that they present a peculiar critical puzzle for our solution. Here are two groups of poems; all the poems are popular; nearly all of them have stood the test of time; yet, though we can understand in most essentials the technique by which the intellectualist poems achieve their results, we are baffled by the technique of the spellweaving poems. We are, in fact, so seriously baffled that many critics refuse a place of honor to poems like *Evangeline* which have endeared themselves to hosts of readers. The puzzle is, first of all, to find out how the spell is woven.

It is a puzzle of which the solution has not even been attempted by most lovers of poetry, because they are so used to classifying and studying poems conventionally by types that they give little thought to the desirability of classifying and studying them according to psychological characteristics. Such psychological classification is, however, desirable and even inevitable.

Critics praise, as a rule, the art they understand. We are all critics to some extent, and few will question the statement that our praise is more whole-hearted, and certainly more illuminating, in those fields of art where we



know what constitutes good technique. Speaking by and large, most of us do understand the technique of an intellectualist poem. We pick it to pieces, examine it phrase by phrase, even word by word; we note the ideas, transitions, and the general structure; we isolate the striking pictorial passages and note their individual value and their respective appropriateness; we pass critical judgment on the versification and many other details of workmanship. In a word, we analyze it from a dozen different standpoints and measure its excellence by as many critical standards. In the main our criticism of an intellectualist poem is just and reasonable.

But for the spellweaving poems listed on page 8 we have no such ready norms. There is something queer about them. Some people express their admiration, but cannot justify it; hence they express it with shamefaced timidity; others simply condemn the art they cannot comprehend. Here, then, is the challenge to our intelligence—what gives these spellweaving poems their power? Shall we yield to the luxurious enjoyment of their dreamy emotionalism, thrill with the ecstasy of their compelling magic, and then say “This is not art”? Shall we, taking refuge in a convenient subterfuge of ignorance, call their art mere “felicity of diction”? Or shall we accept the challenge? With the material at hand which psychology has now put at our disposal, I for one have not been able to refuse the challenge.

I am not greatly attracted by the study of general aesthetics, nor do I look with much hope of profit toward the

general controversies over "What is poetry?" which have been carried on since the dawn of history. But if some striking, isolable phenomenon about a certain group of poems keeps forcing itself on my attention, I take an interest not altogether unique, I trust, in trying to understand it.

As I turned over in my mind throughout a period of years the amazing effectiveness of such spellweaving poems as I have already mentioned by title, I sought here, there, and everywhere for something which would account for the phenomenon. Specifically, I sought for some fundamental characteristic common to *all* of these poems which would explain their peculiar power, but which was *not* to be found in the intellectualist poems which I have mentioned by title in another group.

"Good or bad," I kept asking, "what is the art responsible for the carrying power of these poems?" When there is not one iota of proof or argument stated or suggested in *Crossing the Bar*, why do certain listeners get from it the overwhelming *conviction* of immortality? What magic spell is woven by Browning in *Love Among the Ruins*, so that the phrase "Love is best" becomes indelibly imprinted on the listeners' minds? One can "understand" many of Browning's poems—what is the art that makes us blindly "feel" this one? Casually at first, then more systematically, I kept seeking the trick, the quality, or the combination of qualities, common to all the poems that are spellweaving but not characteristic of those that are intellectualist.

After trying various explanations, so unsound and so unimportant that I need not bring them before the attention of the reader, I repeatedly tried the theory that these poems gain their spellweaving power because of the perfection of their versification; and here, it seemed to me, I was nearer the truth than in any of the other conjectures. It developed that every poem of this sort is characterized by an excellent versification, and so far the explanation was satisfactory. But the flaw in the theory appears as soon as it is applied negatively to the poems of the contrasting group. Immediately we realize that Pope's *Essay on Criticism* is one of the most perfectly versified pieces in the English language, and that it has, roughly speaking, no emotional effect. The same may be said of *The Rape of the Lock*. This leads us at once to suspect that the theory is inadequate. Now, going on to those narrative poems in *The Canterbury Tales*, the versification of which has aroused the praise of critic after critic, poetry-lover after poetry-lover, ever since the re-discovery of Chaucer, we realize that perfection of versification is also a frequent characteristic of the intellectualist poems.

Up to a certain point in my researches, the net result of this prolonged effort to find an essential characteristic which was common to the spellweaving poems but which did not appear in any considerable number of the other group was this: nothing seemed very satisfactory; but the characteristic of extremely good versification might be a *partial cause* of the spellweaving effect. This alone was not enough to account for the phenomena observed, but if an

adequate explanation should be found this element would probably constitute part of it.

Further light subsequently came from a study of Poe. It happened that I carried on this preliminary clearing of the ground, which I have been able to review in a few paragraphs, over a period of several years, during which I had occasion to concentrate my attention from time to time on Poe's poetry, which is singularly spellweaving, and on his theories of poetry. Poe's amateurish interest in hypnotism (mesmerism) was keen enough to make me sometimes wonder just how he would restate his theories of poetry were he living today possessed of all the accurate information about hypnotism which science has put at our disposal. Would he not find a parallel or even an identity between his own dreamily spellweaving sort of poetry and the art of the hypnotist? Would not Poe, were he living today, recognize that the "rhythmical creation of beauty" by which the poet approaches "supernal beauty" is sometimes, in reality, the skillful combination of rhythms and other psychological stimuli which produce the state of light trance so often experienced by the patient in the hypnotic clinic and by the religious mystic in his solitary chamber? Such questions, unanswered, drew me eventually into considering the possible soundness of such a theory, regardless of whether Poe would have held it or not. Perhaps these spellweaving poems are *actually and literally hypnotic*.

From such considerations as I have tried to indicate in this chapter I was naturally led to form a theory, or a work-

ing hypothesis, which may be stated first conservatively and then more vigorously. Conservatively: If poetry-lovers in general and critics in particular would pay more attention to the possible connection between poetry and hypnotism, we might enjoy some of our poetry more and have sounder criticism of it. More vigorously: Certain poems gain their emotional appeal by putting the listeners into a hypnoidal state or some state of trance akin to the hypnoidal, and since the harmonious pattern of sound contributes greatly toward producing this state, it follows, I. That an opinion from a strictly silent reader<sup>1</sup> on the value of such poems cannot be given serious consideration; II. That whatever criticism such poems are subjected to should be radically different from that to which intellectual poems are subjected; and III. That any comprehensive theory of poetics which fails to take into account the foregoing considerations should be modified accordingly.

Such a theory would of course amply explain the baffling technique of the spellweaving poems—*if* it should prove to be sound. It would show that the listeners' powerful emotional response to the poem is not a normal result of intellectual stimuli, but rather is an unusual psychological state induced by a very special technique. If this suggestion contributes anything towards the solution of the puzzle, it solves it completely. The answer would be: not beautiful rhythm alone, but a certain kind of rhythm

<sup>1</sup> For a fuller statement of what is meant by a "strictly silent reader," see pages 131 ff.

combined with other stimuli to put the listeners into a light state of trance—a waking trance in which aesthetic enjoyment is heightened until it may even reach ecstasy.

Should such a theory be established, no matter with how many reservations, its critical implications would be far-reaching. It would give fresh emphasis to the importance of reading aloud the poems admittedly hypnotic. It would establish the futility of dissecting such poems for the application of ordinary critical tests of excellence; and conversely it would enable us to apply the usual critical tests to non-hypnotic poems with more confidence. It would enable us—even require us—to make of certain parts of the poetic field a psychological survey not yet attempted. It would give us a new vantage ground from which to review the historical development and decline of the free-verse movement. It would undoubtedly throw some new rays of light on the perplexed matter of “poetic inspiration.” Above all, its judicious application to poems which are neither purely hypnotic nor purely intellectualist, but mixed, would help solve problems relating to individual poems where critical opinion is now in sad disagreement. It would not be a panacea for all the ills from which criticism of poetry now suffers, but it would provide an excellent psychological classification of poems, on the basis of which sounder criticism would be inevitable.

The fact that most standard treatises on poetry do not set forth this theory, or even hazard it as a conjecture, is an objection more apparent than real. If the world has been interested in poetic theory for well over two thou-

sand years, it may seem inherently improbable that a specific theory not mentioned in famous treatments of the subject should have any importance. But such is not the case. First, such a theory lies outside the scope of those studies which concern the general principles of what all poems have in common, for even in the most unguarded moment no one will suppose that all poems, or even all good poems, have a trance-inducing effect. Second, such a theory could not have been formulated until recently, for hypnosis and analogous states of trance have been understood for only a few decades. Indeed in England and America the prejudice against the use of hypnotism has been so strong that even now there is little interest in it outside the ranks of scientists. Third, any theory emphasizing the parallel or identity between poetry and hypnotic stimulus could not be formulated except by a person who happened to be familiar with one all-important technical point; namely, the existence of a state of trance sometimes called *hypnoidal*, a state clearly demonstrable as abnormal yet so light that the subject is unaware of his temporary partial hypnosis. For these three reasons, then, the tacit omission of a discussion of hypnotism and trance from most books on poetic theory is not a valid objection to the theory's being sound, or probably sound. The fact that the Aurora Borealis was not explained as an electrical phenomenon by early scientists who knew nothing about electricity, is not a valid argument against the soundness of the electrical explanation!

During the past few years, however, the view that a poem may put the listeners into an actual state of trance has been hinted at and openly stated by enough writers to lead me to think it must be accepted at least as a working hypothesis for criticism. Among volumes of pertinent interest are Mr. I. A. Richards' *Principles of Literary Criticism*, Mr. Max Eastman's *Enjoyment of Poetry*, and Miss June Downey's *Creative Imagination*. I shall speak briefly of these three works partly because two of them confirm the hypothesis which I had put into writing before I read them, and partly because I do not wish to claim any particular originality for an idea which has already been set forth in print by others.

Mr. Richards confirms, or rather anticipates, the exact position which I am setting forth. On pages 143-144 of his *Principles of Literary Criticism* he includes in his chapter on *Rhythm and Metre* two paragraphs about the hypnotic effect of rhythm, which are significant because they include this statement: ". . . that a certain handling of metre should produce in a slight degree a hypnoidal state is not surprising."

It is perhaps regrettable that Mr. Richards dismisses the matter so briefly. It would appear that a fuller realization of the significance of his own words might have led to a more exact statement of his meaning, which must, I think, have been followed by a detailed application of the theory to some of the critical problems with which he is concerned. But the crucial thing in Mr. Richards' testimony is that he



assumes as a matter of course, as something needing no special proof, the absolute soundness of the only debatable point in the general position I am upholding.

Mr. Eastman's *Enjoyment of Poetry* is rich with hints of the significance of a poetic technique which he discusses and illustrates by comparison with hypnotism. In the chapter on *Wine and Sleep and Poetry* he shows himself to have a wide background of poetic experience and to have reflected on its psychological meaning. He evinces, nevertheless, a certain timidity about making a direct application of psychological principles. He does not make it clear that some rhythms do, and others perhaps do not, tend to promote an actual state of trance. In this state of doubt or confusion he hopes for an eventual explanation "by a mature science" and leaves the matter there.

But science is already mature enough to have established in the psychotherapeutic clinics of Europe the fact that the curative effects of post-hypnotic suggestion are felt by patients who do not realize they have been hypnotized. And by the same token poetic theory ought to be mature enough to recognize that there are at least a few poems which do produce, under favorable conditions, an actual state of trance in the listeners.

The fullest statement I have yet encountered of the hypnotic effect of poetry, and of art in general, is in Chapter XXVIII of Miss Downey's *Creative Imagination*. Here we find an illuminating discussion of the whole subject from a psychological standpoint, a discussion which confirms, and more than confirms, my opinion that certain poems

do actually put the listeners into a light state of trance. That Miss Downey's views did not arouse more discussion when they were set forth previously in *The Bookman* for February, 1919, is probably due to two causes. First, she does not sufficiently emphasize the fact that hypnotic poems are in a class by themselves, that they employ a technique of their own. Second, her essay may be interpreted as trying to prove too much; it gives the impression that all art tends to make frequent use of hypnotic technique—a thesis so startling that the casual reader naturally discounts her words by assuming that she uses the word *hypnotic* in a loose, inexact sense. Although her position may be sound, her claims are apt to be dismissed as merely specious, or else accepted with such mental reservations as make them of little significance.

These and other less important references to the entrancing effects of poetry, although tending to confirm the opinion I had independently formed, have not seemed very satisfactory. (Parenthetically I may remark that we have had some excellent studies of the entranced mood of the poet himself; but to my mind we should find little interest in the "inspired trance" of the poet unless he had the power to put his readers into something of a trance.) This unsatisfactory treatment of the theory is natural in view of the cleavage, which until recently has been pretty general, between psychologists on the one hand and literary critics on the other. Roughly speaking, we may say that the literary critics have not been accurately enough informed on the psychological technicalities involved to

speaking with assurance, while the professional psychologists have not seen that the theory, if accepted, has far-reaching implications in the field of literary criticism. Even where a specific implication is made that poetry may induce a state of trance, false inferences may be drawn from the discussion. One might infer, for instance, that good versification alone is sufficient to produce the hypnotic effect—to my mind a patent error. Or one might infer that any good poem is supposed to be capable of producing the alleged effect. Or one might infer that the hypnotic effect is of psychological rather than literary interest.

As I see the matter now, it has taken such definite shape in my mind that I should like to state the whole hypothesis, or unproved theory, fully enough to avoid being misunderstood and to suggest that we cannot longer shut our eyes to its literary importance.

1. Certain poems (relatively few) can be counted on to produce an actual state of trance in the listeners when the poems are read aloud under favorable conditions.

2. These poems have in common a technique which uses physical and psychical stimuli (discussed at length in Chapter IV) similar to, and often identical with, the stimuli used by hypnotists to put the subject into the hypnoidal state. One can hardly emphasize enough that metrically arranged words alone, without the support of other stimuli, are not likely to induce a state of trance.

3. To produce the trance effect, the poem should be read aloud without interruption under conditions like those in the hypnotic laboratory; *i. e.*, the listeners should be com-

fortable, the room quiet, and the reader should have (in addition to what one usually expects of a reader) the dignity of bearing necessary to inspire respect and attention.

4. These poems stand at the opposite pole from certain intellectualist poems, and the two extreme types may well be studied in contrast.

5. Hypnotic and intellectualist poems respectively demand radically different methods of treatment by reader, listener, and critic.

6. Any competent critic of poetry should have as a part of his equipment the ability to recognize a hypnotic poem when he sees it, to experience its full value himself, to read it aloud with something of a trance-producing effect, and to criticise it from an appropriate psychological standpoint.

7. As an indirect result of this ability, when the critic encounters and recognizes a purely intellectualist poem, he will be able to apply appropriate critical methods with increased confidence.

8. Having gone thus far, we shall be better able to enjoy, read, and criticize those "mixed" or "semihypnotic" poems which form a great part of the body of significant English poetry.

9. In so far as we are interested in theories of poetry and in theorizing about poems, we shall seldom find a case where our views are not at least colored by the intelligent application of some of the preceding principles.



### III

## HYPNOTISM

## AND OTHER TRANCES\_\_\_\_\_

**B**EFORE proceeding to argue whether the poems I have called "spellweaving" are actually capable of producing a light state of trance in the listeners, it is necessary to review briefly certain well-established facts about hypnosis and other somewhat similar states of trance. I shall begin with hypnosis, which has been made the subject of extended investigation under laboratory conditions, and then consider certain other analogous trances. In making this review I shall omit all controversial matters (especially the moot point as to whether hypnotic or psychoanalytical treatment is better for certain nervous disorders), holding fast to the facts on which psychologists are in general agreement.

### HYPNOTISM

The facts about hypnotism which might have some bearing on the study of poetry may be treated under four headings: the conditions for producing hypnosis, the methods of producing it, the difference between heavy and light hypnosis, and the nature of post-hypnotic suggestion.

1. *The conditions for producing hypnosis* are few and simple: The subject or patient must be in a comfortable posture (usually sitting); he must not oppose his will to that

of the hypnotist; he must make some effort to fix his attention as directed and should submit to such influences or stimuli as the hypnotist may exert. When the hypnotist is some one in whom the subject has implicit confidence, the problem of producing hypnosis is naturally simplified.

2. *The method of inducing hypnosis* is to employ certain physical and psychical stimuli which experience has shown to be effective. Although some doctors facilitate the process by a preliminary use of drugs, I shall disregard this additional stimulus because it is rarely used and it introduces an unnecessary element of confusion in our study.

a. *The physical stimuli* used are such as to fix the attention while retarding mental activity. Rhythmic sounds so regular as to be monotonous are often used; among the commonest are the beat of a metronome at half-second intervals and the ticking of a clock or watch; even the regular clicking of the hypnotist's fingernails has proved satisfactory. Rhythmic "passes" are also used, sometimes without contact, in which case their effect is visual. A luminous object is held in such a position as to cause the subject fatigue from eye-strain; in the more elaborately equipped laboratories a rotating mirror is fixated by the patient so that the fatigue from eye-strain is combined with a rhythmic sensation. Often the "passes" of the hypnotist are made in contact with the subject's forehead or body so that another element of sensing the soothing effect of rhythmic monotony is introduced. There are, of course, other physical stimuli continuous rather than rhythmic, but these are the commonest. They fix the patient's hearing, sight, and

feeling (any or all) on a sensation physically compelling but mentally of no interest to him.

*b. The psychical stimuli* usually take the form of a verbal "suggestion"—words chosen to induce the subject to fall into a heavy (or light) hypnotic sleep. In the act of inducing hypnosis the hypnotist usually "suggests," after a few minutes of physical stimulus of the sort already described, that the subject's eyelids are growing heavy, that he cannot open them, and finally that he is sleeping.

*c. The combined physical and psychical stimulus* is easily achieved when the hypnotist puts this "suggestion" (*b*) into a simple phrase which he repeats with the soothing rhythmic monotony characteristic of *a*. In recent years many hypnotists have become so expert that in all but the most difficult cases they do not avail themselves of any physical stimulus except that of the operator's own voice, calm, dignified, reassuring, repeating a "suggestion." This does not mean, of course, that physical stimulus is futile. It means that the only one needed is the monotonous rhythm of sound, which is supplemented by various psychical influences of manner and personality giving force to the words of the "suggestion."

Although these matters are too well known to need extended documentation, it may be well to include here a brief statement from pages 94 and 95 of William Brown's standard treatise on *Suggestion and Mental Analysis*:<sup>1</sup>

"Generally speaking, the monotonous stimulation of sense organs tends to produce hypnosis—to throw the patient into a

<sup>1</sup> Second Edition. New York: George H. Doran Co., 1922.

state that resembles sleep. The patient lies on a couch and fixates, say, an ophthalmoscope mirror or a faceted diamond held about ten inches from the eyes and slightly above the normal plane of vision, so that to fixate it he must turn his eyes upwards and inwards to the bright object. After a few minutes' fixation he will, if he is a satisfactory subject, experience more and more difficulty in keeping his eyes open, and will pass into the hypnotic state. Suggestions may be given to him that he will get drowsy and that he is going to sleep, with the result that he falls into an artificial sleep, but continues to hear the words of the operator, and later may lose consciousness of everything else. This is a deep stage: he is apparently asleep to everything except the physician's words. Lighter stages can be produced, where he is conscious of what other people say or conscious of voices around him, but where, nevertheless, his mind is concentrated upon the physician's words. He has no great power to move his attention from one thing to another. It is fixed upon the words of the physician.

"The bright object may be replaced by a monotonous sound. A metronome beating at two a second is very useful. The patient lies listening to the beat of the metronome, and gradually falls into a state of dissociation. Another means of producing sleepiness is the use of rhythmical passes with or without contact. We may smooth the forehead at a definite slow rate, or again we may make passes down the subject's body without touching the body at all."

The second paragraph in the quotation above is the pertinent one in tracing the parallel between poetry and hypnotism. It shows that for the physical stimulus rhythmic monotony of sound is enough. As I indicate in more detail in the next chapter, the beats of the metronome at half-second intervals give almost the exact time of the oc-



currence of the heavily stressed syllables in reading English poetry aloud.

3. *Heavy and light hypnosis* must be clearly distinguished. In the heavier states the subject is in a manifestly abnormal condition; he is apparently unconscious of every one in the room save the hypnotist, with whom he is completely *en rapport*. Laboratory experiments testing the degree to which the subject is compelled by the conditions of hypnosis to be obedient to the commands of the operator, have now been carried on systematically, and the results have been recorded, for many years. The most clearly defined limit to the subject's slavish obedience lies in his uniform refusal to perform any act which would be morally revolting to him when in a normal state of consciousness. Volumes have been written on the startling and often amusing way in which a deeply hypnotized person will accept the commands or "suggestions" of the hypnotist—calmly licking with his tongue a frog under the suggested delusion that it is a snowball, chasing nonexistent butterflies about the room, etc. The facts are matters of common knowledge.

In the *hypnoidal* or light state of trance, the subject's behavior is practically normal. He is aware of the presence of others in the room; he obeys the suggestions of the hypnotist (if at all) more reasonably; he is, however, subject to *post-hypnotic suggestion*. Often when the trance is so light that the subject believes himself to be perfectly normal, the existence of the *hypnoidal* condition is capable of being established by convincing proof. Hypnotists who

have cured numerous patients of headaches and insomnia report that the patient, though originally expecting to be hypnotized, says later, "But Doctor, you didn't hypnotize me!"

4. *Post-hypnotic suggestion* is usually a command or impulse for the subject to do a specific thing, or behave in a specific manner, after he has emerged from his hypnotic sleep. And here again, both in the clinics and the psychological laboratories, the results of many experiments have been carefully recorded. Thus the subject, waking from his hypnotic sleep and acting on a previous post-hypnotic suggestion, will put in an unnecessary telephone call, will move a book from a table to a shelf, will call some one in the room "blockhead," or will find himself unable to pronounce his own name—always in blind obedience to the post-hypnotic suggestion.

There is, of course, a wide difference in the extent to which different subjects can be thus influenced and in the punctuality of their response. Thus, a very good subject, having been commanded to put in an unnecessary telephone call exactly one hour after he wakes from his hypnotic sleep, will carry out the suggestion almost to the minute, while another will miss it by as much as fifteen minutes. Some subjects, though easily hypnotized, have a very considerable resistance to these post-hypnotic suggestions. A typical and interesting case of a person who could not entirely overcome the suggestion but was able to evade the issue successfully is cited on pages 171-172 of Albert Moll's *Hypnotism* (London edition of 1913): A

woman was given the post-hypnotic suggestion that she would mispronounce the word "father" as "feether"; when she was awakened and asked about her parents, she persistently avoided the word "father," using instead the cumbersome phrase "the husband of my mother."

Often, however, the response to post-hypnotic suggestion is very strong: one patient is cured of the fear of thunderstorms, and the cure still holds good after the lapse of twenty-five years. Others are helped to cure themselves of the drug habit or of alcoholism. Many fascinating cases are cited in standard works on the subject of psychotherapy.

In tracing the parallel between post-hypnotic suggestion and the influence of spellweaving poems, we must bear in mind that *the results of post-hypnotic suggestion on subsequent conduct may be obtained without the patient's knowing he has been hypnotized.*

## OTHER TRANCES

Although the number of people who are willing to submit to hypnotism is doubtless very much smaller than the number of those who experience trances of other sorts, still the facts about these other trances are not often recorded satisfactorily. Such trances do not occur under laboratory conditions, the subject is often alone, and the facts cannot often be observed with scientific accuracy. Let me cite at intimate second hand a peculiarly dramatic case where the victim of a supposed trance could not possibly give testimony for the simple reason that he was dead. A

friend of the writer once stood at the very bow of a steamer, watching the ceaseless rhythmical procession of waves breaking at the cutwater. The vessel was an oil tanker, on which there were few regulations for passengers because passengers were seldom carried. As the ship surged on, minute after minute, into the moderate head sea, my friend began to feel certain strange symptoms that interested him, as they were not in any way like those of sea-sickness. Just then the mate, standing on the bridge, raised his megaphone and called him back, explaining later: "We had a man once on this line who did just what you were doing, watching the waves like that at the bow, and after a while he pitched forward, overboard, and was lost. Sort of hypnotized, people think. Anyway, we don't allow it now."

The particular form of trance with which we are concerned in this study of poetry is one in which the emotional sensitiveness of the subject grows more and more intense, sometimes reaching the pitch of ecstasy, as his consciousness is concentrated on some one phase of life. This state is similar to, but not identical with, a state of hypnosis. The essential difference is that in hypnosis the subject is put into a hypnotic state by one specific person, the operator, and becomes *en rapport* with him, while in emotional and ecstatic trances of this sort the stimuli do not come necessarily from one person; the psychical stimuli may come from his own mind, and the physical stimuli may be either of his own making or may be due to an external but impersonal force. Thus the Hindoo Yogi is in-

structed that in order to experience the exaltation of religious vision or trance, he should *sit motionless, squint at the end of his own nose, try to control his breathing, and contemplate the Deity*. Here the usual stimuli of hypnotism are duplicated: fatigue from eye-strain, attention fixed on the rhythmically monotonous sound and feeling of his regular breathing, and concentration without great mental activity invited by "contemplating the Deity," but the phenomenon of *rappport* is lacking. In the supposed trance cited in the preceding paragraph the physical stimuli were probably the rhythmic monotony of the procession of waves and the visual fatigue of watching them in motion, as the subject's position at the very bow of the vessel would require a continual change of focus; the psychical stimuli are of course unknown.

Many of the recent books on psychology contain analytical studies of the various moods of trance and ecstasy, and evidence has been gathered in sufficient quantity and with enough scientific exactness to allow certain general conclusions to be drawn. For instance, in Mr. James H. Leuba's *Psychology of Religious Mysticism* is to be found an extended study of numerous cases of trance, which, beginning from simple and comprehensible causes, develop into moods of religious fervor and spiritual exaltation. But because such evidence is now available in various psychological treatises and is obviously too long to include here, it may suffice to give a brief summary.

In most particulars the general conditions for the production of emotional trance are similar to those for the

production of hypnosis. Perhaps these three statements will sum up the most important facts: (1) Whatever stimuli tend to fix the attention and at the same time retard mental activity, are favorable to producing a condition of trance in which the subject's emotional susceptibility is so intensified that he may experience a feeling of exaltation and ecstasy. (2) If in this state of emotional responsiveness the mind of the subject gets a simple idea (a simple idea rather than a complex one that might cause intense mental activity and break the spell), he accepts the idea and clings to it more completely and with more emotional fervor than he would in an ordinary state of consciousness. (3) Similarly, any impulse to act that is implanted during a state of emotional intensity such as we are considering will become a dominating motive in the subject's future conduct, far surpassing in its influence any ordinary impulse not so implanted or accompanied.

### GROUP HYPNOSIS

It is not an uncommon thing nowadays for the instructor of a class in abnormal psychology to put most, or all, of the members of the class simultaneously into a state of "waking hypnosis," and later to hypnotize more deeply those who prove to be the best subjects. The degree of success with which this experiment has been performed may be inferred from the following statement of Mr. Wesley Wells, which I excerpt from his comprehensive article on "Waking Hypnosis" in *The Journal of Abnor-*

*mal Psychology and Social Psychology* for 1924, pages 399-400:

“Waking hypnosis may be used either in group or in individual experiments . . . I recently obtained results with 100 per cent. of a group of 12, and a few months ago I obtained results with 24 of a group of 28.”

The usual practice in simultaneously hypnotizing several people follows closely the advanced practice used with individuals. Suggestion of a simple sort is made by means of a rhythmic phrase, and the phrase is repeated with monotonous iteration until many of those who have volunteered as subjects finally succumb to the combined physical and psychical stimulus. (Onlookers report the process to be exceedingly tiresome.) Elaborate psychical preparation is made: each volunteer is required to sign a statement of his entire willingness to be hypnotized—ostensibly to give some sort of legal protection to the instructor, but really to put the subject into a mood of “consent.” A full explanation is made of the results to be expected, and every effort is made to inspire the subjects with confidence. Among the reiterated phrases are such simple rhythmic suggestions as “You’ are sleep’ing, sleep’ing, sleep’ing,” and “You’ are fall’ing for’ward, for’ward.”

Up to the present time, however, the most striking laboratory experiments in group hypnosis are as nothing compared to the trance phenomena exhibited in various religious revivals by a great number of people at the same time. In such a detailed study as Miss Catharine Cleve-

land's *Great Revival in the West 1797-1805* are recorded, with adequate documentary evidence, group experiences with trance phenomena of amazing violence. As Miss Cleveland points out (page 118), hypnotic suggestion was often partly responsible for the abnormal ecstasy and frenzy which hundreds of people experienced simultaneously. As the topic is too extensive for the limits of this survey, I may refer the reader to another excellent book, Mr. Frederick Davenport's *Primitive Traits in Religious Revivals*. Ample evidence is available to prove that the stimuli needed to induce a state of ecstatic trance are often as effective on a large number of people, or the majority of them, as on an individual.

#### A NOTE ON AUTOHYPNOSIS FROM SILENT READING

Although I do not personally advocate the view that a hypnotic poem *read silently* can produce any recognizable state of trance in the reader, several of my friends, who have discussed the matter with me, insist that it can. Silent reading is of two distinct sorts, "strictly silent" and "silent but auditing," as I show in detail on page 132; and it may be that by a "silent yet auditing" reading of a spellweaving poem one can sometimes produce a light state of trance.

Any one interested in this possibility cannot do better than compare his own experiences with the generally established facts about self-induced states of trance as set forth in Charles Baudouin's *Suggestion and Autosuggestion*, from which I quote briefly on pages 100-101.



My own objections to the idea that a state of trance may be induced by the silent reading of a poem are both practical and theoretical. In practice I cannot say that I myself have felt from my silent reading anything like the "spell" which I have experienced when the same poem was read aloud. Perhaps I have done so, but I am not sure; nor do I know with how much scientific exactness my friends speak when they report such experiences. In theory there are certain obvious objections. First, I suspect that the sheer effort of consecutive reading is not conducive to a hypnotic state. Second, the auditory stimulus of monotonous rhythmic sound must be much weaker when the words of the poem are only "heard to oneself." Third, the briefest looking up from the page, no matter for what cause, automatically interrupts the stimulus, or some of the stimuli, supposed to be inducing a state of trance. The combined force of these objections is enough to make me skeptical.

On the other hand, one of the friends who profess to have had trance effects from the silent reading of poetry admits his inability to read aloud to his own satisfaction, but insists that his "silent but auditing" reading gives him the full value of every syllable. There may, then, be a class of readers whose enjoyment of these poems, even when not read aloud, is heightened by a state of abnormal suggestibility and free play of emotion—readers whose aesthetic enjoyment is due to their being in an actual state of trance.

My skepticism being what it is, I feel it unnecessary to extend this chapter by a statement of the generally accepted

views of autohypnosis. I shall, however, revert to the topic in the chapter on Poetic Inspiration.

### SUMMARY

In the last analysis hypnosis and kindred states of trance cannot be better defined than as *unusual states of consciousness in which the most striking characteristic is the subject's increased susceptibility to suggestion*. Stimuli which promote such states are various, but a peculiarly effective stimulus consists of *words which fix the subject's attention by their rhythmic sound and make a simple suggestion on which the subject concentrates without any great mental activity*. Later the subject's mental activity may be considerable and his emotional reaction in certain trances may even reach actual ecstasy, but his consciousness is still surrounded by a wall which excludes from his mind all but the single phase of existence on which it has become fixed.



## IV

### EVIDENCE

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As soon as I began to study the matter carefully, I was struck by the number of particulars in which the reading aloud of a spellweaving poem puts into action various stimuli, both physical and psychical, parallel to those commonly used to induce a light state of hypnosis, a state called "hypnoidal" by many scientists and one of "waking hypnosis" by others. And the fascinating part of the study proved to be that the more I extended it, the more I was convinced that the parallelism is an actual identity. In this chapter, then, I shall try to show that certain poems have a peculiar trance-inducing technique; that they owe their mysterious "spell" to a magic no more incomprehensible than that of hypnotism; that by intensifying the listeners' suggestibility they permit experiences where—for better or for worse—the poet holds sway over the listeners' conscious and subconscious minds. I shall not try to show that the delightful ecstasy experienced is always profitable, nor that a poem of this sort involves a higher form of art than does an intellectualist poem. I shall, however, try to make clear that there is a technique of poetry which is literally *hypnotic* or *trance-inducing*, and that its recognition is essential both to those who love truth and to those who have any genuine interest in poetry.

Thus far I have uniformly spoken of these poems as *spellweaving*. In a loose, popular sense they may be called

*hypnotic* without any argument. By the end of this chapter I hope to have convinced the reader that they are actually and technically *hypnotic*. Meanwhile I trust I shall not be accused of begging the question if I avoid the constant use of the term *spellweaving* in what must necessarily be a long discussion and call them for convenience by the easy term *hypnotic poems*.

Such evidence as I have is strong enough, I hope, to establish the probable soundness of the theory I have advanced. Although the theory is such that it cannot be either proved, or disproved, beyond the shadow of a doubt, nevertheless I think evidence enough can be marshalled to make it seem both plausible and probable—in fact to put the burden of proof on any one who may not accept it as a working hypothesis for criticism. The evidence may be presented in three parts—that from a study of a group of hypnotic poems, that from a more intensive analysis of Gray's *Elegy*, and that from general considerations of repetition and refrain.

### HYPNOTIC POEMS IN GENERAL

1. On examining a group of hypnotic poems such as those listed in the first chapter, we find the most pronounced characteristic which they have in common is, as I have already suggested, an unusually perfect pattern of sound; and on further analysis we find that this pattern of sound tends to be soothing. Not all marvelous versification produces a soothing effect, but it will be hard to find a single hypnotic poem which is either rugged in

its versification or extremely spirited. The brilliant rhythmic excellence of

“I galloped, Dirk galloped, we galloped all three”

is not characteristic of these poems, but rather the more soothing effect of

“Break, break, break,  
On thy cold grey stones, O sea!  
And I would that my tongue could utter  
The thoughts that arise in me.”

As one considers the rate of reading poetry aloud (my own rate is about twenty-five lines of iambic pentameter a minute) and performs a little simple arithmetic, it appears that the spacing of the heavily accented syllables is so near to the half-second interval at which the metronome is set by Dr. William Brown to induce hypnosis (page 27) that the parallel is almost too exact to be a mere coincidence. As a matter of fact the calculation based on my own reading shows that in iambic and trochaic rhythms the time is just a shade under half a second for the heavy syllabic beats, and in anapæstic and dactylic rhythms just a shade over (twelve twenty-fifths of a second and four tenths of a second respectively). If now we combine this half-second time interval with the regularity of rhythm so obvious in the spellweaving poems under consideration—the opening lines of *Kubla Khan*, for instance—we have the parallel almost perfect to the stimulus of rhythm used by the hypnotist.

In *The Rationale of Verse* Poe laid down the principle that good poets only at rare intervals depart much from a standard pattern of rhythm, and make their departures chiefly "at such points of their subject as seem in accord with the *startling* character of the variation." In general this is true of Poe's best work and of most of the hypnotic poems I have examined, and as the early portions of such hypnotic poems skillfully avoid whatever is "startling," they preserve a marked regularity of rhythm. But a point which Poe did not make in his theorizing (though he habitually exemplified it in his own hypnotic poems) is that the most effective way to fix the listener's attention on rhythm is by ornamenting and elaborating the pattern with rime—two-syllable rime if convenient,—with consonantal *return*, and with as regular a pattern of rising and falling pitch as the circumstances permit. Thus where the hypnotist can say to his subject, "You *must* concentrate your attention on the beats of this metronome," the poet may produce a parallel effect by making his sound pattern so elaborate in its regularity that a listener with a sense of rhythm cannot avoid giving it his full attention. (There is all the difference in the world between a pattern of sound that is irregular and one that is elaborate in its regularity.) One cannot find a much more regular series of iambs than in the opening lines of such a hypnotic poem as *Kubla Khan*; but as Stevenson pointed out in his *Essays in The Art of Writing*, these very lines are ornamented with consonantal harmonies of a most pleasing sort. Although the listener may have no time to enumerate the

details of the recurring pattern, all the details combine to make it compelling. *Hypnotic poems in general give us heavy stresses falling regularly at half-second intervals, and so ornamented that the rhythmically inclined listener has his attention drawn to the sound rather than the sense.*

2. Another point in which practically all of these poems show an interesting parallel to hypnotism is their freedom from any abrupt changes which would be likely to break the spell, and especially freedom from such ideas as compel mental alertness. Looking over the group of hypnotic poems, one notes the absence of cleverness such as one finds in Swift and Pope—I am thinking especially of Swift's own verses *On the Death of Doctor Swift* and Pope's *Rape of the Lock*. One notes also the absence of paradox which is so stimulating in poems like Browning's *Glove* and *The Statue and the Bust*. This freedom from abruptness and from everything that might cause intense mental alertness would naturally allow the listener, and indeed invite him, to slip gradually into that attentive but listless mental state which is likely to become hypnoidal.

3. Another characteristic of these poems, akin to the foregoing, is a certain vagueness of imagery which contrasts strongly with the hard, clear imagery sought by the group of modern poets called "Imagists." The pictures presented in these hypnotic poems have such soft, shadowy outlines that one may fill in the details to suit one's fancy or let the picture remain hazy. They foster an idle, dreamy state of consciousness like the preliminary stage of hypnosis. Their technique—whether we like it or not—is

of the sort to produce a state of trance. To check the accuracy of this statement one cannot do better than contrast the imagery of a hypnotic poem like *Annabel Lee* with that of the realistic battle scenes in Mr. Stephen Vincent Benét's *John Brown's Body*. Poe's remarks on vagueness, if we limit their application to hypnotic poetry only, are significant:

"There are passages in his [Tennyson's] works which rivet a conviction I had long entertained, that the *indefinite* is an element in the true *ποίησις*. . . I *know* that indefinitiveness is an element of the true music—I mean the true musical expression. Give to it any undue decision—imbue it with any determinate tone—and you deprive it, at once, of its ethereal, its ideal, its intrinsic and essential character. You dispel its luxury of dream. You dissolve the atmosphere of the mystic upon which it floats. You exhaust it of its breath of *fäery*." (From *Marginalia*.)

4. The next point of similarity between these poems and that which produces hypnosis may be nothing, or it may be something of considerable critical importance. I shall point it out in some detail and leave the reader to check its psychological soundness for himself. As a state of hypnosis is more easily induced when the subject experiences fatigue from eye-strain, so I suggest that there is something in these poems corresponding to the rotating mirror, to the key held painfully high above the eyes, which we considered in Chapter III. There are certain difficulties which the ordinary listener cannot solve, which he naturally tries a little to solve; then becoming fatigued, he says to himself, or rather, unconsciously adopts this atti-



tude, "Well, I give up. The poet knows his business. I will take everything on his say-so." That is, these difficulties break down his resistance through fatigue. I refer not so much to structural difficulties in sentences that are long, complicated, or inverted, as to verbal difficulties—not necessarily difficulties that would bother the scholar or even the close reader—but those which the ordinary listener cannot solve in the brief fractions of a second which are at his disposal for their solution. In my analysis of Gray's *Elegy*, later, I shall point out several. Let us turn for a moment to one of the most hypnotic of all Kipling's poems, *The Long Trail*, and see a number of specific phrases which the ordinary listener not familiar with the technical language of the sea may find to cause him fatigue and to break down his resistance, allowing free play to the "suggested" mood of the poem. The specific phrases are these: "Ha' done with the Tents of Shem," "rime-ringed sun," "blind Horn's hate," "black Bilbao tramp," "load-line over her hatch," "heel of the North-East Trade," "Peter at the fore," "Hawsers warp her through," "Lower Hope," "Gunfleet Sands," "Mouse swings green on the old trail." After the listener's resistance has been broken down by the fatigue of his futile efforts to understand such phrases, Kipling gives us at last several great, memorable lines, which produce a very remarkable emotional response. Such lines of hypnotic suggestiveness are:

"And the Southern Cross rides high!  
Yes, the old lost stars wheel back, dear lass,  
That blaze in the velvet blue.

They're all old friends on the old trail, our own  
trail, the out trail,  
They're God's own guides on the Long Trail . . .

"And it's twenty thousand mile to our little lazy isle  
Where the trumpet-orchids blow!"<sup>1</sup>

The point is an important one and involves a nice distinction. Not that the eye-strain experienced in the hypnotic clinic is identical with the ear-strain of the listener who is baffled in his effort to understand the poet's exact phrase—an attempt to identify them would be futile. Rather that the *fatigue* from strain in the two cases may be so nearly identical as to produce the same psychological result, namely, to facilitate in each case the process of falling into a state of trance. Paradoxical though it sounds, we may yet have to accept the view that in the early stages of a hypnotic poem a foreign word, an obscure phrase, or any slight difficulty that causes fatigue from strain on the part of the listener may actually promote the ultimate aesthetic effect at which the artist aims. Such a theory might account for the peculiar effectiveness of Shelley's phrase "The champak odors fail." It might be one out of several reasons why English readers respond most to the passages of Burns which are written in Scottish, and *vice versa*. In any case the parallel is there and it may be significant.

5. The use of a refrain, or of frequent repetition, is characteristic of many hypnotic poems; for example, *Annabel Lee*, the *Bugle Song* from *The Princess*, *The Ancient*

<sup>1</sup> Rudyard Kipling. *Collected Poems*. New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co.

*Mariner*. Some repetition is mere physical stimulus, rhythmic monotony likely to fix the listener's attention, something comparable to the meaningless sounds used by the earlier hypnotists (p. 25). Often, however, repetition takes the form of a key phrase or refrain of special significance like the "You' are fall'ing back'ward, back'ward," in which the modern hypnotist (p. 34) combines a psychical suggestion with rhythmical monotony. A striking example is the tragic "Nevermore" of *The Raven*, a poem which is singularly hypnotic to those who have not heard it parodied.

Refrain and kindred matters take us, however, back to the admittedly hypnotic incantation of savages. Hence I defer to the end of this chapter a more detailed treatment of a topic at once complicated and fascinating.

6. Finally these hypnotic poems show a general tendency to use *suggestion* on an entranced person. As hypnotic treatment differs from psychoanalytical treatment, so hypnotic poetry differs from intellectualist poetry; one *suggests* to a person whose suggestibility has been abnormally intensified, while the other calls the mental faculties into play in a more ordinary way. The compelling artistry of such *suggestions* is one of the marvels of hypnotic poetry. Clearly it is not alone the art of versification which the poet employs in this particular, though the perfect versification produces a physical stimulus which makes the listener more susceptible emotionally. The wistfulness of the *Hymn to Proserpine*, the bleak loneliness of *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*, the hushed reverence for

virgin beauty of *The Eve of St. Agnes*—all these are “suggested” by subtleties of technique, especially by words of peculiar connotation which bring to the listener certain associated ideas appropriate to the mood desired. But the parallel must not be forced. Lamb and De Quincey have this power of suggestion in common with the writers of hypnotic poetry, as many a man who is not a professional hypnotist has great personal magnetism. Yet a comparative study of Poe’s masterpieces in prose and in verse respectively shows that by a dozen lines of hypnotic verse he could effectively arouse an emotion almost equal to what he could arouse by a dozen pages of prose. And this fact, which any reader can test for himself, leads back to the conclusion that the emotional mood induced by hearing, say, *Annabel Lee* is due to a suggestion reinforced by a technique genuinely hypnotic.

Some hypnotic poems stop here: the listener is lulled by a perfect pattern of sound, his attention is fixed without arousing of his mental faculty, and he falls into whatever mood the poet “suggests.” It is interesting to see how many poets are thus content to stop without taking full advantage of the grip they get on the listener’s emotions. Such skillful artists as Poe, Swinburne, the youthful Tennyson, and countless others persistently fail, or refuse, to galvanize the sensitive reader into action, determination, or even thought. Nor can the lover of poetry find a more fascinating theme for speculation than whether certain lyrics would gain or lose in perfection if they contained something for the mind to grasp. Other hypnotic

poems carry the parallel to hypnotism still further by "suggesting" an impulse to action, making a parallel to the specific post-hypnotic suggestions of the hypnotist. *Merlin and the Gleam* (of which more in Chapter X) furnishes an excellent parallel to the post-hypnotic suggestion.

Now it may be objected that such "suggestions" are also commonly found in non-hypnotic poems, and the objection, so stated, is valid. But there is discoverable a difference in the *nature* of the suggestion and often in the *position* of the suggestion, which makes only the hypnotic poems resemble the performance of the hypnotist. Specifically, in a hypnotic poem the key sentence "suggesting" an idea comes near the end, or at least only after there has been a long preliminary soothing of the listener's senses by monotonous rhythmic "passes." So in hypnosis. Also this key sentence "suggesting" an idea carries conviction without argumentative support, or with only the simplest of obvious arguments to support it. In the non-hypnotic poem these conditions do not obtain.

For example, in Browning's hypnotic poem *Love Among the Ruins*, the idea "suggested" comes in the three last words, "Love is best," and if the reader accepts them as truth he does so because he has been prepared not intellectually but emotionally. By contrast, Clough's non-hypnotic poem *Say not the Struggle Nought Availeth*, begins with its key sentence, and supports it throughout the rest of the poem with elaborate arguments by analogy, first from the conduct of battle and then from the appear-

ance of the rising tide. In the first poem there is no argument—only rhythm, pictures, hypnotic passes, emotions, and then a key statement; in the latter there is first the rousing command, and then an argument to show why Clough's specific command should be obeyed. These differences are characteristic of the two contrasting types, hypnotic and non-hypnotic.

Further examples of the hypnotic and the non-hypnotic method may be illuminating. Tennyson's *Crossing the Bar* holds its key idea until the end, presenting it without convincing logical preparation; but the ordinary listener is so completely *en rapport* with the poet that he accepts it without resistance:

"I hope to see my Pilot face to face  
When I have crossed the bar."

Browning's *Cristina*, on the other hand, opens with its startling key idea, and offers logical support and explanation in the succeeding lines. The abrupt beginning is utterly unlike the manner of the hypnotic poems:

"She should never have looked at me  
If she meant I should not love her!"

Again, in *The Isles of Greece* Byron begins, like the hypnotist, with "passes" of rhythmic harmony, suggests vaguely that we should deplore the waning greatness of Greek glory, gets the reader completely under the spell of his magic, and ends with the post-hypnotic suggestion

"Dash down yon cup of Samian wine!"

Between the exquisite beginning,

“The isles of Greece, the isles of Greece!  
Where burning Sappho loved and sung,”

and this concluding command, there is only the merest suggestion of argument—a little group of taunting rhetorical questions. If the conclusion proves effective, it does so in accordance with the same psychological principle that makes a post-hypnotic suggestion effective. Pope, on the other hand, in his most brilliant failure, the *Essay on Man*, argues throughout Epistle I in support of a thesis, losing most readers entirely in the intricacies of the arguments (which he derived from his friend Bolingbroke), and finally states the thesis he has tried to establish: “Whatever is, is right.” Although the final position of this key sentence is in accord with the hypnotic tendency, Pope’s poem in most respects is of the other type. In so far as it fails, the difficulty is probably due (as I show in more detail on page 149) to the psychological discord between the soothing monotony of the “rocking-horse couplet” and the intense mental activity demanded of the listener.

Having now seen that the poems called “hypnotic” offer in general striking parallels to the laboratory methods of inducing and utilizing a state of hypnosis, let us make a more intensive study of a single poem. And in making such a study of Gray’s *Elegy*—spoken of as perhaps the most popular poem in the English language—let us avoid distorting the facts to support a theory. Let us rather focus

our attention on the elements which bear on the theory, whether to support it or not.

### GRAY'S *ELEGY*

An analysis of the pattern of sound in the first quatrain of Gray's *Elegy* shows it to be one of the most harmonious stanzas—perhaps the most harmonious stanza—in English poetry. The metre is iambic with only two such slight departures from regularity as serve to keep it from being painfully mechanical. That is to say, the word “wind” in the second line suggests a spondee rather than an iamb, and the fourth foot of the fourth line is perhaps a pyrrhic. The rhythm of these four regular lines is felt very strongly because it happens that the accented syllables are also the syllables of long duration. Thus, whether one be a “timer” or a “stresser,” one's ear is sure to respond to the soothing regularity. Again, as each line is rimed and end-stopt, one easily feels the rhythm of the line unit.

The vowel effects are singularly interesting; but as the present state of knowledge on the psychological effectiveness of “dark” and “light” vowels is rather dubious, I will not risk giving evidence on this point, however tantalizing the temptation may be. But the consonantal effects—to consider only the most obvious ones—are, I think, unique. Even Poe with his adroit choice of the name “Lenore” and his rather artificial coinage of the name “Ulalume,” never quite equaled the skill with which liquids and nasals are repeated in the *Elegy*. As the eye may well be employed to supplement the ear in an analysis



of this sort, the following arrangement may aid to make the matter clear. Thus, a careful inspection shows that in these four lines every accented syllable save one—and it is the accented syllables that really count—either ends in a vowel sound or involves a liquid or a nasal! The only exception is “plods,” which is so effective for other reasons as to be inevitable. Liquids and nasals are capitalized.

the cuRfew toLLs the kNeLL of paRtiNG day,  
 the LowiNG heRd wiNd sLowLy o'eR the Lea,  
 the pLowMaN hoMewaRd pLods his weaRy way,  
 aNd Leaves the woRLd to daRkNess aNd to Me.

The second and third stanzas, like the first, continue, so far as versification is concerned, to employ the very highest artistry to satisfy and soothe the ear; and, with only slight modification, the same thing may be said of the whole poem. The skillful return to the liquids and nasals in the second and third stanzas is so perfect as to defy comment but to invite a brief continuation of the visual device that has already been used.

Now fades the gLiMMeRiNG laNdscape oN the sight,  
 aNd aLL the aiR a soLeMn stiLLNess hoLds,  
 save wheRe the beetLe wheeLs his droNiNG fLight,  
 aNd dRowsy tiNkLiNGs LuLL the distaNt foLds:

save that fRoM yoNdeR ivy-MaNtLed tow'R  
 the MopiNG owL does to the MooN coMpLaiN  
 of such as, waNd'RiNG NeaR heR secRet bow'R,  
 MoLest heR aNcieNt soLitaRy ReigN.

The English language has not gone further—perhaps cannot go further—than in these twelve lines to parallel the methods of the hypnotist in fixing the subject's attention on those rhythmic stimuli so productive of a state of trance. My analysis of the pattern of sound has been far from complete, but in a case where virtually every reader knows the lines by heart he can complete it in all that is essential (so far as the mere sound is concerned) by repeating the lines aloud. And since this is the case, I hurry on to consider the poem from another standpoint.

These first three stanzas have for their dominant tone *peaceful solemnity*. The suggestive power of the words even in the first line is perfect—from the quaintness of *curfew* on through the solemnity of *tolls* and *knell* to the twilight of *parting day*. And so on through the first twelve lines. One would have to quote every phrase to do justice to Gray's artistic suggestiveness—even the “tinklings” are “drowsy” enough to “lull” the “distant folds.”

By the smoothest of all possible transitions stanza four continues the serene description and focuses attention on the “rude forefathers”

“Each in his narrow cell forever laid.”

Here is death indeed, but calm death, softened into “sleep.” The transition is so easy that one is reminded of the method of the hypnotist who would begin by muttering “sleep—sleep—sleep” and then *without altering the cadence of his voice* would continue his experiment. This smoothness of

thought—or, to put it negatively, this avoidance of anything likely to cause a mental jar—is one of the features in which the *Elegy*, in common with other poems already considered, seems to be specifically following the method of the hypnotist and avoiding the dramatic abruptness which is often effective in intellectualist poetry. Stanza four thus serves the double purpose of continuing the lulling pattern of sound and introducing the topic of death in such fashion that the listener is not mentally aroused. It combines the physical and psychical stimuli to perfection.

There follow next three stanzas (the fifth, sixth and seventh), still principally descriptive, suggesting the homely rural life in days gone by. The listener's attention is held amid hazy suggestions by such occasional concrete details as "the echoing horn" and "the blazing hearth," but the picture is still in soft outlines, the sound pattern is still soothing, and the emotional mood is one of sympathy and regret. Meanwhile there are two verbal difficulties of the sort that may cause the listener to "give up and give in" a little more easily. One is merely the quaint phrase,

"Or busy housewife ply her evening care."

The other, which is bound to puzzle even the scholar for a moment, is a line of which the obscurity seems to be almost studied:

"Their furrow oft the stubborn glebe has broke."

Only after subjecting the listener for twenty-eight lines to this superlatively skillful combination of soothing sounds, soothing suggestions, shadowy pictures, and slightly fatiguing language, does the *Elegy* offer its first hypnotic suggestion or command. And this command, containing the *idea* of the poem, is given in language so abstract as to be universal yet so simple as to be unforgettable. The listener accepts emotionally and holds forever the idea, perhaps the exact words, of

“Let not Ambition mock their useful toil,  
Their homely joys, and destiny obscure;  
Nor Grandeur hear with a disdainful smile  
The short and simple annals of the poor.”

Here the poem might well close and still be a very effective piece of poetic hypnotism. But the poet, having the reader under the spell of his artistry, will not let him go. He immediately adds three frankly obvious lines of which the general purport is clear, but in which the inversion of word order is so overwhelming that four people out of five mistake subject and object, and a distinguished editor like the late Mr. Duncan Tovey must devote half a page to explaining the sentence structure. No ordinary listener will untangle the lines successfully, and if the attempt does not cause fatigue, it will be because he misses the singular number of the verb *awaits*, with its subject *hour*:

“The boast of heraldry, the pomp of pow’r,  
And all that beauty, all that wealth e’er gave  
Awaits alike th’ inevitable hour.”

But no matter. The listener's ear carries the easy rime of *gave*, and his whole emotional susceptibility finds satisfaction in another immortal line:

“The paths of glory lead but to the grave.”

Now come fourteen consecutive stanzas in which the poem almost follows a set formula, and the formula is this: four hazy and lazy; one vivid; four hazy and lazy; one vivid; four hazy and lazy. That is to say, we have four stanzas of calm platitudinous moralizing and solemn reflection, of little intellectual power but of great harmony in both sound pattern and emotional mood. The description and the ideas are both diluted with more words than are strictly necessary. Where a modern realist would say: “If no friends erect monuments in a cathedral” or “If no friends erect monuments in Westminster Abbey,” Gray keeps the imagery less definite, the appeal to the mind less incisive, but at the same time gives the ear the onomatopoetic organ tones of

“Where through the long-drawn aisle and fretted vault  
The pealing anthem swells the note of praise.”

Then we have a never-to-be-forgotten stanza, which I have indicated in the formula as “vivid” (the famous one beginning “Full may a gem of purest ray serene”). Then we have four more stanzas similar in tone to the preceding group of four, but harder to follow; then another immortal one (“Far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife”), and afterwards we have again four of description

and moralizing, which end with enough perfection of "what oft was thought but ne'er so well expressed" to win the unstinted praise of Dr. Johnson.

Here, after the ninety-second line, the poem distinctly breaks in structure; also, if my analysis is correct, in psychological effectiveness. With the abrupt "For thee" of line ninety-three, we are introduced to three separate people: "thee," "some kindred spirit," and "some hoary-headed swain," the last of whom takes the stage and speaks on until the Epitaph. These concluding stanzas of the body of the poem are arresting in their personal directness, but by no means easy to follow. And psychologically it is too late for further fatigue to have any value; the listeners are quite fatigued enough already—so one would suppose, and so my own readings have shown.

But with the Epitaph the poem regains all, or nearly all, of its former effectiveness. Once more the poet himself seems to be giving a hypnotic suggestion, and—whoever the "youth to fortune and to fame unknown" may be—the language grows simpler, and the idea grows emotionally more compelling that even the victim of the most obscure poverty may find repose in

"The bosom of his Father and his God."

#### REPETITION AND REFRAIN

"For repetition as the main element in savage poetry it is useless to spread out evidence; no one denies the fact, and ethnology is full of it." Thus the late Mr. Francis B.

Gummere on page 252 of *The Beginnings of Poetry*. We need not go beyond the limits of the same volume for convincing evidence that repetition is likewise the main element in poetry of the *folk* when they are considerably advanced beyond the savage state.

Probably the strongest single argument for the trance-producing effect of certain modern poems would result from showing the links or successive stages connecting the admittedly hypnotic incantations of savage tribes with the polished spellweaving poems of civilization. Although the extensive gathering and weighing of evidence necessary for such an argument exceeds the scope of this study, I can suggest some of the links from which such a chain of evidence could be forged.

Verbal incantations which promote hypnotic "magic" among savages involve monotonous rhythms often produced by repeating the same word or phrase again and again. (This may, or may not, be supplemented by dancing and the beating of tom-toms.) No one who has read anything about primitive peoples, in scientific treatises or in popular narratives like Mr. W. B. Seabrook's *Magic Island*, is likely to deny that a state of trance is often produced largely by the familiar verbal stimuli of monotonous repetition.

Next we find this element of tiring, yet effective, repetition in folk songs in general, and especially in popular ballads. Here, of course, are weak links, or at least elements of confusion. Folk *songs* introduce the added factor of music, and I am reluctant to complicate the argument to

the extent of trying to separate the musical elements from the specifically poetic ones. Ballads, when recited, without music, often contain too much interest—compel too great mental alertness—to be typically hypnotic. Yet despite these elements of confusion I feel that folk poetry retains the refrain largely for a trance-promoting effectiveness doubtless little understood but often experienced. The process of oral tradition, we are told, wore away, or allowed to drop out, all but the essentials of a folk poem. Wherein is the monotonous repetition essential except for its peculiar psychological effect? Why, otherwise, did it survive? Granted the obvious mnemonic appeal to the group, there is probably a more subtle appeal in the power of the refrain to induce a light state of autohypnosis.

A later survival of the hypnotic magic of repetition may perhaps be found in popular hymns. Here again we encounter the confusing admixture of music, but the evidence is too interesting to be omitted. Go to any great revival meeting and study the cynical, curious faces of the late-comers at the back of the auditorium; then watch the progressive steps of interest, fascination, and ecstasy, as they gradually come under the spell of the rhythmic repetition of:

“There is power, power, power, a wonder-working power,  
In the blood of the Lamb,”

or,

“Throw out the lifeline, throw out the lifeline,  
Some one is drifting away;



Throw out the lifeline, throw out the lifeline,  
Some one is sinking today."

The success of the exhortation that follows may be due in no small measure to the effect of the songs in putting the members of the congregation into a state of abnormal emotional sensitiveness—increased suggestibility,—and the leader of the meeting is a poor psychologist if he does not soon have many of them quite at his mercy.

Such being the fairly obvious links in the chain of evidence, I suspect that wherever repetition or refrain is used freely in a hypnotic or "somewhat hypnotic" poem, it is a survival of the old savage rite of hypnotic incantation. Take away the refrain from Mr. Alfred Noyes's "somewhat hypnotic" ballad of *The Highwayman*, and note the diminution of the spellweaving effect. Take the most hypnotic of Poe's lyrics, and note their dependence on the art of repetition. Elaborate the test by applying it to all the poems which any one reader finds most hypnotic, and draw the logical conclusion.

#### DISCUSSION OF EVIDENCE

What does all this analysis prove? Not that the poems discussed are the most hypnotic ones theoretically conceivable. Not that they are necessarily the greatest short poems in the language. Simply that in their method and order of procedure they subject the listener to a series of combined physical and psychical stimuli so similar to those used in the typical hypnotic clinic that the parallel is not likely to

be a mere coincidence. We have similar causes producing in the one case a state of trance where the subject's resistance is definitely broken down till he is *en rapport* with the hypnotist, in the other case a state of emotional responsiveness where the subject's resistance is broken down till he is spellbound. Is not the presumption all in favor of the hypothesis suggested—that certain poems do put the listener into a light state of trance?

We may call the listener's condition "a hypnoidal state," or, if that introduces a difficulty as to whether he is *en rapport* with the poet or with the reader, we may call it simply "a light state of ecstatic trance"; but whatever we call it, we must recognize that the listener has undergone a peculiar psychological experience. We cannot shut our eyes to the fact that the key phrases of hypnotic poems have become embedded in his subconscious mind through a process that is not wholly intellectual. He is more fixed in his hope that he may see his "Pilot face to face" than if he had been listening to an argument on immortality, more determined to "Follow the Gleam" than if he had been reading an essay on idealism. Above all, he has had an aesthetic experience made possible only by hypnotic art.

A distinguished psychologist, who agrees with the main thesis that I have advanced in this chapter, asks me whether I regard it as *moral* for the poet to drive home his ideas by a process that is largely non-rational. And my answer is that, whether moral or not, it is a method often used to achieve an end in the art of poetry and that as such it should be understood by critics. Granted that the technique

of the hypnotic poem might be used to disseminate ideas not sound, the abuse of the art is not inevitable or even frequent. We have outgrown the stage where the fact that paintings of the nude *may* be undesirably sensual is urged as a reason for compelling all painters to drape the human figure. Frankly I incline to agree that some poets have abused their hypnotic power, but, as I show in Chapter VIII, not many.

Some one is sure to ask whether it is as high art to convey an idea by this hypnotic process as to accomplish the same result by means of an intellectualist poem. The question is apt, but to my mind one that may be waived. My chief concern is that these hypnotic poems shall be experienced, enjoyed, and criticised according to the technique which they employ, and that intellectualist poems shall be read, studied, enjoyed, and criticised on a very different basis. If this point has been made, I am content to leave to others the question of artistic superiority.



## V

# SEMIHYPNOTIC POEMS

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IN the four preceding chapters I have aimed to explain and make at least plausible the theory that certain poems gain their power by applying the laws and principles of hypnotism, regardless of whether the poet has a theoretical knowledge of such laws. In this chapter and those that follow I shall assume that the theory is true, at least to the extent of using it as a working hypothesis for criticism.

Hypnotic technique in poetry provides a short cut or special route to the mood of *ecstasy* in which the listener often experiences the maximum enjoyment of a work of art. In *The Literature of Ecstasy* Mr. Albert Mordell has shown with able argument and profuse illustration the importance of this single element, which he has stressed in the title of his book, as an essential of great literature. And although we may disagree with Mr. Mordell's peculiar use of the word *poetry* and with many of his subordinate statements, I think we must pay a merited tribute to his success in emphasizing ecstasy as the criterion by which a great aesthetic experience is distinguished from a small one. If we turn from Mr. Mordell's book to the study of the *trance of ecstasy* in Mr. James Leuba's *Psychology of Religious Mysticism*, we may be able to synthesize certain

ideas—not explicitly stated, but suggested—into a few statements about hypnotic poetry:

1. The production of ecstasy in the reader is one of the characteristics of great poetry.

2. Ecstasy is one of the recognized phenomena in a certain state of trance.

3. Poetic ecstasy is *sometimes* (not often) produced by a peculiar hypnotic technique which psychology enables us to isolate.

4. Hypnotic technique in poetry is, then, the use of physical and psychical stimuli which tend to induce a light state of ecstatic trance in which emotional play is intensified.

5. This hypnotic technique has often been used by poets who had no knowledge of the facts about hypnosis familiar to modern science.

When I speak of a “semihypnotic” poem, I mean to imply either or both of two things: (1) That it contains one or more passages employing marked hypnotic technique, along with other passages of patently intellectualist technique. (2) That despite some quality—narrative interest, for instance—which keeps it from being completely hypnotic in effect, it does usually tend to be spellweaving and sometimes is peculiarly so. The terms *sometimes hypnotic* and *somewhat hypnotic* would often be more exact, but refinements in phraseology involve us in such nice distinctions and complicated explanations that I shall simplify matters by using the single term *semihypnotic*.

Semihypnotic poems are so numerous in English that I

shall limit myself in this chapter to consideration of a very few which, while familiar, invite criticism from a special psychological standpoint. I shall not, of course, attempt in any case a complete criticism (whatever that phrase may imply), but shall make various random remarks relating principally to hypnotic technique as promoting that "transcendental feeling" which, as Mr. J. A. Stewart has remarked in his brilliant Introduction to *The Myths of Plato*, "is the essential charm of all poetry." I shall also comment a little on three poets whose work has but a modicum of hypnotic art—Browning, Whitman, and Wordsworth.

Semihypnotic poems usually contain a good deal of food for thought. Their imagery is often clear, their contrasts may be striking, and at times they compel mental alertness and demand *study*. To that extent they are typically intellectualist. But here and there are passages which invite an easy, dreamy enjoyment and which if read aloud tend to promote a momentary slipping off into a light state of trance. The listener at such times feels a delicious sense of ecstasy and, regardless of the exact meaning of the words being spoken, drifts along on the stream of harmonious sounds and hazy impressions.

### BROWNING

Browning's technique is seldom hypnotic. *Love Among the Ruins* is, in fact, his only familiar poem of any length which I have heard mentioned as likely to lull the listeners

into harmonious agreement with its thesis by a non-rational process. If we may speak of the "characteristic manner" of a poet so versatile, Browning's characteristic manner is the reverse of hypnotic in nearly every particular: his rhythms are not conspicuously regular; his versification is seldom intricately ornate enough to fix the attention on sound rather than sense; he habitually uses dramatic contrasts and grotesque effects which startle us into intense mental activity; he makes little use of repetition; and he argues far more than he *suggests*.

But, as Browning knew full well, intellectualist poetry may move readers of a certain type to a pitch of high ecstasy. His best poems illustrate (and prove, if proof were necessary) how absurdly we should err if we assumed that hypnotic technique was the only sure means of attaining the distinction of great poetry. Certain lovers of Browning, readers not too lazy to crack the hard shell and find the kernel, encounter in his works more passages where they enjoy the ecstatic thrill of approaching the sublime than in those of any other English poet since Milton. Such passages are almost uniformly intellectualist and should be criticised on that basis.

There are, nevertheless, several noteworthy instances of hypnotic, or semihypnotic technique. The conclusion of the first section of *The Ring and the Book* (the twenty-six lines beginning, "O lyric Love,") is universally admitted to approach the sublime, and on analysis proves to be pure hypnotism—a series of phrases *suggesting* with inimitable art the rare mood of adoration. We enjoy them

not in an intellectual way, nor in a pictorial way, but in a way which psychology is enabling us to understand. The exact meaning is so perplexing that even after devoting a special appendix to it in his exhaustive *Commentary* on *The Ring and the Book* Mr. A. K. Cook leaves it still dubious. The matchless phrases, made effective by an unusual harmony of mellifluous sounds, blend the suggestion of chivalrous adoration with that of religious fervor—a thing extremely difficult to accomplish—so successfully that the passage, read aloud without comment, produces an effect seldom equaled. A few other passages where Browning uses a semihypnotic technique are: the Lover's last long speech of *In a Gondola*, the climactic stanzas of *Rabbi Ben Ezra* (which for the most part is typically intellectualist) and *A Woman's Last Word*.

## KIPLING

*Mandalay*

Probably the best known of Kipling's semihypnotic poems is *Mandalay*. It contrasts strongly with such an intellectualist achievement as *An Imperial Rescript*, where vivid characterization and humor combine to make compelling the stimulating idea that

“We will work for ourself and a woman, for ever and ever,  
amen.”

Though a strictly silent reading of *An Imperial Rescript* brings out virtually every excellence the poem has to offer,



such is far from being the case with *Mandalay*. Intermixed with the three brilliant stanzas devoted to the "Burma girl" in her Oriental surroundings and the two stanzas presenting the contrasting "fifty 'ousemaids" of London, there is a lilting, alluring melody towards the end of each stanza leading always into the same refrain—

"On the road to Mandalay" etc.

If we succeed in disassociating the poem from its two familiar tunes (of which one is somewhat namby-pamby and the other stirring and martial) and submit it to the test of reading aloud, we find it rich with brief touches of hypnotic art. People virtually cannot, and certainly do not, visualize clearly

"Where the old Flotilla lay—

Can't you 'ear their paddles chunkin' from Rangoon to Mandalay?"

Whether the paddles "chunk" as the Flotilla steams from Rangoon to Mandalay, or whether the "chunkin'" is heard from one place to the other, seems of no importance, nor does the exact appearance of a "road" with "flyin'-fishes." ("Road," one may remark, sometimes means "harbor"—but apparently it does not here!) No matter: it is all exotic and alluring.

The hypnotic passes, however, are not sustained; the dreamy mood is persistently interrupted by striking, colorful pictures, some of them even grotesque, and the full trance of hypnotic poetry is not induced. Yet the refrain

takes on some little touch of magic art, and by repetition becomes a sort of incantation to bring the listener into fuller emotional sympathy with the poet's mood. Whatever one may have thought before, one comes to feel that this man Kipling must be right—he knows—and in that frame of mind one fairly revels in the vigorous final stanza:

“Ship me somewheres east of Suez. . . .”

### POE

#### *The Raven* and *Ulalume*

Whether we should call *The Raven* hypnotic or not depends on whether it weaves a certain spell when read aloud under favorable conditions. For myself I cannot remember ever reading it under favorable conditions; I was only a boy when I heard parodies of it and parodied it myself, nor do I suppose I have ever read it to people of any maturity whose reaction was not conditioned in this way. There are, however, accounts of the tremendous and lasting effect the poem created when it was first read, especially when it was read by Poe himself.

So far as I can analyze the technique of *The Raven*, it is not hypnotic in every respect. Its narrative interest compels a degree of mental alertness hardly consistent with any one's falling into a state of trance, nor of giving even momentary belief to the incidents. The story or plot of the poem is improbable; it stretches one's credulity to the breaking point. Quite apart from the unlikelihood of the Raven's entering and behaving as reported, it is improbable

in a more fundamental way that a despondent lover would torment himself by making a raven confirm his fear that his "lost Lenore" is indeed lost forever. Taking the whole poem on a higher plane, we may regard it as symbolic of the inevitability of grief, of tragedy in life and love; but still there are difficulties. That these difficulties are largely overcome shows the poem to be in other respects a *tour de force* of hypnotic artistry.

The sound pattern completely fixes the attention by its elaborate ornamentation of internal rime and end-rime of one and two syllables, and by other devices of a more subtle nature. It is extremely regular in its procession of trochees; it involves much repetition and, of course, a refrain. Few poems, if any, in the English language tend so strongly to fix the listener's attention on the physical element of sound. In my own reading, I always feel impelled to make a definite crescendo as the poem advances, a crescendo inherent in the poem itself, not artificially added, and I find a climax of volume in next to the last stanza coincident with the climax of emotion.

Concurrent with this hypnotic pattern of sound is a brilliant use of psychical suggestion. The minor key of melancholy is used early in the poem and is continued with increasing effectiveness until the climax. We hear a singularly rich harmony of suggestive words—"midnight dreary," "weak and weary," "quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore," "bleak December," "dying ember," "ghost"—and then the clear, simple tones of "sorrow, sorrow for the lost Lenore." By the most gradual transitions we are

led on in the succeeding stanzas from suggested melancholy to grief, from grief to tragedy, and from tragedy to a mood of what Poe called, in another connection, "deep and irredeemable gloom."

Poe's *Ulalume* is a rather hypnotic poem in its effect on some people, not on others. Those who find it so, see no allegory in it, get no very definite post-hypnotic suggestion from it, yet are so lulled into a sympathetic mood by its artistry as to accept the concluding tragic melancholy with peculiarly strong emotion. Other listeners, also failing to see the allegory, are so annoyed by what they consider its meaningless verbiage that they dislike it strongly, regarding it frankly as Poe's worst poem—perhaps an attempt to test the gullibility of the public. A third group of readers, having fathomed the allegory to their own satisfaction, like the poem immensely but find it far too stimulating mentally to be hypnotic. The question just how far the allegory is an autobiography so fascinates such readers that they never sink into the state of complete emotional responsiveness. In view of this situation it may be well to include here a key to the allegory, which was suggested to me some years ago by a friend and which has since, I believe, appeared occasionally in print: The speaker ("I") is falling in love (not for the first time) and is communing with his soul (Psyche) trying to still the soul's instinctive objections to the new romance. Astarte, his new beloved, comes to him—in spite of the Lion (another suitor?)—and the speaker accepts her, calming the strong but vague

objections of his soul. Suddenly some coincidence of date and place makes it overwhelmingly evident that the speaker has already had the one great romance of his life, and that the memory of his lost Ulalume will forever bar Astarte from his heart. If the poem is autobiographical, the speaker is Poe, Ulalume is his wife, and the puzzle is to identify Astarte. Such a puzzle naturally destroys the subtle hypnotic effect, but gives the poem a tantalizing interest.

### SHAKESPEARE

#### *To Be or Not to Be*

Shakespeare's *To Be or Not to Be* is not strictly a hypnotic poem because it is not, properly speaking, a poem at all, but a blank verse speech in a play. It contributes its magnificent quota to the scene at a point where a great emotional climax is not needed for dramatic purposes. Nevertheless, I have mentioned it early in Chapter I because it proceeds in a somewhat hypnotic manner.

As for Hamlet's specific *thought* on suicide, not all—not nearly all—who admire the passage and have been moved by it, can tell on what ground Hamlet comes to his conclusion, and a few cannot even tell to what conclusion he comes! This fact—which the reader can easily verify for himself by questioning a dozen friends—disposes at once of the view that the *idea* or intellectual depth of the passage is a primary element of its effectiveness. It would be possible to confirm this by argument: no *very* great mind is needed to say, "Life is so burdensome that I should kill

myself if I were not afraid of the hereafter"! But argument is superfluous where the fact has been established by simpler means.

Yet the great soliloquy is as rich in suggestive metaphors and moving images as it is poor in thought. It is a harmony of phrases all calculated to arouse the listener's emotion. From "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune," on through a dozen others too well known to need repetition here, it moves magnificently on to the matchless phrase for death—

"The undiscovered country from whose bourn  
No traveller returns."

It is this phrase which contains the lasting post-hypnotic suggestion.

My own interest in this soliloquy lies in the perfection with which it shows how certain things and certain individuals fall into a circle of ever-increasing potency. A great hypnotist is known to have vast powers of inducing hypnosis; his new patients are so well aware of his reputation that a "suggestion" of being easily hypnotized is implanted in them even before they see him. His ability leads to a reputation which, in turn, increases his ability until he can hypnotize almost without effort. Likewise a great speech such as *To Be or Not to Be* is known to have moved vast audiences so deeply that a "suggestion" of yielding to its spell is given us as we sit in the theatre and hear the first six words. Expecting to be moved, we are moved more deeply, or more easily, than would otherwise be possible.

TENNYSON<sup>1</sup>*The Lady of Shalott, Locksley Hall, Ulysses, and Crossing  
the Bar*

Looking at the printed page, one sees that *The Lady of Shalott* consists of nineteen apparently identical stanzas of this pattern:

a

a

a

a

First Refrain of "Camelot"

b

b

b

Second Refrain of "Shalott"

Although the word "Lancelot" is substituted once for the usual first refrain, and once for the second, in other respects the nineteen stanzas appear identical.

But on closer analysis we find the pattern of rhythms is repeatedly changed—not varied with irregularities, but changed. The first stanza is iambic with the usual one-syllable rimes; the second is trochaic with two-syllable rimes; the third is trochaic catalectic with one-syllable rimes, and then iambic; the fourth is trochaic, like the second, and so on. The eleventh stanza begins with four lines of iambs but an extra syllable allows the two-syllable

<sup>1</sup> For discussions of *In Memoriam* and *Merlin and the Gleam* see pages 85 and 152 respectively.

rimes of *weather, leather, feather, and together*. On completing the analysis of the versification, I find it leads nowhere. The rhythms change without systematic relation from stanza to stanza in each of the four Parts into which the poem is formally divided.

Taking a fresh start and considering the effect of the poem as a whole, we note several features: the gorgeous descriptions of the landscape and of Lancelot's trappings, the narrative interest, the mystery of the spell or "curse," the solemn tragedy, and the peaceful (anticlimactic?) benediction with which the poem closes. In a still larger way we feel a suggestion of symbolism—a suspicion that the Lady's fate is symbolic of that of others who are sheltered and then suddenly brought into contact with the full force of a life that is too strong for them.

The poem when read aloud does not produce a uniformly hypnotic effect. This fact is probably due first to the frequent abrupt changes in rhythm, and second to the occasional touches of intense narrative interest. Nevertheless, there are several sustained passages so dreamily harmonious in sound, so elaborately interlocked by rhythm, rime, and refrain, that the listener feels himself quite helpless to resist the suggestion of the supernatural. Indeed it is not until the thirty-fifth line, when the hypnotic spell is woven, that we are asked to accept the supernatural—that we find we have a "fairy" lady.

Most people who have read *Locksley Hall* only once or twice admire it without knowing what it is all about.



Later, on closer study, they find it seems to represent a series of unrelated and sometimes contradictory attitudes toward life not very clearly separated from each other. One that is very often quoted ("I will take some savage woman") proves to be utterly repudiated a few lines later by the speaker, who says in condemnation:

"Fool, again the dream, the fancy! But I *know* my words are wild."

Further study, however, shows that each of these momentary outbursts or temporary attitudes towards life, is quite appropriate when spoken by the disillusioned lover. Part of the keen enjoyment of the poem ultimately comes from sorting the speaker's outbursts into two groups—the temporary and the abiding. And among the latter is, of course, the magnificent "vision of the world and all the wonder that would be," with its prophecy of air transport and world peace. The height to which the mind may soar on the sheer intellectual inspiration of such a passage is virtually unlimited, and the ecstasy aroused is largely an intellectual thrill.

Yet I cannot but think this magnificent effect is sometimes promoted, and as often retarded, by various touches of hypnotic stimulus. Is it not significant that the false metaphor of the world spinning forever—a railway train—"down the ringing *grooves* of change" was never corrected? Tennyson wrote the line supposing the wheels of a train ran in *grooves*, and when he discovered

his error, he preferred to keep the figure vague.

If the poem be broken up into its proper sections, we find it to consist of a series of short passages—several of them considerable enough to make complete independent poems. Now intellectually these various units do not support each other in producing a cumulative force or climactic effect, but as psychological stimuli they do. The long end-stopped lines riming in couplets compel a monotonous rising and falling pitch pattern which eventually becomes hypnotic. This dulls the listener's mental alertness and doubtless causes him to miss some of the nice points of the speaker's reasoning, but it also tends to break down possible resistance and put the listener into a receptive mood. If the metre were as monotonous as the pitch patterns, the poem would perhaps become an intellectual slumber-song—an inartistic hybrid. And it does lean in that direction. But fortunately the metre is trickily varied; although we seem to have standard lines of trochaic octameter catalectic, there are many with only four primary stresses; for example,

“In the Parliament of man, the Federation of the world.”

Almost every young man at some time in his life finds *Ulysses* the most inspiring short poem in the English language. This statement, made by a distinguished English critic, is probably not an exaggeration; in any case, the poem is a masterpiece, and any new light on the reasons for its effectiveness should be welcome.

That the blank verse is perfect and that the theme is inspiring are commonly accepted as sufficient reasons for the satisfaction the poem gives. And certainly it was a stroke of genius when Tennyson took from Dante the post-Homeric Ulysses and by a few deft changes made him representative of the seeker for truth of any sort in any age—one whose spirit yearns

“To follow knowledge like a sinking star,  
Beyond the utmost bound of human thought.”

But the art of the poem lies not only in these brilliant strokes which are recognized by conventional criticism. It lies quite as much in masterly touches of the hypnotic technique which make perfection more perfect.

The verse is not monotonously regular enough to produce the completely soothing effect of Gray's *Elegy*; the numerous run-on lines prevent the regular rising and falling pitch pattern. But the proportion of regular iambs is very great when compared with the proportion in, say, *Paradise Lost*, and as the poem draws to its impressive conclusion the stresses fall with an unusual degree of regularity. If the pitch pattern is not hypnotic, the rhythm is.

The ideas (in which this poem is far richer than a typical hypnotic poem) scrupulously avoid anything startling, and allow the listeners an easy progress from one to the next. Thus if the listeners never slip off into an actual state of trance, they are never very far from it. Now from the psychological standpoint these ideas con-

sist of four preliminary stages and then a post-hypnotic suggestion: (1) Lines 1-17 tell what this Tennysonian Ulysses has done in the world of affairs, notably

“Far on the ringing plains of windy Troy.”

(2) Lines 18-32 progress naturally to Ulysses' insatiable thirst for knowledge, which has led him into this active life and which still lures him on despite his age. (3) Lines 33-43 digress on Telemachus, and certainly lessen the force of the hypnotic spell by their laconic conclusion,

“He works his work, I mine.”

(4) Lines 44-53, specifically addressed to “My Mariners,” contain a suggestion of the great discoveries yet to be made, and end with the lines,

“Some work of noble note may yet be done  
Not unbecoming men that strove with gods.”

The last seventeen lines, containing what I have called the post-hypnotic suggestion, begin with the description of the harbor at twilight,

“The lights begin to twinkle from the rocks,”

and then continue with a specific exhortation which subtly but irresistibly becomes the poet's exhortation to his listeners quite as much as Ulysses' to his mariners. At the words,

“Come, my friends,  
’Tis not too late to seek a newer world,”

the listeners find that the words addressed to the mariners apply to themselves and realize that the search for knowledge and experience should be their own. Prior to this point, they have merely admired Ulysses' attitude and hoped the mariners would support him. Now they find the quest is one in which they too may join.

Thus the monologue, which has begun in a mood of meditative reminiscence, ends with the inspiring never-to-be-forgotten command, which has the psychological effect of a post-hypnotic suggestion—

“To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.”

I may note here a personal reaction to *Crossing the Bar* because it illustrates how a certain analytical tendency may break the spell of hypnotic art. Until a few years ago I had found *Crossing the Bar* typically hypnotic in its effect on others and on myself. To be sure, I usually heard it read at funerals, where I was already subject to influences likely to render me susceptible to such a poem, but even after making allowances I felt that the poem had a real “spell” for me. Subsequently I became interested in the notion that man's existence might be both pre-natal and post-mortem as suggested in Wordsworth's great *Ode*, and found the idea perhaps implied in Tennyson's two lines—

“When that which drew from out the boundless deep  
Turns again home.”

Questions as to whether Tennyson meant to convey this specific idea of pre-natal existence, and of his relation to Wordsworth, have subsequently associated themselves in my mind with the second stanza of *Crossing the Bar*, and the spell, so far as I am concerned, is no longer cast. That is to say, I cannot experience the poem as an artistic unit nearly so well as before.

## WHITMAN

Whitman's best poems, despite their general neglect of some obvious hypnotic stimuli, contain, nevertheless, passages of peculiar interest to this study. Leaving out of consideration *O Captain! My Captain!* which is in a class by itself, we find that many of his representative pieces—*Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking* and *When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd*, to take the most familiar ones—sometimes put certain people under a spell of peculiar magic. Whether they do so depends partly on the sensitiveness of the listener and partly on the manner of reading.

There is only one best way to read Whitman aloud, a way which resembles the usual solemn, almost intoned, manner of reading the Psalms. If such a reading does not make Whitman effective for the listener, nothing further can be done about it. The lack of rimes and regular metre causes such annoyance, at what is felt to be a literary hybrid, that some people cannot, even by the most patient effort, acquire a taste for Whitman.

People of a different aesthetic responsiveness find that the sound of Whitman's verse—when read *their* way—involves three elements combined into a somewhat hypnotic stimulus. First, two-syllable and three-syllable rhythms more regular than those of standard English prose, but less regular than those of strict metre, attract them as a happy medium between disorder on the one hand and mechanical standardization on the other, even as the varied beating of waves on the shore is rhythmically more pleasing to some than the regular swinging of a pendulum. And as rhythm in the last analysis is largely a subjective experience, we cannot say more, or less, than that some people do react thus to Whitman. Second, his individual lines, almost invariably end-stopt, allow (and virtually compel) repetition of a rising and falling pitch pattern which makes the tune of one line much like that of the others. If this one-line pitch pattern is brought out by modulation of the voice, and the line-unit is emphasized by a slight pause, there is created a line-by-line rhythm on which some listeners cannot but fix their attention. Third, Whitman's representative poems make such free use of repetition as to suggest the hypnotic incantations of olden days. As the actual quantity of repetition is greater than would be supposed possible in the work of a writer who studiously avoids such conventional devices as metre and rime, I must refer the reader to the excellent recent study by Miss Autrey Wiley in *American Literature* for May, 1929. Indeed, Whitman's artistry in the effective use of parallelism, refrain, and various other

sorts of reiteration makes him a master of this single phase of hypnotic art.

The psychical stimuli needed to complete the process of putting the listener into even the lightest state of trance are not often to be found. His most characteristic manner is about as unhypnotic as that of any writer of his century. If he compels mental alertness by his abruptness, his incisiveness, and his colloquial vigor, he goes still more directly against the principles of hypnotism by focusing our attention not on one simple phase of life, but on a series of varied pictures painted with the bold strokes of an avowed realist.

In his most lyrical passages, however, such as the best parts of *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking* and *When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd*, Whitman soothes us—or some of us—into a mood of considerable suggestibility, and then gives us telling post-hypnotic suggestions. His range is so considerable, his manner varies so much from one poem to another, that the student of Whitman will find the search for semihypnotic passages amply repaid. Among fascinating topics is the doubtful relation of his own mystical trances to the long “inventories” by which he may have been trying to give his readers an opportunity to enjoy similar transcendent experiences.

### WORDSWORTH

Although Wordsworth's poetry is unlike Browning's in most respects, it has in common with it the fact of being almost never strictly hypnotic. Sustained passages of



verbal hypnotism such as we frequently find in Poe, Tennyson, and Swinburne, are utterly inconsistent with the Wordsworthian manner.

This does not, however, mean that there are to be found in Wordsworth no hypnotic touches whatever. If I were asked to indicate offhand the two brief passages most certain to have what I call a spellweaving effect on an audience, I should of course choose a particular passage from *Tintern Abbey* and stanza V of the great *Ode*. In these two poems Wordsworth surpassed his usual style in many felicitous ways; hence it is not safe to infer that their success is due to his use of hypnotic technique, or that the poems should be read and criticised on that basis. We may, however, note as a matter of scientific interest a few points. The sound pattern of *Tintern Abbey* is smooth and regular enough to be somewhat soothing; the mood of solemn meditation (almost the "churchyard mood") is suggested and maintained with little interruption to startle one into mental alertness; a few crucial lines linger in the memory, possibly because they have been embedded there with the force of an actual hypnotic suggestion—

"The still, sad music of humanity."

"A presence that disturbs me with the joy  
Of elevated thoughts."

If the reader retains a lasting sense of this "presence," it is not because its existence has been proved to him by the poet, but because he has attained the light state of trance

in which he accepts the poet's dictum unreservedly by a non-rational process. Whether this process is sub-rational or super-rational is perhaps vital—but not to a study of poetic art.

The memorable lines in stanza V of the great *Ode* exert on the listener a spell so much more powerful than what precedes or what follows that they challenge criticism to account for it. Here is a suggestive experiment: neglect the meaning of the poem as a whole and read only stanzas II, III, IV, and V. Make the reading of stanzas II, III, and IV too rapid to allow the listeners to make much sense out of what they hear, and modify the spirited sound pattern into what can only be called a rapid intonation or chant. Then, more slowly and more solemnly, read stanza V as if it were all that really counts, as if the preceding lines had been only necessary hypnotic passes. Does the poem lose anything by this treatment? It loses two fine passages of consolation at the ends of stanza IX and stanza XI. To my mind the experiment merely confirms the opinion that in the great *Ode* Wordsworth was using to advantage every sort of poetic art—even hypnotic.

## LONG POEMS

### *In Memoriam* and *Evangeline*

I have put these two poems side by side in the hope of startling the reader into focusing his attention on the hypnotic quality in its essence. *In Memoriam*, philosophic, argumentative, and reflective, differs in almost every

particular from *Evangeline*, narrative, simple, even naïve. Yet the two poems have in common the psychological effect of promoting trance. If one reads aloud a hundred lines chosen from almost any part of *In Memoriam*, there is produced a cumulative soothing effect which gives to certain sections a distinctly hypnotic force. Similarly a hundred lines chosen—perhaps with more care—from *Evangeline* build up gradually an entrancing power well-nigh irresistible. Neither of the two selections quoted below is quite hypnotic in itself—that is, if read with no preparation. But if the reader will try the experiment of reading, say, the eighty lines preceding either of these selections and thus leading into it, he may share my experience of finding it typically hypnotic.

“When on my bed the moonlight falls,  
I know that in thy place of rest,  
By that broad water of the west,  
There comes a glory on the walls:

Thy marble bright in dark appears,  
As slowly steals a silver flame  
Along the letters of thy name,  
And o’er the number of thy years.

The mystic glory swims away;  
From off my bed the moonlight dies;  
And, closing eaves of wearied eyes,  
I sleep till dusk is dipt in gray:

And then I know the mist is drawn  
A lucid veil from coast to coast,

And in the dark church, like a ghost,  
Thy tablet glimmers in the dawn."

"Still stands the forest primeval; but far away from its shadow,  
Side by side, in their nameless graves, the lovers are sleeping.  
Under the humble walls of the little Catholic churchyard,  
In the heart of the city, they lie, unknown and unnoticed.  
Daily the tides of life go ebbing and flowing beside them,  
Thousands of throbbing hearts, where theirs are at rest and  
forever,  
Thousands of aching brains, where theirs no longer are busy,  
Thousands of toiling hands, where theirs have ceased from  
their labors,  
Thousands of weary feet, where theirs have completed their  
journey!"

When Poe wrote that "the phrase, 'a long poem,' is simply a flat contradiction in terms," he confused the issues sadly. And though he supported the statement by clever argument in *The Philosophy of Composition* and again in *The Poetic Principle*, neither argument is convincing. A more exact statement of the matter is this:

A long poem often divides itself naturally into passages each of which is a unit, much as each stanza in Mr. William Ellery Leonard's *Two Lives* is a sonnet in itself. Some of these passages may be hypnotic, in which case they will not greatly exceed a hundred lines apiece in length and may be much shorter. Most of the passages, especially if the poem be principally narrative, will be of the intellectualist type. In any case the individual units can be fairly treated as short poems, for despite all I have

said about the necessity of reading a hypnotic poem in full, it is not necessary to read all of *Evangeline* or of Mr. Stephen Vincent Benét's *John Brown's Body* to get the trance effect!

*Evangeline* in particular offers a field for more astute criticism than has yet been made of it. At its worst (when the hexameters are too halting to satisfy one's rhythmic sense and the action is too slow to hold one's interest) it sinks to a very low ebb. But at its best it has long passages so soothingly hypnotic that the listener cannot help responding to the deep chords of tragedy which the poet occasionally strikes. The conflict of gushing admiration and violent condemnation over *Evangeline* is one of the outstanding evidences of the confusion in criticism. The fact is that in *Evangeline* Longfellow applied the hypnotic method to a long narrative poem, with rather better results, artistically, than might be expected.

### VERY SHORT POEMS

Such poems as are found to be hypnotic only after introductory remarks by the reader remind us of those hypnotic clinics where the operator, before beginning to hypnotize, exerts his utmost skill to make a strong personal impression on the subject, inspiring him with confidence. It is an interesting experiment with a poem which has all the hypnotic characteristics except the length necessary to allow for the slow process of inducing the trance, to precede it by remarks calculated to promote its effectiveness. Something may occasionally be ac-

complished. But far more effective is the experiment of reading it, without comment, just after a longer hypnotic poem by the same poet. Both Stevenson's *Requiem* and Poe's *To Helen* seem to me to suffer—as hypnotic poems—from this undue brevity. But the sixteen short lines of Tennyson's *Break, Break, Break* seem in my own experiments to weave a spell without support.

### CONCLUSION

It would appear unnecessary to include in this study other semihypnotic poems which lend themselves to the process of analysis from this standpoint. If the reader finds any merit in the procedure, if he finds the essential value of certain poems more readily by scrutinizing them from this particular psychological point of view in addition to others that are more usual, he can easily apply the method to such poems as suggest themselves.

According to my own judgment there are dozens of poems—to consider only the more familiar ones—which take advantage of the hypnotic principle to some extent. They are not completely hypnotic; they do not, even under the most favorable conditions, produce a state of trance. But each has one or more passages tending in that direction. And in attempting an appreciative criticism of such a poem it is unwise to assume that every part must be rich with some golden thought or else with some gem of description. Mr. E. A. Greening Lamborn was on very safe ground when he said in his *Rudiments of Criticism*, "Repeated experiments have shown that children not only

enjoy listening to the music of poetry in an unknown tongue, but that they are keenly responsive to its emotional appeal." I think we may go a good deal further, and say that even for the most mature adults a quatrain may serve a very useful artistic purpose, without either conveying a specific idea or presenting a vivid image, provided its sound pattern is fascinating enough to fix the attention. I do not say, however, that such quatrains are utilized with equal success by different poets, or by the same poet in different compositions. Herein, of course, lies the opportunity for discriminating criticism.



## VI

# POETIC

# INSPIRATION

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SO much has been written, ever since the time of Plato, about "poetic inspiration" that we all know well enough what the vague phrase means, without having a clear conception of how the phenomenon is produced. The poetic "frenzy," "fury," "ecstasy," or "inspiration" is a rare condition in which the poet is carried "out of himself," as we say, into a mood of sublime elevation; and in that mood, happily for us, he is articulate. The question of supreme interest is, what lifts him? What forces combine to turn the mere man into the "inspired" poet for a few minutes or a few hours, after which he drops back into everyday life?

It would be both presumptuous and futile for an individual to attempt anew, where so many keen minds have failed, an analysis of *all* the circumstances which combine to produce the well-known effect. Yet I cannot but think that we shall come a little nearer to an understanding of the phenomenon if we stress more than is generally done the psychological effect of rhythm in leading to a state of trance and in intensifying emotional susceptibility. Here again I must disclaim any great originality. Although the views set forth in 1910 by Mr. George Woodberry in *The Inspiration of Poetry* are not



in the main acceptable to some of us, nevertheless on pages 207-209 he gives hints which may easily be interpreted as anticipating some of the points which I make in the following pages.

Let me say that the effect of a rhythmic pattern of sound on the poet may be twofold. The poet may realize that his readers will be put into a mood of emotional responsiveness by the harmony of his rhythms. He may also, without knowing it, be able to get himself into an intensely emotional state, not unlike that of the religious mystic in a state of trance. If neither of these suggestions alone goes very far towards explaining "poetic inspiration," we may yet find on analysis that these two psychological factors together often do explain it.

I. Few writers of prose are so free from self-consciousness as to be able to voice their highest ideals and their most intense feelings through letters to the public press. No matter what pure gold a man may think to himself, he is apt to mix it with the alloy of materialism before writing to the *Times*, and the same thing is true, with certain modifications, of writing prose of any sort. Quite naturally! Nothing hurts a writer more keenly than the cynical sneer of the unsympathetic reader. We instinctively guard ourselves against the pain of having our most sacred ideas distorted and laughed at even behind our backs; "No indecent exposure of soul," we say, drawing the pen ruthlessly through a half-finished sentence. Inevitably this "dignified reserve," as we like to call it, becomes the inhibition of self-consciousness. But with the poets it is

different, as all the world knows. The greatest of them, at least in their most "inspired" moments, speak out from the heart with an amazing directness. Beauty shines forth as naked beauty, truth as simple truth, and goodness as compelling goodness free from the cant of worldly wisdom.

To account for the poet's relative freedom from restraining inhibitions, we need not assume him to be familiar with the detailed theory which explains how rhythm tends to put the listener into a responsive emotional mood. It is sufficient that the poet knows the fact alone, without either the *how* or the *why*. And it is not likely that a man could devote himself to the art of poetry for any length of time without having an inkling of the fact. He has himself come under the spell of other poets; he has responded emotionally to the magic of their rhythm and suggestion; and he knows that other listeners are likely to respond as sympathetically to him, can he but weave a similar spell of words.

This condition alone would account for much of the poet's so-called inspiration. He has a confidence in the power of his own verse to carry his message into the reader's heart. We need not suppose the poet, even the great poet, to be able to tap some divine source of ideas not open to other mortals. The writer of prose may think as deeply and respond to beauty as readily, but he cannot escape entirely from his inhibitions. Many of us prose writers may have flashes of insight into life when our wisdom approaches the wisdom of the prophets—but,

alas, we prophesy not! We have not the use of a rhythmic medium to break down the reader's possible resistance, and knowing that fact we dare not speak out.

II. The second or unconscious feature in producing a state of poetic inspiration is more easily understood. Indeed any one who has read the more exhaustive treatises on trance, ecstasy, and autosuggestion can readily see that a poet may often be in a state of autohypnosis. Let us put it this way: If a poet has composed the opening lines of a poem and keeps repeating them to himself, he may unwittingly get into such a hypersensitive state that he continues the process of composition in a mood of ecstasy. I have neither the space nor the technical knowledge to go through all the intricacies of the argument for such a theory, but its main contention is plain and, I believe, sound. The "droning monotony" (as M. Emile Coué calls it) of a repeated phrase, or the soothing of rhythm, is as valuable a preliminary to autohypnosis as to hypnosis, and autohypnosis frequently leads to ecstasy.

Such a state of ecstasy naturally increases the poet's fervor for whatever is uppermost in his consciousness and allows him—perhaps compels him—to look past the diverting doors opening to right and to left, and to fix his rapt eyes on the vision at the end of the vista.

"For I dipt into the future, far as human eye could see,  
Saw the Vision of the world and all the wonder that would be."

And from that time on until his vision fades away, he will concentrate with an almost superhuman intensity on

the single theme that he is developing. At subsequent times he may, in the most prosaically analytical mood, modify and correct certain phrases, but the bulk of his best work is hammered out while the theme glows in the white-heat of the ecstatic trance. The abnormal emotional state may not always be the result of autohypnosis stimulated by a rhythmic pattern of sound; in the case of Coleridge's *Kubla Khan* and some of his other poems there is good reason to believe the special stimulus was an opiate; but it is highly significant that other poets without the stimulus of a drug have been able to get into virtually the same state of trance. It is also significant that it now appears Poe wrote much less often than has been supposed under the influence of an opiate—almost always preferring the ordinary beverage coffee, which will not in itself produce anything remotely approaching the poetic fervor!

Perhaps, then, it was under the spell of trances induced by the harmony of his own rhythms that Poe caught occasional glimpses of that "supernal beauty" of which he wrote so feelingly that he seems to have made the word "supernal" his own:

"The struggle to apprehend the supernal Loveliness—this struggle, on the part of souls fittingly constituted—has given to the world all *that* which it (the world) has ever been enabled to understand and *to feel* as poetic. . . . It is in Music, perhaps, that the soul most nearly attains the great end for which, when inspired by the Poetic Sentiment, it struggles—the creation of supernal Beauty. It *may* be, indeed, that here this sublime end is, now and then, attained *in fact*. We are often made to feel,

with a shivering delight, that from an earthly harp are stricken notes which *cannot* have been unfamiliar to the angels. . . . It has been my purpose to suggest that while this (Poetic) Principle is, strictly and simply, the Human Aspiration for Supernal Beauty, the manifestation of the Principle is always found in *an elevating excitement of the Soul*. . . .”

(From *The Poetic Principle*.)

Perhaps, likewise, it was under the spell of a trance induced by the harmonious rhythms of Dante that Longfellow at last rose to the heights which he had never scaled before. In any event, he was deep in his translating of Dante when he wrote the six sonnets entitled *Divina Commedia*, which are generally considered to be his best work, and it may be that the ecstasy which failed to come to him from repeating his own verses did come to him when he repeated those of the master.

Now there happens to be a very keen controversy at present among theologians and psychologists as to whether the trance of the religious mystic is merely autohypnosis, as one side contends, or autohypnosis plus an added element of direct communion with the Deity. Difficult though it may be to avoid taking sides on such a point, we ought to be able to avoid the controversial part of the discussion and fix our attention on the patent fact that ecstatic trance often begins with autohypnosis, or something akin to it, and develops into a mood of intense concentration in which the subject of the trance is freed from certain restraining inhibitions. After what has been said in preceding chapters about the effect of a hypnotic poem in throwing the listeners into a state of trance, it seems reasonable

that the same effect may be produced in the poet himself as soon as he has completed a stanza or two and begins repeating them over to himself.

A most striking illustration of this second point, of ecstasy resulting from the effect on himself of the poet's own words, is to be found in Browning's *Saul*. As originally written, *Saul* was an account of how the first King of Israel was gradually brought out of a state of coma through the psychological influence of David's singing to the harp. Later, however, Browning doubled the length of the poem, and without changing the title made David the principal figure. As the poem now stands in its entirety, our interest attaches chiefly to the added stanzas, which reveal the gradual steps by which David worked himself up into a state of religious and poetic ecstasy.

Throughout the earlier stanzas David tells how he sang a shepherd song, a reaping song, a marriage song, and so on until at the end of stanza seven, he says: "Here in the darkness Saul groaned." Then, finding Saul partly conscious, he sang on, as recounted in the next eight stanzas of the poem, of the joy of living and of the greatness of the King himself, until at length the King was brought wholly back to a normal state. And here Saul virtually fades out of the poem as David has a sudden flash of insight into the greatness of God's love for man. So overwhelming is the ecstasy that the sixteenth stanza consists of a single vivid line:

"Then the truth came upon me. No harp more—no song more!  
outbroke—"

And there follows in Browning's most masterly manner a prophetic religious poem that verges on the sublime.

In studying the complete *Saul* to illustrate a poet's gradually getting into the inspired mood, the identifying of David with Browning himself is inevitable. What Browning is giving us is an example of how he or any other great poet experiences the full force of the "poetic madness." Of special interest is the fact that in his ecstasy David is fully master of his intellectual faculties, reasoning with such acuteness that he cuts to the heart of the matter in the flash of an eye. He sees almost as a mathematical formula this truth: If what I do for Saul is the product of my great love multiplied by my limited power, then what God will do for man will be the product of his greater love multiplied by his infinite power; and so he rushes on to prophesy the coming of the Messiah.

The successive steps in the composition of an "inspired" poem may, then, be something like this: first the poet composes several lines of verse leading towards a theme in which he is interested. (If he composes in the manner of Burns, he fits these lines to a tune that is running in his head, but such a supposition is not at all necessary.) Then, testing these original lines and finding them adequate to put readers into a sympathetic mood, he proceeds with added confidence. As he repeats over and over to himself what he has already composed and dwells with increasing concentration on a single phase of life, he gradually experiences the trance in which for the time being nothing else is of any importance or indeed enters

into his consciousness. This phase of his experience is accompanied by the intense emotional susceptibility common in ecstatic trance, and by a heightening of the poetic faculty at least proportional to the completeness with which it is focused on one topic. Under such conditions the poem is completed, and either then or subsequently it is committed to paper.

Some years ago I myself wrote a poem which was composed, I now realize, under just these conditions, and by just these stages. I do not append it here, for its technical flaws would divert the reader's attention from the topic—in fact I cannot, for I tore up the manuscript the next day. Nevertheless, I still remember the stages of trial, initial success (so I thought), repetition of the opening lines again and again, and subsequently of fervid and ecstatic concentration and enthusiasm. So far as I can make out, my psychological state at the height of my frenzy was exactly like that of a real poet in a mood of real inspiration.

But, someone objects, I am citing my own unverifiable experience to prove my own unverified theory. Very well. Then turn to any reliable account of the frenzy of the world's great poets as they have been recorded. Read, for instance, pages 263 ff. in Mr. Frederick Clark Prescott's volume, *The Poetic Mind*, and apply these tests: Are not the two factors I have suggested at least among the most probable contributory causes of the known effect? Can any other combination of factors, without these, account adequately for the fact of "poetic frenzy"? Remove the



poet's inhibition of self-conscious reserve, then let him use the most likely stimuli to produce an autohypnotic trance, and whatever inherent power he has is completely liberated for the time being.

That autohypnosis may be produced after some practice by such means as I have described is not, I believe, disputed. Turning to a standard psychological treatise on such matters I find the statements I have made confirmed point by point by a scientist whose interests are non-literary and who, in fact, devotes but one sentence in his whole volume to the topic of poetry.

The following sentences from the more pertinent paragraphs of the chapter on Autohypnosis in Charles Baudouin's *Suggestion and Autosuggestion*<sup>1</sup> will serve to give the gist of the chapter to those who may not have the treatise at hand. The chapter does not take up the disputed matter of the therapeutic value of autosuggestion, but deals explicitly with the easiest means of producing a state of autohypnosis.

"Outcropping, somnolence, even sleep, can be brought about by a means which we have not hitherto described, namely, by immobilization of the attention . . .

"In summary classification it may be said that there are two main kinds of immobilization of the attention:

1. Fixation;
2. Seesaw . . .

"As to immobilization by seesaw, we have examples of this in the noise of the waves beating on the shore, where two splashing sounds of different pitch answer one another in an

<sup>1</sup> New York: Dodd, Mead & Co.

alternating song; in the tick-tack of a pendulum, where the alternation is between sound and silence; in lullabies; and in any kind of regular rhythm. . . .

“Obviously, when autosuggestion is our aim, the hypnosis must not be pushed to the stage of profound sleep, in which we shall no longer be able to control the direction of our thoughts. But a moderate degree of hypnosis is to be recommended for this purpose. The presence of a watch or clock not far from the ear has a lulling influence. . . .

“Furthermore, physical procedures are not the only methods for the production of autohypnosis. The attention may be immobilized in other ways than by an outward sensation. Immobilization can be brought about by a mental image, by an idea. . . .

“Let us return to autohypnosis, as described earlier in our own text. Since it can be induced by immobilizing the attention on a mental state, why should we not choose, for this mental state (in preference to the bead-telling or the counting), the very idea which is to be the object of the suggestion?”

Autohypnosis, then, is produced by simultaneously fixing the attention on some regular rhythmic sound and mentally concentrating on a single idea or image—precisely the process employed unconsciously by the poet when he repeats to himself the opening lines of a poem already composed! And in this light state of trance or ecstasy his full artistic powers are liberated; for, as M. Baudouin remarks (on page 158 of the 1921 translation):

“Emotion is likewise an instigator of images, a condition in which the inhibitive faculties appear to be thrown out of gear. This is especially noticeable in the poet, for the images flow

from his pen more spontaneously, more vigorously, and more rapidly, in proportion as his emotion is more intense."

That the ideas and images expressed by the poet in his "inspired" mood should reach such a very high plane, is the natural result of inherent ability stimulated by a trance of intense concentration. Perhaps an analogy from another kind of concentration may clarify the matter.

Chess players know that the rapidity and almost flawless accuracy with which a master player can foretell the result, some three moves later, of a play which he contemplates, is not a miracle but merely a case of concentration on essentials. It is true that there may be to his contemplated move some twenty *possible* replies by his opponent, each of which would allow of twenty subsequent plays by himself, and that to each of these there may be some twenty rejoinders by his opponent. To analyze all possible variations for these three moves would then require consideration of perhaps eight thousand plays, which would fill one of the folio volumes of the *Chess Digest*. Now the plodding analyst cannot pass adequate judgment on the one move under consideration until he has performed some such Herculean task; even then, however, the plodding analyst will fail, for his mind cannot possibly grasp and compare the relative merits of some eight thousand potential positions. The secret of the master's success lies in the fact that he knows at a glance, and even without a glance, that perhaps eighteen of the twenty moves in each case are so weak as to be absurd; neither he nor a worthy opponent would risk them. In

such a case he can, in each of the three successive steps, analyze only the two strongest moves, and by comparing the advantages of eight resulting positions he has done all that is most essential in the problem of analysis. His efficient speed in selecting the move which will bring him the best possible position three moves later is thus rather more than a thousand times that of the mechanical analyst.

Just as the success of the chess player is proportional to his power of concentrating his attention on the few lines of play that may be vital, so perhaps the heightened fervor of the "inspired" poet is proportional to the effect of his trance in excluding from his consciousness all but one phase of life. If he is dealing with beauty, he "worships the principle of beauty" like Keats; if he is composing a religious poem, he becomes for the time being almost a fanatic. From any trunk of thought there are as many possible digressive ramifications as there are twigs on a giant spruce, but the entranced bard sees only the main trunk and follows it up higher and higher to the very top.

It is a wise saying that there is no accounting for genius. But as to the factors which contribute to the mood of creative ecstasy, "poetic frenzy," we can make some very definite conjectures.



## VII

# FREE VERSE IN AMERICA

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NOT long ago I suggested to a friend that an interesting lecture might be given on "The Rise and Fall of Free Verse in America," a consideration of why the form had been so popular between 1910 and 1920, and why it is now dead. I was promptly brought to book, however, by a citation of statistics about the current vogue of Miss Amy Lowell's work. Since her work still sells well—not only new (posthumous) volumes but re-issues of the old ones—it follows that free verse is not dead. The public still likes it and pays for it.

Nevertheless, an impartial survey of the poetic trend of the first three decades of this century shows that in America, and to some extent in England, these were a few brief years when free verse ran riot. Magazines were full of it, volumes of free verse were published by hundreds, and anthologies of free verse by dozens. It provided material for innumerable critical essays general and particular, pro and con; it penetrated the drawing room, the dining room, and the class-room; even the staid literary reviews bent to welcome it. But no more. As a literary "movement" it is as dead as the Gothic Romance.

The inquest which I propose to hold in this chapter will be brief and will touch on three topics: the reasons why

the movement came into being when it did, the reasons for the shortness of its life, and the inherent merits and demerits of free verse as a literary form. Such post-mortem examinations have been held before, and this one offers only such new evidence as comes from viewing free verse in contrast to hypnotic verse.

Now the term *free verse*, like charity, covers a multitude of sins. The phrase has been popularly used in such a variety of meanings that we can accomplish nothing by discussing it unless we define what types of composition may reasonably be meant by *free verse*, and say with which of these we are chiefly concerned. Such a careful analysis as that in Mr. Bliss Perry's *Study of Poetry*<sup>1</sup> is valuable:

"Readers who are familiar with the experiments of contemporary poets will easily recognize four prevalent types of 'free verse':

(a) Sometimes what is printed as 'free verse' is nothing but prose disguised by the art of typography, i. e. judged by the ear, it is made up wholly of the rhythms of prose.

(b) Sometimes the prose rhythms predominate, without excluding a mixture of the recognized rhythms of verse.

(c) Sometimes verse rhythms predominate, and even fixed metrical feet are allowed to appear here and there.

(d) Sometimes verse rhythms and metres are used exclusively, although in new combinations which disguise or break up the metrical pattern."

In this chapter my interest is with free verse of types *b* and *c*, and to simplify matters I shall speak of these types jointly as "free verse." Type *a* is eliminated automatically

<sup>1</sup> Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co.

by being merely prose in disguise, while type *d* is often too close to conventional verse to be distinguished from it without hair-splitting.

Ever since the Ossianic poems of James Macpherson became popular in the late eighteenth century, the opportunity to develop a technique of "spaced" or "measured" prose has been evident. In my book on *The Celtic Revival 1760-1800* I have shown that to some of Macpherson's contemporaries the "Ossianic manner" seemed worthy of imitation; more than a century later, occasional uses of this peculiar prose style are still to be encountered. Thus Mr. George Herbert Palmer described the style of his English prose translation of the *Odyssey* (1891) as using "a simple rhythm, a rhythm so unobtrusive and so free from systematic arrangement that no one need turn from the matter to mark the movement." Let there be no misunderstanding: this style is not content with the rhythms inherent in good literary prose; it has a far closer similarity to formal metre; it is, in fact, exactly the same "measured" prose employed by Macpherson. Except in its typographical arrangement it does not differ greatly from free verse of types *b* and *c*.

But the major poets of the nineteenth century, except for Whitman, who is a unique force, manifested little interest in semimetrical forms. All of them had acquired the knack of writing excellent metrical verse, and many of them had mastered the greater difficulties of a technique that is hypnotic. Such experiments in the direction of free verse as they did make, they do not seem to have taken

very seriously. But about the turn of the century three circumstances combined to invite a radical change in the type of poetry to be produced, especially in America.

The death of five or six leading poets on each side of the Atlantic—poets whose work their respective countrymen could hardly hope to surpass—was significant in preparing for a change in the style, tone, or nature of the verse to be written by the oncoming poets of another generation. The dates of death are these: Lanier 1881, Rossetti 1882, Fitzgerald and Longfellow 1883, Arnold 1888, Browning 1889, Lowell 1891, Tennyson and Whittier 1892, Holmes 1894. If now we add that Swinburne virtually withdrew from lyric composition at the same time, the facts speak for themselves. But even as the old conservatives were dying off (conservatives in the matter of versification) the influence of the great radical, Whitman, surged back from Europe and swept with irresistible force over his own country. No matter whether Whitman's popularity in England had been due to his manner or his matter, Americans who came to admire him accepted his manner, his successful use of free verse, as a guide-post pointing to a rich and almost virgin land. Its resources had been discovered but not yet exploited. Finally came the third circumstance—the crystallization of popular interest in whatever was most radical in music and art as well as in letters. So forceful was this popular radicalism that by 1910 the music of a one-time extremist like Wagner was regarded as heavy and conservative, while impressionistic painting was forgotten in an orgy of post-impressionism,



cubism, and futurism. Thus the death of the old-school poets, the growing interest in Whitman's free verse, and the eagerness of the public for novelty—always great, but seldom so intense—combined between 1910 and 1920 to set the American stage for the free-verse movement.

Among the obvious attractions of free verse are the ease with which almost any one can write it and the amusing novelty of the resulting product. Once the movement got started a little, millions of people found themselves at least potential "poets." In a natural way these potential poets and the magazines of new poetry led each other on, because those whose work had not yet been published were buying and reading the magazines of free verse to see wherein their own poems fell short of those that had appeared in print, and the magazines were accepting more and more startling compositions in their competition with each other. Sheer novelty, while it lasted, made free verse attractive to editors not only of magazines but of newspapers. "If a dog bites a man, that is not news; but if a man bites a dog, it is." And so it was with these amazing effusions: a sensible idea in conventional verse was not "news," while a mad idea in mad verse was. But novelty was also the bane of free verse, for the public soon found far more delight in clever burlesques than in the form itself. Staid critics, too, who had long refused to dignify free verse by commenting on it, were at length roused to condemn it in no uncertain terms, and the cumulative effect of such condemnations from the lecture platform and in conservative magazines was considerable.

By the time free verse had come to be a literary fad, it was enjoying a vogue so obviously out of proportion to its inherent merits that it invited and inevitably received the rebuke of parody. Here and there all over the United States people began to produce free-verse effusions, which, when read to their friends, were accepted as quite up to the usual standard but which, as a matter of fact, were simply nonsense poems. I remember that in 1916 I read aloud half a dozen poems selected from an anthology of free verse and asked each member of a group of listeners to name the one he liked best. Most of them—I think all of them—named a poem called *Drowned Love*, which happened to be a thing I had composed myself in five minutes without having the slightest idea of what I was writing about. I had simply tried to see how many lines of passable free verse I could turn out in five minutes; and, having produced a dozen lines, I copied them off on the typewriter and secretly concealed the sheet in the anthology. When I explained to the listeners, who had voted this poem the best in the group, that it was merely a nonsense poem, we stopped to analyze a little the three cheap tricks that had enabled it to surpass the other five poems which had actually been reprinted for their supposed merit. Now the tricks were these: (1) The meaning was so obscure that the timid reader suspected a secret depth which he was too shallow-minded to fathom. In reality, of course, the pool was not “deep” but muddy. Even the author himself had not the faintest notion whether the quality of love had been drowned in some one’s life or

whether some one's beloved had actually died by drowning. (2) It had "a strong phrase" suggesting a daring modernity—the phrase happened to be "back to the gates of hell." (3) The most vividly pictorial line, "My feet sink into the oozy slime," was repeated at the end and thus impressed itself on the listener's mind more strongly than some of the others. Of course it won the vote, for each of the other trifles employed only one or two such tricks!

But the downfall of the free-verse movement was chiefly accelerated by the brilliant Spectrist hoax perpetrated by Mr. Arthur Davison Ficke and Mr. Witter Bynner—a hoax so successful that it has now become an incident in literary history. It consisted of the publication of a number of idiotic pieces of free verse supported by such elaborately meaningless critical comment as served to take in more of the unthinking enthusiasts than one might suppose possible. From the delightful account in Mr. Louis Untermeyer's *American Poetry Since 1900*<sup>1</sup> I quote the following:

"In 1916, poetry was enjoying 'boom times.' Poetry magazines were breaking out everywhere. Prizes were blossoming on every bush; anthologies were thicker than office-seekers in Washington. It was the time of manifestos, movements, overnight schools, sudden departures. The Cubists, Futurists, Imagists, Impressionists, Vorticists had all taken a hand at rejuvenating the staid and perplexed Muse. And so, in November, the literary world accepted, with a mixture of complacency and sophistication, a book of poetic experiments entitled *Spectra*

<sup>1</sup> New York: Henry Holt & Co.

(Mitchell Kennerley, 1926). There was a properly cryptic dedication to Remy de Gourmont by Emanuel Morgan (described as an American painter who had studied in Paris but had not succeeded) and a characteristic prose preface by the other half of the school, Anne Knish ('a Hungarian woman who had written for European journals and had published a volume of poems in Russian under a Latin title.') . . .

"Within a few months, the Spectrists had arrived! *Others*, *A Magazine of the New Verse*, devoted its entire January 1917 number to *Spectra*; William Marion Reedy, after private commendations of this new and 'virile school,' published his enthusiasms in his *Reedy's Mirror*; John Gould Fletcher wrote of their 'vividly memorable lines'; an erudite essayist in *The Forum* analyzed and extolled the poems, which were headed (not with such ordinary things as titles) but with opus numbers; *The Little Review* requested poems and published them with gusto and congratulations. Disciples announced themselves overnight—the battlefield of 'this most daring of the new tendencies' was clearly won. Revolutionary poets proved their radicalism by excoriating those of their fellows who refused to recognize the advent of a new power in literature; reviewers and undergraduates deserted their fixed stars to gape at this new and brilliant constellation."

When it finally appeared that all this hubbub was over a hoax, the supporters of free verse retreated with becoming humility, the movement continued a short time, and then died without pain.

Once a reaction against free verse had set in, the form was repeatedly subjected to critical analysis which commonly resulted in adverse judgment. My own analysis

shows several inherent defects in free verse which will prevent the majority of readers from enjoying it. I propose to touch on them briefly.

First of all, our natural disgust with prose disguised by the printer's art (free verse of type *a*) naturally has spread to all free verse, so that the genuine article suffers from resembling the false. Though this is only an unlucky accident, the associative instincts are so strong that we are often predisposed against a piece the instant we see that it is not in regular metrical form. So far as this is true, free verse labors under a handicap.

A second defect is that free verse seems to many people to be the unorganized product of an undisciplined mind. It suggests to them the sound of a violin played by a beginner who considers himself above the drudgery of practice and who has not the ear to recognize his own false notes. It recalls to their memory painful amateur nights in vaudeville. In its most unhappy moments of undisciplined awkwardness it reminds them of the savage who stole the missionary's coat and wore it wrong side before. Even at its best it is offensive to people who like art perfected by practice.

Next, even the people who enjoy free verse must regret its lack of mnemonic appeal. Poems with heavily interlocked rimes, like those of Shelley's *Cloud* or Poe's *Raven*, stick in the memory very easily; and even blank verse has enough rhythmic regularity to make it easier to learn than free verse. Now it tickles one's vanity, at least subconsciously, to be able to recall the exact words of a poem,

and the satisfaction so derived produces a very nice critical problem: Is this mnemonic appeal something that tends to produce great poetry in itself? The answer is "No," but with certain reservations. Though I can never forget the exact words of

"Little Miss Muffet  
Sat on a tuffet,"

I am perfectly sure that such a jingle is in no sense a "great poem." On the other hand, I do feel that something important is added to *Rabbi Ben Ezra* by the mnemonic appeal of the opening couplet—

"Grow old along with me,  
The best is yet to be."

At least this quality is a convenience, and perhaps it is a good deal more. Perhaps it is a very significant factor whenever the memorable phrase is doubly memorable—both easy to remember and worth remembering. In any case it is something very prominent in all hypnotic poetry and completely lacking in most free verse.

There is, moreover, in free verse a certain indefinable lack—a want of something that neither it nor bald prose can ever achieve. What Wordsworth wrote in the 1800 *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads* about the inferiority of prose to verse may be quoted and applied in every important particular to the inferiority of free verse to the conventional forms:

“Now the music of harmonious metrical language, the sense of difficulty overcome, and the blind association of pleasure which has been previously received from works of rhyme or metre of the same or similar construction, an indistinct perception perpetually renewed of language closely resembling that of real life, and yet, in the circumstance of metre, differing from it so widely—all these imperceptibly make up a complex feeling of delight, which is of the most important use in tempering the painful feeling always found intermingled with powerful descriptions of the deeper passions. This effect is always produced in pathetic and impassioned poetry; while, in lighter compositions, the ease and gracefulness with which the Poet manages his numbers are themselves confessedly a principal source of the gratification of the Reader. All that it is *necessary* to say, however, upon this subject, may be effected by affirming, what few persons will deny, that of two descriptions, either of passions, manners, or characters, each of them equally well executed, the one in prose and the other in verse, the verse will be read a hundred times where the prose is read once.”

To conclude our analysis of the inherent defects of free verse, it is only necessary to consider from a more strictly psychological point of view than Wordsworth's the effect of its sound pattern on the majority of readers. Perhaps the contrast between free verse and hypnotic verse may clarify the matter. It is evident that free verse can never be strictly hypnotic in its effect on most listeners, for there is never enough regularity of sound pattern to fix the attention primarily on the rhythmic beats and to deaden a condition of mental alertness. This, of course, is not in itself a fault; many of the great poems of our language are not strictly hypnotic, as every one knows. The sound pat-

tern of free verse is, however, so persistently irregular that a composition in that form is likewise outside the realm of that semihypnotic technique by which innumerable poets have given to their listeners a touch of the dreamy ecstasy of trance.

In so far as I understand the theory of what patterns of sound are essential to hypnotic poetry—and I doubt if any one understands it completely—those most effective seem to involve regularity of accentual rhythm plus *more than the ear anticipates* of the delicate harmonies which make the pattern more elaborate but not appreciably less regular. Exact rime, some tendency to compel the voice to repeat a regular cycle of rising and falling pitch, heavy playing on little groups of vowels and of consonants—these are elements which in hypnotic poetry one finds so combined as to make a pattern of sound as regular as well can be, but more intricate than the listeners expect. And we know from experience that this works out very well in its practical effect on the listeners. Most of them do not care to hear the national anthem played out of time by a single instrument, but played in time by a full orchestra—that is different!

Now the freest verse is not prose—it has just enough regularity of pattern to invite the reader's rhythmic sense to be constantly alert, but it is continually disappointing that alertness. Hypnotic verse is ever keying the rhythmic sense up to feel an even richer enjoyment than it is used to. The one subjects a person with a strong sense of rhythm to the same annoyance that he feels in dancing when the



music is out of tempo. The other not only satisfies a person with a strong sense of rhythm but positively delights him.

Since, then, free verse finds most of us predisposed against it, since it disappoints the orderly, disciplined mind by its slovenliness and fails to leave implanted in the memory whatever beauties it has, since it lacks what Wordsworth found most delightful in poetry, and since it persistently neglects to wave the magic wand of hypnotic art—what merit can it have? Has it any possible advantage over good literary prose? Personally I am not responsive to most free verse, but this very fact puts me on my guard against condemning it entirely.

Here as always in a complex problem of this sort we must be sure of our ground. We must recognize that rhythm is primarily subjective, and then despite this confusing fact forced on our intelligence by psychology, we must advance and see our way clear to speaking objectively of “the rhythm of a poem”—but with a difference! Let us elaborate this a little. A series of drumbeats, equally loud and at equal intervals of time, may be counted and felt by one group of listeners in two’s (as iambic) and by another group in three’s (as anapæstic). To that extent rhythm is clearly subjective, and in any comprehensive survey this principle of subjectivity is found to have important ramifications. Thus Mr. I. A. Richards is quite comprehensible when he says in his *Principles of Literary Criticism* that rhythm “is not *in* the stimulation, it is in our response.” On the other hand, drumbeats may be

made thus: boom boom BOOM (pause), boom boom BOOM (pause), boom boom BOOM, in which case all listeners will have about the same subjective experience of anapæstic grouping, and the rhythm may be discussed as *objectively* anapaestic. Further, we must recognize the possibility of finding a pattern of sound which will rhythmically satisfy a few listeners but not many; and it is this element of varied personal reaction which continually makes inexact most of our generalizations about free verse. Finally we must recognize that even when a rhythm has an objective existence, it may cause pleasure to one person and annoyance to another.

With these ideas in mind, let me restate in more general terms what I have already said near the end of Chapter V in favor of Whitman's versification. We can recognize that free verse at its best causes some people to respond pleasantly to the same small units (two-syllable and three-syllable rhythms) which are repeated with considerable regularity in semimetrical or "measured" prose. That is to say, free verse shares with the "measured" prose of Macpherson's *Ossian* a quality which satisfies certain people who feel it to be a happy medium between the irregular rhythms of ordinary prose and the standardized rhythms of conventional verse. And where we find various classes of people whose rhythmic response to, say, Whitman's free verse is radically different, one cannot do better than accept the fact without argument. The rhythmic response to such stimulus is very satisfying to a limited number of readers.

Furthermore, free verse adapts itself more naturally than prose to the effective use of repetition. Even as a refrain is virtually impossible to handle in prose, so most of the other reiterative devices have been associated with popular poetry and with verse in general more than with prose. Such devices catch the eye of the reader more readily when the composition is printed line by line in the manner of verse; they impress themselves on the silent reader and they allow any one who is reading aloud time enough to modify his reading to emphasize the intended effect. Whitman was a master of this technique; and the failure of his imitators to duplicate his success is no more an argument against the merit of free verse as a form, than is Tennyson's inability to write great drama an argument against the merit of drama.

Finally, free verse as distinguished from prose, has the quality of making the line-units stand out on the printed page according to the author's intent. Now in free verse of type *a* (which Mr. Perry defines as "nothing but prose disguised by the art of typography") there may be no gain from such a line-by-line arrangement because the line may not be a natural unit but an arbitrary one. But in real free verse the line-units may resemble each other in such ways as to set up a subtle but satisfying large-scale rhythmic response. People who are accustomed to reading the Psalms aloud responsively will inevitably understand some of the features of this "large-scale" rhythmic effect: each line-unit of free verse may contain a unit of thought; if so, it is end-stopt and lends itself to a rising and

falling pitch pattern which is duplicated in other end-stopt lines of the same length; each of several successive lines may contain an image, or may otherwise distinguish itself as a natural unit to be coördinated with other lines of the same sort. Thus free verse, even without making any use of metrical effects, may produce a large-scale, line-by-line rhythmic reaction which distinguishes it from prose, and which a skillful artist may utilize to the enjoyment of many readers.



## VIII

# IS POETRY AN ESCAPE FROM REALITY?\_\_\_\_\_

THE “new psychology” has brought a new complaint against poetry: “Poetry,” we are now told, “is merely an escape from reality.” Personally I have a good deal of respect for certain phases of the new psychology when it is treated by serious-minded people who have something more than a smattering of Freudianism. Let us examine the charge and see whether another idol of ancient superstition is to be shattered, or whether the attack is merely an effort to “debunk” something that has no “bunk” about it.

Historically there has always been a controversy over the apparent untruthfulness of poetry. Almost every classic defense of poetry takes the position so frankly stated by Plutarch that “bards often falsify, sometimes intentionally, and sometimes unintentionally.” But again, almost every such defense reaffirms and enlarges on the sound Aristotelian view that poetry is more philosophical and has a deeper seriousness than even history. Obviously the poet, like the novelist, may invent fictions in the interest of a larger truth. Since Sidney’s *Apologie* and Shelley’s *Defense*, the consensus of opinion has been “Not . . . that Poetrie abuseth mans wit, but, that mans wit abuseth Poetrie.”

In the eighteen-forties, however, Poe reopened the con-

troversy, or started a similar one, by his repeated affirmation that poetry and truth were like oil and water, that they simply would not mix. His critical views gave lustre to his own verses, and his own verses so well illustrated his views that a good deal of confusion has resulted. This difficulty was in turn clarified by our realization that what Poe said was true of his own particular kind of poetry and no other. Few people take seriously nowadays the assertion that poetry is simply "the rhythmical creation of beauty," or that it has no direct connection with truth.

But the spectre will not be laid. All the old arguments against the apparent untruthfulness of poetry are being revived, repeated, and (what is more important) given point by the new psychological application of the "escape" theory. When most of life seems—in the opinion of some—to be a mere tissue of *complexes* and *escape mechanisms*, what is more plausible than that poetry should owe its popularity to the ease with which the third-rate mind may find in it an escape from the world of reality, an intoxicating relief in illusion from facts too painful to be faced? And what is more amusing than that our idol the poet should be reduced from the status of a prophet and seer to that of a mere bartender?

To be sure, that stimulating book *The Philosophy of "As If,"* which exposed so many of humanity's pet delusions, did not attack poetry on this ground—or on any other. Of course Herr Vaihinger does treat poetry as a "fiction," especially in his paraphrase of the views of F. A. Lange, but not as a fiction providing an escape

from reality into a dream that makes one forget one's troubles in the real world. On the contrary, in Lange's treatment poetic idealization of life is regarded, like *infinity*, as a useful fictitious exaggeration to express the extreme of a tendency. The value of such poetry lies in the exaltation and aspiration of contemplating a world so idealized that one becomes aware of the faults of human life, and aims to remedy them. Thus, if *The Philosophy of "As If"* has promoted the view that poetry is an escape from reality, it has done so only when the book has been misunderstood and its teaching on this point reversed!

Yet the "escape" theory is allied to the general tendency (which Herr Vaihinger's book sometimes does promote) to ridicule whatever has been traditionally revered. And since poetry, as well as religion, has suffered a good deal from a hit-or-miss iconoclasm, it may be well to consider impartially whether the view of poetry as always and inevitably an escape from reality is sound, unsound, or partly sound; and if it proves to be partly sound, to consider whether its exponents are in most cases guiding or misleading those who follow them. For the sake of clearness let me quote the key sentence from an essay in which this doctrine is vigorously set forth by a contemporary critic who holds that "poetry is a comforting piece of fiction set to more or less lascivious music," and who brings the question to a direct issue by saying that "This quality of untruthfulness pervades all poetry, good and bad."

Now though the merest tyro at criticism is sure to scent

a fallacy here, he may not so easily see just what the fallacy is; half truth is often more puzzling than complete error. In this case the fallacy is simply one of hasty generalization, of inferring because the poet has a sort of hypnotic power which he *may* use (and sometimes does use) to create a world of illusion, that he always or habitually uses it thus. Because a real untruthfulness of idea pervades some poetry, we are asked to accept the patent absurdity that it "pervades all poetry, good and bad."

On a moment's reflection the fallacy is as evident as would be a similar one in regard to oratory: thus because the orator has sometimes used his powers of persuasion—spellbinding powers somewhat akin to those of the poet—to delude his audience, some one might argue that oratory necessarily plays on the emotions to make men act contrary to their reason. But the fallacy of the hasty generalization is at once evident. Eloquence is quite as often employed to give force to truth as to error—let us hope rather oftener! One might propound an equally bare-faced fallacy about the drama: because a few fantastic plays invite us to escape from reality into fairyland—one thinks immediately of *A Midsummer-Night's Dream* or *Peter Pan*—one might advance the obviously unsound proposition that drama always deals with the romantic land of make-believe, never with life. But here the argument has reduced itself to absurdity.

Let us admit every item in the charge against poetry that can be admitted, and see to what it amounts: doubt-



less we can find poems that provide mere mental diversion. Perhaps, too, there are others which involve an actual mental perversion; certainly we suspect a taint of falsehood in some of Swinburne's hypnotic lyrics. From a moral standpoint we deplore such a tendency just as we deplore the taint of perversion in some of the pictures displayed in the booths along the Seine in Paris. But we do not greatly care; the few isolated cases are of little importance when compared with the great majority. The occasional abuse of an art scarcely justifies a critic in attacking the art itself.

The poet whose technique is psychologically intellectual *cannot* successfully promulgate any very false notions of life. The poet whose technique is hypnotic generally *does not*. Nor, if he made the effort, would he succeed in perverting his readers' ideas very seriously, for even the most deeply hypnotized subject invariably rebels against whatever is morally revolting. This striking fact about hypnotism has its parallel in the limitations of hypnotic verse: weave what spell of words you please, employ every emotional stimulus you can to put the listener *en rapport* with you, then tell him bad is good—and hear him scoff!

If we consider fairly a great number of cases, we find that poetry may be, *but usually is not*, an escape from reality; further that as an escape, poetry is seldom of the highest order. In an admirable discussion of certain phases of this question in *The Theory of Poetry*, Mr. Lascelles Abercrombie distinguishes the poetry of *refuge* (escape)

from that of *interpretation*. His conclusion (page 240) is significant—that “the poetry of interpretation cannot but be greater than the poetry of refuge.” Poets are not essentially charlatans. Even those who have mastered the art of weaving magic spells find pleasure enough in the legitimate, sensible employment of their powers. For there is a legitimate need of the hypnotic technique in poetry—the need of making truth compelling. And the more psychology shows us that men are moved by their emotions, the more we shall honor those poets who supplement intellectual conviction with the driving force of emotion.

As a refreshing change from this inadequate view that poetry is a mere escape from life, it is pleasant to turn to some passages in Matthew Arnold's *Essays in Criticism*. Now Arnold was himself a rather biased critic, and more apt to be sound in his judgment than in his logic. He had, moreover, a peculiar way of excluding from the category of great poetry all that did not involve what he called “high seriousness.” In his contention that great poetry inevitably involves a “criticism of life,” his personal prejudice is obvious. But as an antidote to the specious views under discussion, he is admirable.

“The future of poetry is immense,” says Arnold, “because in poetry, where it is worthy of its high destinies, our race, as time goes on, will find an ever surer and surer stay. There is not a creed which is not shaken, not an accredited dogma which is not shown to be questionable, not a received tradition which does not threaten to dissolve. Our religion has materialised

itself in the fact, in the supposed fact; it has attached its emotion to the fact, and now the fact is failing it. But for poetry the idea is everything; the rest is a world of illusion, of divine illusion. Poetry attaches its emotion to the idea; the idea *is* the fact. The strongest part of our religion today is its unconscious poetry. . . . We should conceive of poetry worthily, and more highly than it has been the custom to conceive of it. We should conceive of it as capable of higher uses, and called to higher destinies, than those which in general men have assigned to it hitherto. More and more mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us. . . .”

In this idea that poetry may guide us and console us by interpreting life, I cannot but think that Arnold has come to the heart of the matter. As I have suggested in Chapter VI, the great poet not only sees into the life of things, but he tells us what he sees, for his own ecstasy gives him the inspiration to speak out, and he knows, at least subconsciously, that his reader is likely to be in a sympathetic mood. Most of the world's great poets have not been afraid to reflect and interpret life as it is. The fictitious elements in their work are the accidental qualities, while the underlying truth is the essential. The supernatural machinery of the *Iliad* is no more an integral part of the human nature the epic portrays than a frame is an integral part of a picture. And so of *The Divine Comedy*, and of *Faust*. “Poetry attaches its emotion to the idea. The idea is the fact.”

A witty iconoclast might insist that Tennyson's *Ulysses*

is merely the speech of a man long dead who never lived. But if it makes impressive the nineteenth century's ideal that the search for knowledge is a worthy end in itself, it has fulfilled its high purpose. To say that we read it to escape from everyday life into an imaginary existence some thousands of years ago, is very evident nonsense, for the spirit that Tennyson shows in a Ulysses who will "follow knowledge like a sinking star" regardless of whether he reaches the Happy Isles, is simply the spirit of the great scientist of the modern world. Nor does the lover of poetry need to have the poem rewritten about a biologist in a laboratory patiently seeking a cure for cancer! The glowing idea is the same whoever the tireless seeker after knowledge may be—Ulysses, Shackleton, Pasteur, or the unknown and unsuccessful man with the microscope and the germ-laden test tubes.

If a master spirit has given us his most sublime thoughts uttered in a moment when he has shaken off the trammels of self-conscious reticence, if he has so blended beauty with truth that we hear him with pleasure, if he has woven such a pattern of sound that his exact words impress themselves indelibly on our memories, and if by supreme art he has made these sublime thoughts so moving that they enter our subconscious minds to remain with us always, what adequate thanks can we give? If Milton was right in saying that "A good book is the precious life-blood of a master spirit, embalmed and treasured up on purpose to a life beyond life," what can we say of a good

poem? Even the enthusiasm of Arnold seems to fall short when he says, "Poetry is nothing less than the most perfect speech of man, that in which he comes nearest to being able to utter the truth."



## IX

# THE SEAT OF THE SCORNFUL\_\_\_\_\_

**I**N this chapter I wish to indulge in a little protest against those current critical prejudices which militate most strongly against the proper appreciation of hypnotic and semihypnotic poetry. The topic is one which some readers might wish to see expanded to include all the common fallacies of criticism by which our good sense is offended—truly a legion! But there are a few—some of them rather subtle—which are marshalled against this special kind of poetry so often that a volume like this would be incomplete without an attempt to neutralize their pernicious effect.

I do not believe criticism in the twentieth century has any vice equal to the habit, so prevalent a century ago, of damning a man's poetry because one did not like his politics, but it has some amazing faults. The one most universal, of which many magazine writers are habitually guilty in print, and of which we are all doubtless guilty in conversation, is the tendency to sacrifice truth to interest. Anything sensational makes good "copy" these days, and it is very profitable to sit in the seat of the scornful. Now when some brilliant iconoclast overthrows the heroes of other days in a spirit of high comedy, *à la* Mr. John Erskine, there is much merriment and no real harm.

But when a sophomoric cynicism creeps into criticism of poetry, it is time to call a halt.

### JEALOUSY

One of the pertinent questions which Robert Buchanan long ago said should be asked in judging a critic's competence to make a fair and intelligent estimate of another man's work is this: "Has he written anything himself, and has he been *soured*?" Thus it appears that before the term *inferiority complex* was known, the effect of personal jealousy in warping criticism was recognized quite as well as today. We must never forget it! It happens that a good many of our professional critics are also poets, or poetasters, who have written something and been "soured" by the cold reception which the public has given to their efforts. Often enough these poetical efforts have been manifestations of the "new spirit" which inclines towards interest and vividness but lacks mature wisdom and perfection of structure, and in some cases the lack of adequate structure has resulted in actual slovenliness of versification. When such poet-critics attempt to cry up their own wares, whether consciously or unconsciously, by crying down the productions of the great Victorians, there appears to be no limit to the smug self-assurance with which they attack their predecessors. Nor is this always a strictly personal matter: often a critic, not himself a poet, belongs to a literary coterie that has suffered a group inferiority complex, and in his comments on po-

etry in general it is evident that he is singularly partial.

What criticism of poetry needs, before it can proceed to establish itself on a sound basis, is a weeding out of insincerity and jealousy. We are tired of the cynical sneer, of the assumption that everything Victorian is necessarily worthless, of the fallacious insinuation that poems produced in the same half-century—or by the same author—are all to be lumped together with the comment that “any one who can admire the poetry of So-and-so would join a Browning society.” Let the cleverest and most fallaciously brilliant of contemporary criticasters gather a few dozen critical absurdities from our literary reviews, reprint them with caustic comment, and turn the force of his ridicule against all those who make a practice of sacrificing truth to sensational interest—himself included!

### STRICTLY SILENT READING

Another question which indicates whether a critic is able to pass fair and adequate judgment upon a poem, especially a hypnotic poem, is this: “Does he make a practice of reading aloud or not?” But here, lest we do an injustice to a large group of critics, we must in fairness recognize that there are three ways of reading poetry (with reference to the pattern of sound), and we must distinguish these three ways even at the cost of treating them somewhat technically.

Class I. The person who habitually reads aloud is presumably able to do justice to the pattern of sound.



Class II. Less certain is the status of the person who, though not reading aloud, hears "to himself" every syllable of every word and probably moves his larynx with every syllable though he may not be aware of the motion. Such a reader hears "to himself" five distinct syllables in

Forgive us our debts

and seven distinct syllables in

Forgive us our trespasses.

We may call him the *silent but auditing* reader. He will often get the tone values of a poem almost as well as if he were reading aloud—at least he will get the more obvious ones. It is doubtful, however, whether he apprehends the subtleties—the exquisite delicacies of consonantal *return*, the pitch pattern, and the prolonged tones of a line like

"Where through the long-drawn aisle and fretted vault."

In general one can never be quite sure whether a critic of this class is able to comment intelligently on questions of versification or on the psychological effect produced by hypnotic poetry.

Class III. The last class is represented by the person who is not only silent in his reading of poetry but who is also non-auditing; we may call his reading *strictly silent*. He grasps a poem in a purely intellectual way, skimming it,

if it is easy, just as he would skim a piece of easy prose. To him *debts* and *trespasses* are merely loose synonyms for *sins*; in reading the word *trespasses* he has no feeling of three distinct syllables nor of the hissing of the repeated *s*. Such a method of reading is almost as valuable in skimming the newspapers as it is harmful in reading verse, and most people take advantage of it in the former case. Thus after reading a report of the case of *Jones vs. Vanhomrigh*, one may know all the facts of the case and be aware that the litigants are Jones and some one whose name begins with *V* or perhaps *Van*, yet one may not know whether the *Van* person has a name of two syllables or three or four. Now in reading hypnotic poetry by this strictly silent method, one gets the principal ideas and the more colorful images, but one never undergoes the trance-producing stimulus of the soothing verse.

As critics of versification, then, readers of Class III are quite at sea; but because the professional critic must read omnivorously he is often tempted to follow this line of least resistance and greatest speed. When the poem in question is a hypnotic one, which achieves its effect principally through the emotions and stimulates these emotions by its special technique of hypnotic versification, the critical comment that results is inevitably comic. To expect valuable criticism of a hypnotic poem from a strictly silent reader would be—to quote a happy phrase by which Mr. Alfred Noyes pays his respects to certain critics of Tennyson—“like asking a puppy to direct the hand of a great surgeon during a delicate operation.”

## UNSCIENTIFIC DISSECTION

Another difficulty with contemporary criticism of poetry is its tendency to pick a poem apart, regardless of whether it is intellectualist or hypnotic, and appraise it line by line. Now an intellectualist poem has some resemblance to an elaborate piece of jewelry; each stone may be examined as an individual gem, and the value of the whole is partly determined by the perfection of the separate stones. To subject each stone of such a piece of jewelry, or each sentence of an intellectualist poem, to the closest critical scrutiny will give the connoisseur a surer sense of the value of the whole piece. But the rhythmic passes by which a hypnotist puts the subject into a state of hypnosis cannot be isolated and criticized by any ordinary standards of intellect or of art; nor can the rhythmic phrases of a hypnotic poem. The only certain basis for criticism in such cases is the study of the total effect which the rhythmic passes produce when experienced under suitable conditions. In this connection it is hardly necessary to remark that the absurd controversy in the English press of 1927 as to whether Longfellow ever wrote "a single line" of great poetry was the more absurd in so far as his poetry is hypnotic.

Now a hypnotic poem resembles not an elaborate piece of jewelry, but rather—if I may take my analogy from a different field—a representative painting by J. M. W. Turner. Seen as a whole from the proper distance, such

a painting presents certain luminous color effects not often found in more conventional work. It is a platitude that the close scrutiny of detail which brings out the best in, say, a Hogarth, is absurd for a Turner—and every critic takes it for granted. But in poetry some critics still blunder along applying, at least by implication, the same standards to *Rabbi Ben Ezra* and *The Raven*! In painting we have learned that a certain marine blue-green may be produced either by brushing the canvas with paint previously mixed from blue and a dash of yellow, or by dotting the canvas with tiny daubs of blue among which are intermingled here and there daubs of yellow. Whether the second method of obtaining the desired color, with its added sparkle to the waves, is a higher or lower form of art than the first, I do not for the moment care. But I have no hesitation in saying that to isolate individual dots of blue or yellow, examine them under a magnifying glass, and ridicule them, would only bring ridicule on the head of the critic. And so it is with certain poems: “We murder to dissect”; and when, having dissected, we condemn an individual line or phrase out of its context, we ally ourselves with the puppy who, as Mr. Noyes pointed out, is not competent to direct the hand of a great surgeon during a delicate operation. I do not say that a hypnotic poem can never be dissected to advantage, but the point is that such dissection to be useful must be done with a difference, and that it seldom adds much to our aesthetic experience.

## FEAR OF THE DIDACTIC

One of the most evident characteristics of modern criticism is its overwhelming tendency to condemn the didactic in both fiction and poetry. The old custom of "pointing a moral" is so obsolete, so out of keeping with the tendency of the age, that he would be a brave writer indeed who should attempt to revive it.

Whatever moral value a piece of literature may contain should be found by the reader himself, we are told, or not at all. Nay, more, the reader of narrative must be left to add from his own imagination the concluding incidents of the story. Only children, we are assured, enjoy reading, "And so they married, and lived happily ever after." The sophisticated reader requires a different ending: "Darling," he murmured, "will you—can you ever—" A far-away light gleamed in her eyes. FINIS.

Or, better still:

"Darling," he murmured\*\*\*\*\* FINIS.

Roughly speaking, that is supposed to be the successful formula. It is based on the reiterated principle that "the adult mind enjoys solving a puzzle—finding the moral without (obvious) aid from the author, completing the happy romance by drawing on its own (supposedly) wide knowledge of human nature."

The author must, of course, avoid the pitfall of being over subtle. Should he leave his story too far from com-

plete, he will find favor with only the few who have leisure to put together the clues given until at length they find, or think they find, the correct solution. Thus, the perfect formula is to give just enough hints to guide the reader inevitably in the right direction, but always without his knowing he is being guided.

And how well the formula serves! How flattered we are to get "the point" of the story all by ourselves! How complete our scorn of those novels of Dickens where we are told just how every villain is punished and how every good character is happily married or sent to Australia! And how superior we find the detached, coldly objective poetry of today, to those works of Wordsworth, Longfellow, and Tennyson, where, in an old-fashioned concluding line or stanza, the poet points a moral!

Thus we are told that the last stanza of Keats's *Ode on a Grecian Urn* is artistically far below the level of the rest of the poem because it openly states what the reader might have been left to infer for himself. Of course "Beauty is truth, truth beauty"! Why be so childish as to say so? By the same token, I suppose, some of these opponents of the openly didactic would think Tennyson's *Ulysses* more satisfying for the omission of the concluding exhortation,

"To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield."

Perhaps, too, *Crossing the Bar* could be improved to suit the popular taste if the poet's hope to see his "Pilot face to face" were merely suggested instead of being openly stated!

This almost universal objection to the didactic is not of recent origin. It was, indeed, Poe who, nearly a hundred years ago, strengthened his brilliant attacks on Longfellow by his effective use of the phrase "The heresy of the didactic." And although Poe's objection to the art of Longfellow was largely a matter of personal jealousy, the phrase he used fell in so well with the taste of the late nineteenth century, that his view came to be generally accepted. And now we of the twentieth century find ourselves facing a singular paradox. In spite of our boasted independence of literary dogma, our amusement at "the canons of criticism," our frank admiration of anything unconventional in fiction or poetry, we still cling, with a violence almost amounting to fanaticism, to one fundamental of literary faith: we will not tolerate the heresy of the didactic!

Can it be possible that a more enlightened age will smile at our naïveté? Can it be that all this beating about the bush to avoid the inevitable is an artificial fad, comparable to the elaborate circumlocutions of eighteenth-century "poetic diction"? Can it be that in literary taste, as in many phases of social life, there are not merely two levels of intelligence, but three—and that, like those half-cultivated persons who eat corn on the cob by cutting off the kernels with a knife, we are still on the second level?

In the social relations of men and women, the western world is slowly climbing from the second level of intelligence to the third, and the third has a good deal in com-

mon with the first. Already we feel a certain amused superiority when we attend a revival of one of those well-made plays reflecting the strained and artificial code of honor of the mid-nineteenth century. We smile indulgently to see reproduced the absurdities of a society in which a girl's reputation was inevitably tainted by her being unchaperoned for a few minutes in the company of a male, and in which the husband who found his wife in another man's "chambers," no matter on what errand, "made his arrangements" for a speedy divorce.

Can it be that in objecting to "the heresy of the didactic" we are—but even the writer of a criticism of criticism dares not make his point too obvious. Let the "adult mind" of the reader complete the question, and discover the critical significance of the answer, for himself!

In general I am sympathetic with the rule of thumb that direct teaching and preaching had better be done in prose than in verse. Yet I cannot forget that most rules have their important exceptions, and that absolute *tabus* are often mere superstitions. When we issue a critical fiat excluding a poet's moralizing from the class of good poetry, we may refuse him the right to express an essential part of his personality. Whittier's two lines are a case in point:

"Alas for him who never sees  
The stars shine through his cypress-trees!"

The excision of such moralizing lines as these from *Snow-Bound* would not produce anything quite so ludicrous as



"*Hamlet* without Hamlet," but it would give us a mere winter idyl without Whittier himself.

Such considerations must not, however, be overstressed. They cannot be legitimately used to justify such goody-goody moralizing as Longfellow appended to his poem on *The Village Blacksmith*:

"Thanks, thanks to thee, my worthy friend,  
For the lesson thou hast taught!" etc.

For if any one argues that such sentiments express an essential part of the poet's personality, we may reply with justice, "We don't like a personality which moralizes so much that the tail wags the dog."

In brief, criticism should not reverse, but merely modify, its attitude towards didacticism in poetry. Victorian verse in general doubtless suffers from a profusion of the moralizing tendency; but in isolated cases it is better art to state an opinion than to dodge it, and in other isolated cases it is better art for the poet to reveal his personality than to mask it. If a good many hypnotic poems of the nineteenth century are somewhat didactic, they should not be condemned offhand on that ground.

#### THE POINT OF DIMINISHING RETURNS IN POETIC THEORY

The "battle ground of poetic theory" now lies, I am informed, in the attempt to define "the true function of the poet," or to define "pure poetry" in a way that will be acceptable to all. Such an effort seems, at least super-

ficially, to bode well for the future of criticism and, indirectly, of poetry.

This "battle ground" was reached by a gradual process of enlargement so natural as to be almost inevitable. To obtain critical standards we have grouped together certain similar poems and compared their merits until we have been able to formulate certain theories about what makes for poetic excellence in that group. It makes little difference whether the poems compared have for their point of similarity a common subject, or a common type, or a common author; the essential is that we arrive at a generalization—some bit of poetic theory—that will be of aid in appreciating another poem which we may wish to examine critically. This is, of course, the way of the literary world, and a very sound way.

But students of poetic theory have not been content to stop with studying small groups of similar poems and drawing limited conclusions. They have felt it natural to throw together small groups into larger ones, and to evolve poetic theories including proportionately larger areas of the field of poetry. And it seems, again at least superficially, that poetic theory will have reached the ideal stage when it stops talking about the parts and turns to the whole—when it defines "the true function of the poet" and "pure poetry." But the search for general standards, for all-inclusive definitions of "the true function of the poet" and of "pure poetry," is open to serious objections both general and specific. These objections are, I believe, sound, and they suggest the plainest reasons why the existing

battle over poetic theory has come to be something of a musical-comedy affair.

The study of economics has given the world a fuller understanding of the law of diminishing returns: that an acre of land, for instance, produces a larger and larger crop in proportion to the amount of fertilizer used *only up to a certain point*. But beyond this point a further increase in the amount of fertilizer used will not produce results in proportion. Eventually we reach a situation where more fertilizer would actually do harm by burning out the crop entirely. Thus although some things are so related that it is profitable to carry a certain policy on and on indefinitely, other things are so related that we encounter a point of diminishing returns. This essential fact is too often forgotten by students of aesthetics in general and of poetics in particular. Here to say, "Let us generalize about larger and larger groups of poems until we are able to generalize about all poetry," is to neglect the point of diminishing returns. The range of poetry is so vast that, long before our enlarged groupings cover the whole field, we find we have included poems in which the points of difference so far outweigh the points of similarity that comparative analysis is puerile.

Cooks, architects, and other practical people find a point beyond which broader generalizations lead to useless platitudes. Culinary experts deal with the cooking of individual dishes, and of classes such as soups, meats, and salads; but should they try to deal with the art of preparing all foods, their generalization would be as flat as a

statement that "food should be appetizing and nourishing." Architects may generalize profitably about colonial houses or about Gothic cathedrals; but there would be little value in a study of the points which colonial houses, Gothic cathedrals, railway stations, and summer cottages all have in common. And so it is of poems.

Not that it is literally impossible to generalize about *Mandalay* and the *Iliad*, but that it is silly. And the silliness is obvious except where shallow platitudes and hasty generalizations are obscured with a haze of pedantry. This, then, is a final point where certain faults must be eliminated before we can proceed to a sounder and more valuable use of the critical faculty. Poetic theorizing must not attempt the absurd; battles of theory must not be fought where *a priori* considerations show that neither side can win a victory. If we would have and enjoy good poetry, we must have sound criticism; and to have sound criticism we must limit our discussion of poetics to matters on which progress can be made.

How refreshing it is to run across Mr. H. W. Garrod's vigorous refusal to be misled by a sweeping generalization! In answering the Abbé Bremond's assertion that poetry and indeed all the arts "aspire to join prayer," Mr. Garrod (on page 39 of *The Profession of Poetry and Other Lectures*) trenchantly replies that "some poetry is very like prayer, and other poetry is as little like it as could be."

Two thousand years and more of discussion, and still no definition of poetry on which we can agree! Of course.

It was inevitable. Mr. H. L. Mencken in his essay on *The Poet and his Art* has conveniently listed several definitions of poetry so contradictory as to need no comment; then he has added one of his own, with which I fancy few thinking people will agree. And the list can be multiplied indefinitely. Not until poetic theory narrows its efforts to a more modest and practical scope, not until its generalizations are held short of the point of diminishing returns, can we expect a sounder criticism.

A more specific objection to the arguments over "the true function of the poet" and the meaning of "pure poetry" is that such arguments beg the question by assuming without proof the dubious idea that some one function of the poet is "truer" or more essential than all other functions; likewise that some one kind of poetry is "purer" than all other kinds. Such is not likely to be the case. Poets, like gardeners, raise different flowers in their respective gardens—who shall say whether the tulip or the daffodil is "purer"?

Another serious objection to trying to generalize about the whole field of poetry lies in the personal factor, which we cannot escape. It is psychologically demonstrable that different individuals are aesthetically responsive in different ways and to different extents. Some are tone deaf in music but may have for compensation an extra degree of sensitiveness in some other particular. In their sense of rhythm some are natural "timers," others are "stressers." Another class—perhaps they will be called "pitchers"—are keenly sensitive to the rising and falling pattern of pitch.

Some are more responsive emotionally than intellectually, and *vice versa*. The proverb *de gustibus non disputandum* is in reality perfectly applicable here. No matter how sincere a writer may be, when he writes about "pure poetry" he is probably thinking of the sort of poetry to which he himself is most responsive. Let him face the facts.

I have called this chapter "The Seat of the Scornful" because the critical positions I have been assailing all have something in common which may lead good poetry to be misjudged. The tendencies to let criticism be warped by jealousy, by strictly silent reading, by unwarranted dissection, by universal *tabu* of the didactic, and by futile battles over the definition of "pure poetry"—all have this in common: they tend to make us neglect the art of those nineteenth-century poets whose ability was in the production of hypnotic and semihypnotic verse. Critics who hold these positions are aiming, whether consciously or not, to set up the poetry of the present day as the world's ideal by the simple process of irrationally attacking that which preceded it chronologically. From a dispassionate standpoint this is a sin against literature—this sitting in the seat of the scornful. It is unworthy of our civilization. It would be equally unworthy if we were to scorn the efforts of new poets without having some rational ground for so doing. Every poet is entitled to state his own case, and to make a controversial matter of it if he will. But among poets themselves there is often an amaz-

ing degree of tolerance. Whitman was an arch-controversialist, yet his tolerance, his avowed admiration of men who had done the other sort of thing and done it well, is an inspiration. We critics may well ride our own literary hobbies—that is what we can do best—but we are wise not to scorn the work of poets whose tastes are a little different from our own. As Whitman said in his old age, commenting on the achievement of Poe, the American poet most unlike him in taste and standards: “The poetic area is very spacious—has room for all—has so many mansions!”



## X

# TOWARDS

## A SOUNDER CRITICISM\_\_\_\_\_

IN working towards a sounder criticism of poetry, something can be accomplished by the negative process of shunning the pitfalls discussed in the preceding chapter. If we avoid the prejudices due to jealousy, if we read aloud poems that ought to be read aloud, if we refrain from dissecting works of art that can only be experienced as wholes, if we modify a little our superstitious fear of the didactic, and if we keep clear of those controversies which are inherently futile, we shall at least have made a start. But something more positive is desirable.

In a general way criticism of poetry cannot hope to emerge very far from its present chaotic state until we call on physics and psychology to give us technical information of fundamental importance. At the present time technical information of a certain sort is not available; criticism proceeds largely by an odd combination of guesswork and a supposed "feeling" for art—a combination by which any one can often make out as plausible a case as the mature critic whose taste has been cultivated by long years of reading.

What scientific facts we need from physics are specifically these: an accurate analysis and codification of the elements which combine to produce the pattern of sound



in each of several dozen poems which have maintained their popularity despite the test of time. On the basis of such an analysis we can eventually achieve what we have not achieved up to the present time—a definitive treatise on versification, or at least a definitive treatise on certain kinds of verse. *Stress* and *time* have, of course, been measured with some accuracy, and a little scientific work has been done on *pitch*, but it is still the fact that our treatises are based for the most part on two elements out of half a dozen. This is deplorable. Moreover, since Lanier's *Science of English Verse* opened the whole topic as long ago as 1880, it is inexcusable.

One body of technical information that we need from psychology relates to the effect on the listener of certain sounds and elaborate combinations of sounds. Without belittling the progress that has already been made by keen searchers for truth, we must recognize that much remains to be done. What patterns of sound best produce, or harmonize with, certain emotions? Is it true that certain vowels tend to stimulate different emotions respectively, according as they are "dark" or "light"? After arranging the vowel sounds in an orderly phonetic table, can we say anything accurate about their appropriateness to convey different ideas and to rouse different emotions? These are vital matters for any one who would fathom the mysteries of great literature, whether prose or verse. Information more pertinent to verse is particularly needed on the psychological effects of refrain, length of line, rime, and of the different rhythms. The phrase "heavy trochees

and tripping iambs" suggests something pertinent, but it is all too easy to jump at conclusions. As soon as we gather fuller evidence, we find our offhand conjectures hopelessly inaccurate. Something can be done—must be done. Until it is done we can scarcely hope to comprehend the subtle artistry which, even in *Evangeline*, has proved too elusive to be understood by critics yet too effective not to be felt by the reading public.

For example, in our present state of ignorance on these fundamental matters I may guess (but it is hardly more than a guess) that the most soothing pattern of verse to be produced in the English language is iambic pentameter, generally end-stopt, rimed. I may guess that this type of verse will constitute the strongest available physical stimulus to fix the listener's attention on the mere sound, while dulling his mental faculties. If my guess is correct, or approximately so, I have hit on a clue to the success of Gray's *Elegy*, for, as suggested in Chapter IV, the broad, easy platitudes of the poem require an emotional sympathy between reader and poet rather than any special intellectual agreement. But (again, if my guess is correct) I have also hit on the explanation of the varying degrees of admiration and dislike with which Pope and his imitators are read by later generations. These gentlemen, it seems, inadvertently selected, of all possible forms of verse, the one most ineffective for their peculiarly intellectual poems. If their "rocking-horse couplets" be read aloud in a casual way, it requires a supreme effort of will for the listener to focus his attention on the witty subtleties

and argumentative points with which the poems abound. Unless the reader employs every artifice of pause, inflection, and emphasis, to bring out the meaning in spite of the lulling pattern of sound, the wisdom of the *Essay on Criticism* and even the playful brilliance of *The Rape of the Lock* will be lost. To get the best out of Pope and his imitators, then, it may be well to resort to strictly silent reading or, better, to take the most effective couplets quite out of their context. While we may infer from their practice that the Augustan poets did not understand the psychological principle they so persistently violated, there is reason to suppose that Pope himself eventually came to have some inkling of the incongruity of the situation. Long before his death he began working on the plan of an epic poem entitled *Brutus*, which, had he lived to compose it, would have been his *magnum opus*. The significant point is that the epic was not to be in heroic couplets but in blank verse.

Such fascinating critical speculations are, however, but an indication of the need for specific technical aid from both physics and psychology. For the present we may as well frankly admit the chaotic state of criticism of poetry, and do what we can to promote order and good sense.

One principle to which any critic might well agree is that he should proceed with great caution in disparaging a poem if he is not sympathetic to that kind of poetry. If, for example, a critic does not like long narrative poems while much of the world does, let him suspect that the difficulty lies with himself more than with the poem in

question. If, however, he usually responds to a certain type of poetry, but finds no virtue in one particular poem of that type, then of course he may be surer of his ground in pronouncing an adverse opinion. Let this principle be applied generally and with becoming humility on the part of critics. We are human; each of us likes to think he has catholic tastes, but individually we have not. The range of poetry is too great for one critic to be sensitive to all kinds.

Another principle to which we might agree—unless this book has been written quite in vain—is that we must consider poems, and especially certain ones, from a particular psychological standpoint. Granted that it is often well to classify poems conventionally by authors and to give each its appropriate biographical criticism, again by types with criticism suited to each type, again by subjects with comparison of the manner in which the same subject is treated in different poems, and so on—is the time not ripe for psychological classification as well? Shall we not distinguish the dreamy, persuasive hypnotism of *Love Among the Ruins* from the subtle intellectuality of *My Last Duchess*? Can we not agree that entirely different critical standards are needed for the majestic, flowing sweep of *The Battle Hymn of the Republic* and the keen, powerful irony of other war poems such as those in *The Biglow Papers*?

The study of any kind of poetry should concern itself less with the qualities it has in common with all other kinds than with the peculiar quality that is its leading

characteristic. As I said in the preceding chapter, it is not literally impossible to find points of similarity between the *Iliad* and *Mandalay*, but it is silly to hunt for them. If this leading characteristic happens to be the employment of hypnotic technique, and if the poem contains something of a hypnotic "suggestion," let us focus our attention there. How valuable is the suggestion, and how deeply does it penetrate the listener's conscious and sub-conscious minds? A persuasive orator intent on driving home a truth, no matter how sketchy his logic, is in some ways the superior of a Burke, whose tiresome arguments emptied the House so often that he came to be known as "the dinner bell." To get results is always something, and a hypnotic poem with a "suggestion" does just that. Most of the message of Gray's *Elegy* had been uttered before Gray by other poets, as Mr. John Draper has shown *in extenso* by his study of *The Funeral Elegy and English Romanticism*—but it had not been heard! Gray's credit is that he made himself heard, believed, and remembered. His plea for the humble English peasant has become immortal. General Wolfe gave credit where credit was due, and set a standard for criticism which combines truth with interest, when he said he would rather have written *The Elegy* than take Quebec.

To illustrate, a typical application of such principles may be made to a familiar semihypnotic poem, Tennyson's *Merlin and the Gleam*. This poem becomes less hypnotic in proportion as the listeners exert themselves

to trace in it an allegory of the poet's own career. But to listeners unfamiliar with the poem (who hardly become aware of the allegory) and to those so familiar with it that the allegory interprets itself without effort on their part, it is intensely hypnotic. Now criticism is puerile in such a case if it limits itself to a conventional study of the poem. Such a study is doubtless fascinating: the novelty of the metrical structure, the quaintness of individual words, the deftness with which the allegory reveals the poet's own failures and triumphs, the daring with which the word *Arthur* suggests at once King Arthur and Arthur Hallam—all these fascinating topics can be treated in the ordinary critical fashion. But that is only a beginning. The greatness of *Merlin and the Gleam* lies in the power of the spell under which it throws the listeners and in the force of its post-hypnotic suggestion—"Follow the Gleam!"

If a critic had to choose between estimating the value of the poem by ordinary literary standards or by the psychological standards of hypnotic poetry, he could not stultify himself more than by choosing the former. His most significant comments should be based on the following points: (1) That the listeners must know in advance that "the Gleam" meant to Tennyson "the higher poetic imagination" and that it may symbolize to each individual the highest ideal in his own career. (2) That listeners who have to labor over the allegory are not in a state of mind to experience the poem properly. (3) That the technique of the poem is so perfect—with its haunt-

ing rhythms, its baffling, mysterious vagueness, and its commanding climax—as to make the post-hypnotic suggestion overwhelmingly effective.

If the critic has included those essentials, he can be sure that his comment will be at once sound and interesting. Then, if he is able, he may in addition attempt the psychological analysis of *how* the effect is produced. He may count over and find that “the Gleam” is specifically mentioned eleven times, usually with a —○○— rhythm, contrasting with the more frequent pattern of—○○—, if that is significant. He may ponder over the easy steps by which the listener is made familiar with “the Gleam,” laying special emphasis on the early introduction, through the Master’s command to Merlin, of the key phrase, “Follow the Gleam.” He may trace, if he can, the entranced listener’s vague wonderings as to what it all might mean to him if he were in the poet’s place, and trace the subtle suggestions by which an idea that is vague and ethereal becomes one of definite aspiration. He may try to decide whether more, or less, of hypnotic preparation would have helped the listener into the mood of emotional responsiveness. He may note the reasons why at exactly line 124 the listener *is* in the poet’s place, and *must* “follow the Gleam.” But still the essentials of his criticism will be the three points enumerated in the preceding paragraph.

Listeners who have ever followed a gleam more inspiring than the tail-light of the automobile ahead, listeners with ambition for self-realization, listeners with a touch of that sublime aspiration that used to be called idealism—

such listeners know that *Merlin and the Gleam* is a great poem. And not least among the reasons for its greatness is its hypnotic art.

I have kept harping on hypnotic poetry in this chapter for the same reason that I have made it the subject of the whole study—because I believe it to be an important isolable phenomenon, not frequently isolated and not generally understood. Although I have no interest in disparaging masterpieces of a different type, still I do urge that here more than elsewhere is a chance for lovers of poetry to get their bearings with new accuracy, and to voyage, and voyage easily, “towards a sounder criticism.”

How important is the hypnotic technique? Is its absence always to be deplored? I think not. Is its presence a sign of greatness? Its presence is at least a sign of skilful artistry, and it may be more. There are so many qualities by virtue of which (singly or in combination) a poem may recommend itself, that the presence or absence of one is not necessarily vital, especially if the poem be short. Many of Browning's *Dramatic Lyrics* and *Dramatic Romances* show no trace of several of the usual poetic merits, yet they stand as masterpieces because they make the best possible use of a few others—subtlety of character portrayal, dramatic contrast, and climax of interest. “Who supposes that all poetry,” asks Mr. Lascelles Abercrombie in *The Theory of Poetry*, “even all the poetry which is to be called supremely good, must have all possible qualities?” If a critic should condemn, say, Brown-



ing's *Soliloquy in a Spanish Cloister* for its lack of lyric beauty and of various other poetic qualities, while completely overlooking its obvious merits, we should have no patience with him. As I have already said, it is usually some positive aspect of the leading characteristic which, if anything, makes a poem important.

Now it does not seem an unreasonable extension of this principle to include, among those qualities by virtue of which a poem may recommend itself, the spellweaving magic which has enthralled listeners from the primitive age of man down to the present day. If certain admirers of intellectualist poetry cannot respond to the spell, or if by strictly silent reading they cut themselves off from it, so much the worse for them. The fact still remains that the generality of mankind do respond to that magic and have responded ever since the dawn of history.

One finds the hypnotic quality—to speak only of English literature—in the popular ballads rich with incremental repetition, in the majestic blank verse soliloquies of Marlowe and of Shakespeare, in the grandest passages of Milton. One feels its soothing dignity in Gray's *Elegy* and its potent malignity in the curse of his *Bard*. One finds it again in the lilting melodies of Burns's lyrics, and on throughout the golden pages of nineteenth-century poetry. It still lives today in the most effective passages of Kipling and Noyes. And if the views I have advanced in this volume have any approximation to accuracy, we have good reason to believe this hypnotic quality will live on through the ages to come.



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