

## Chaos in Poetry

POETRY, they say, is a matter of words. And this is just as much true as that pictures are a matter of paint, and frescoes a matter of water and colour-wash. It is such a long way from being the whole truth that it is slightly silly if uttered sententiously.

Poetry is a matter of words. Poetry is a stringing together of words into a ripple and jingle and a run of colours. Poetry is an interplay of images. Poetry is the iridescent suggestion of an idea. Poetry is all these things, and still it is something else. Given all these ingredients, you have something very like poetry, something for which we might borrow the old romantic name of *poesy*. And *poesy*, like *bric-à-brac*, will for ever be in fashion. But poetry is still another thing.

The essential quality of poetry is that it makes a new effort of attention, and 'discovers' a new world within the known world. Man, and the animals, and the flowers, all live within a strange and for ever surging chaos. The chaos which we have got used to we call a *cosmos*. The unspeakable inner chaos of which we are composed we call *consciousness*, and *mind*, and even *civilization*. But it is, ultimately, *chaos*, lit up by *visions*, or not lit up by *visions*. Just as the rainbow may or may not light up the storm. And, like the rainbow, the vision perisheth.

But man cannot live in chaos. The animals can. To the animal all is chaos, only there are a few recurring motions and aspects within the surge. And the animal is content. But man is not. Man must wrap himself in a vision, make a house of apparent form and stability, *fixity*. In his terror of chaos he begins by putting up an umbrella between himself and the everlasting whirl. Then he paints the under-side of his umbrella like a firmament. Then he parades around, lives and dies under his umbrella. Bequeathed to his descendants, the umbrella becomes a dome, a vault, and men at last begin to feel that something is wrong.

Man fixes some wonderful erection of his own between himself and the wild chaos, and gradually goes bleached and stifled under his parasol. Then comes a poet, enemy of convention, and makes a slit in the umbrella; and lo! the glimpse of chaos is a vision, a

window to the sun. But after a while, getting used to the vision, and not liking the genuine draught from chaos, commonplace man daubs a simulacrum of the window that opens on to chaos, and patches the umbrella with the painted patch of the simulacrum. That is, he has got used to the vision; it is part of his house-decoration. So that the umbrella at last looks like a glowing open firmament, of many aspects. But alas! it is all simulacrum, in innumerable patches. Homer and Keats, annotated and with glossary.

This is the history of poetry in our era. Someone sees Titans in the wild air of chaos, and the Titan becomes a wall between succeeding generations and the chaos they should have inherited. The wild sky moved and sang. Even that became a great umbrella between mankind and the sky of fresh air; then it became a painted vault, a fresco on a vaulted roof, under which men bleach and go dissatisfied. Till another poet makes a slit on to the open and windy chaos.

But at last our roof deceives us no more. It is painted plaster, and all the skill of all the human ages won't take us in. Dante or Leonardo, Beethoven or Whitman: lo! it is painted on the plaster of our vault. Like St Francis preaching to the birds in Assisi. Wonderfully like air and birdy space and chaos of many things—partly because the fresco is faded. But even so, we are glad to get out of that church, and into the natural chaos.

This is the momentous crisis for mankind, when we have to get back to chaos. So long as the umbrella serves, and poets make slits in it, and the mass of people can be gradually educated up to the vision in the slit: which means they patch it over with a patch that looks just like the vision in the slit: so long as this process can continue, and mankind can be educated up, and thus built in, so long will a civilization continue more or less happily, completing its own painted prison. It is called completing the *consciousness*.

The joy men had when Wordsworth, for example, made a slit and saw a primrose!\* Till then, men had only seen a primrose dimly, in the shadow of the umbrella. They saw it through Wordsworth in the full gleam of chaos. Since then, gradually, we have come to see *primavera*\* nothing but primrose. Which means, we have patched over the slit.

And the greater joy when Shakespeare made a big rent and saw

emotional, wistful man outside in the chaos, beyond the conventional idea and painted umbrella of moral images and iron-bound paladins, which had been put up in the Middle Ages. But now, alas, the roof of our vault is simply painted dense with Hamlets and Macbeths, the side walls too, and the order is fixed and complete. Man can't be any different from his image. Chaos is all shut out.

The umbrella has got so big, the patches and plaster are so tight and hard, it can be slit no more. If it were slit, the rent would no more be a vision, it would only be an outrage. We should dab it over at once, to match the rest.

So the umbrella is absolute. And so the yearning for chaos becomes a nostalgia. And this will go on till some terrific wind blows the umbrella to ribbons, and much of mankind to oblivion. The rest will shiver in the midst of chaos. For chaos is always there, and always will be, no matter how we put up umbrellas of visions.

What about the poets, then, at this juncture? They reveal the inward desire of mankind. What do they reveal? They show the desire for chaos, and the fear of chaos. The desire for chaos is the breath of their poetry. The fear of chaos is in their parade of forms and technique. Poetry is made of words, they say. So they blow bubbles of sound and image, which soon burst with the breath of longing for chaos, which fills them. But the poetasters can make pretty shiny bubbles for the Christmas-tree, which never burst, because there is no breath of poetry in them, but they remain till we drop them.

What, then, of *Chariot of the Sun*?\* It is a warlike and bronzy title for a sheaf of flimsies, almost too flimsy for real bubbles. But incongruity is man's recognition of chaos.

If one had to judge these little poems for their magic of words, as one judges Paul Valéry,\* for example, they would look shabby. There is no obvious incantation of sweet noise; only too often the music of one line deliberately kills the next, breathlessly staccato. There is no particular jewellery of epithet. And no handsome handling of images. Where deliberate imagery is used, it is perhaps a little clumsy. There is no coloured thread of an idea; and no subtle ebbing of a theme into consciousness, no recognizable vision, new gleam of chaos let in to a world of order. There is only a repetition of sun, sun, sun, not really as a glowing symbol, more

as a bewilderment and a narcotic. The images in 'Sun Rhapsody' shatter one another, line by line. For the sun,

it is a forest without trees  
it is a lion in a cage of breeze  
it is the roundness of her knees  
great Hercules  
and all the seas  
and our soliloquies

The rhyme is responsible for a great deal. The lesser symbols are as confusing: sunmaids who are naiads of the water world, hiding in a cave. Only the forest becomes suddenly logical.

I am a tree whose roots are tangled in the sun  
All men and women are trees whose roots are tangled in the sun  
Therefore humanity is the forest of the sun.

What is there, then, in this poetry, where there seems to be nothing? For if there is nothing, it is merely nonsense.

And, almost, it is nonsense. Sometimes, as in the 'verse' beginning: 'sthhe fous on ssu eod', since I at least can make no head or tail of it, and the mere sound is impossible, and the mere look of it is not inspiring, to me it is just nonsense. But in a world overloaded with shallow 'sense', I can bear a page of nonsense, just for a pause.

For the rest, what is there? Take, at random, the poem called 'Néant':

Red sunbeams from an autumn sun  
Shall be the strongest wall  
To shield the sunmaids of my soul  
From worlds inimical.  
Yet sunflakes falling in the sea  
Beyond the outer shore  
Reduplicate their epitaph  
To kill the conqueror.

It is a tissue of incongruity, in sound and sense. It means nothing, and it says nothing. And yet it has something to say. It even carries a dim suggestion of that which refuses to be said.

And therein lies the charm. It is a glimpse of chaos not reduced to order. But the chaos *alive*, not the chaos of matter. A glimpse of

the living, untamed chaos. For the grand chaos is all alive, and everlasting. From it we draw our breath of life. If we shut ourselves off from it, we stifle. The animals live with it, as they live in grace. But when man became conscious, and aware of *himself*, his own littleness and puniness in the whirl of the vast chaos of God, he took fright, and began inventing God in his own image.\*

Now comes the moment when the terrified but inordinately conceited human consciousness must at last submit, and own itself part of the vast and potent living chaos. We must keep true to ourselves. But we must breathe in life from the living and unending chaos. We shall put up more umbrellas. They are a necessity of our consciousness. But never again shall we be able to put up The Absolute Umbrella, either religious or moral or rational or scientific or practical. The vast parasol of our conception of the universe, the cosmos, the firmament of suns and stars and space, this we can roll up like any other green sunshade, and bring it forth again when we want it. But we mustn't imagine it always spread above us. It is no more absolutely there than a green sunshade is absolutely there. It is casually there, only; because it is as much a contrivance and invention of our mind as a green sunshade is. Likewise the grand conception of God: this already shuts up like a Japanese parasol, rather clumsily, and is put by for Sundays, or bad weather, or a 'serious' mood.

Now we see the charm of *Chariot of the Sun*. It shuts up all the little and big umbrellas of poesy and importance, has no outstanding melody or rhythm or image or epithet or even sense. And we feel a certain relief. The sun is very much in evidence, certainly, but it is a bubble reality that always explodes before you can really look at it. And it upsets all the rest of things with its disappearing.

Hence the touch of true poetry in this sun. It bursts all the bubbles and umbrellas of reality, and gives us a breath of the live chaos. We struggle out into the fathomless chaos of things passing and coming, and many suns and different darknesses. There is a bursting of bubbles of reality, and the pang of extinction that is also liberation into the roving, uncaring chaos which is all we shall ever know of God.

To me there is a breath of poetry, like an uneasy waft of fresh air at dawn, before it is light. There is an acceptance of the limitations of consciousness, and a leaning-up against the sun-imbued world

of chaos. It is poetry at the moment of inception in the soul, before the germs of the known and the unknown have fused to begin a new body of concepts. And therefore it is useless to quote fragments. They are too nebulous and *not there*. Yet in the whole there is a breath of real poetry, the essential quality of poetry. It makes a new act of attention, and wakes us to a nascent world of inner and outer suns. And it has the poetic faith in the chaotic splendour of suns.

It is poetry of suns which are the core of chaos, suns which are fountains of shadow and pools of light and centres of thought and lions of passion. Since chaos has a core which is itself quint-essentially chaotic and fierce with incongruities. That such a sun should have a chariot makes it only more chaotic.

And in the chaotic re-echoing of the soul, wisps of sound curl round with curious soothing—

Likewise invisible winds  
Drink fire, and all my heart is sun-consoled.

And a poem such as 'Water-Lilies' has a lovely suffusion in which the visual image passes at once into sense of touch, and back again, so that there is an iridescent confusion of sense-impression, sound and touch and sight all running into one another, blending into a vagueness which is a new world, a vagueness and a suffusion which liberates the soul, and lets a new flame of desire flicker delicately up from the numbed body.

The suffused fragments are the best, those that are only comprehensible with the senses, with visions passing into touch and to sound, then again touch, and the bursting of the bubble of an image. There is always sun, but there is also water, most palpably water. Even some of the suns are wetly so, wet pools that wet us with their touch. Then loose suns like lions, soft gold lions and white lions half-visible. Then again the elusive gleam of the sun of livingness, soft as gold and strange as the lion's eyes, the livingness that never ceases and never will cease. In this there is faith, soft, intangible, suffused faith that is the breath of all poetry, part of the breathing of the myriad sun in chaos. Such sun breathes its way into words, and the words become poetry, by suffusion. On the part of the poet it is an act of faith, pure attention and purified receptiveness. And without such faith there is no poetry. There is

even no life. The poetry of conceit is a dead-sea fruit.\* The poetry of sunless chaos is already a bore. The poetry of a regulated cosmos is nothing but a wire bird-cage. Because in all living poetry the living chaos stirs, sun-suffused and sun-impulsive, and most subtly chaotic. All true poetry is most subtly and sensitively chaotic, outlawed. But it is the impulse of the sun in chaos, not conceit.

The Sun in unconcealed rage  
Glares down across the magic of the world.

The sun within us, that sways us incalculably.

At night  
Swift to the Sun  
Deep imaged in my soul  
But during the long day black lands  
To cross

And it is faith in the incalculable sun, inner and outer, which keeps us alive.

Sunmaid  
Left by the tide  
I bring you a conch-shell  
That listening to the Sun you may  
Revive

And there is always the battle of the sun, against the corrosive acid vapour of vanity and poisonous conceit, which is the breath of the world.

Dark clouds  
Are not so dark  
As our embittered thoughts  
Which carve strange silences within  
The Sun

That the next 'cinquain'\* may not be poetry at all is perhaps just as well, to keep us in mind of the world of conceit outside. It is the expired breath, with its necessary carbonic acid. It is the cold shadow across the sun, and saves us from the strain of the monos, from homogeneity and exaltation and forcedness and all-of-a-pieceness, which is the curse of the human consciousness. What does it matter if half the time a poet fails in his effort at expression!

The failures make it real. The act of attention is not so easy. It is much easier to write poesy. Failure is part of the living chaos. And the groping reveals the act of attention, which suddenly passes into pure expression.

But I shall not be frightened by a sound  
Of Something moving cautiously around.

Whims, and fumbings, and effort, and nonsense, and echoes from other poets, these all go to make up the living chaos of a little book of real poetry, as well as pure little poems like 'Sun-Ghost', 'To Those Who Return', 'Torse de Jeune Femme au Soleil', 'Poem for the Feet of Polia'. Through it all runs the intrinsic naïveté without which no poetry can exist, not even the most sophisticated. This naïveté is the opening of the soul to the sun of chaos, and the soul may open like a lily or a tiger-lily or a dandelion or a deadly nightshade or a rather paltry chickweed flower, and it will be poetry of its own sort. But open it must. This opening, and this alone, is the essential act of attention, the essential poetic and vital act. We may fumble in the act, and a hailstone may hit us. But it is in the course of things. In this act, and this alone, we truly *live*: in that innermost naïve opening of the soul, like a flower, like an animal, like a coloured snake, it does not matter, to the sun of chaotic livingness.

Now, after a long bout of conceit and self-assurance and flippancy, the young are waking up to the fact that they are starved of life and of essential sun, and at last they are being driven, out of sheer starvedness, to make the act of submission, the act of attention, to open into inner naïveté, deliberately and dauntlessly, admit the chaos and the sun of chaos. This is the new naïveté, chosen, recovered, regained. Round it range the white and golden soft lions of courage and the sun of dauntlessness, and the whorled ivory horn of the unicorn is erect and ruthless, as a weapon of defence. The naïve, open spirit of man will no longer be a victim, to be put on a cross, nor a beggar, to be scorned and given a pittance. This time it will be erect and a bright lord, with a heart open to the wild sun of chaos, but with the yellow lions of the sun's danger on guard in the eyes.

The new naïveté, erect, and ready, sufficiently sophisticated to wing the neck of sophistication, will be the new spirit of poetry

and the new spirit of life. Tender, but purring like a leopard that may snarl, it may be clumsy at first, and make gestures of self-conscious crudity. But it is a real thing, the real creature of the inside of the soul. And to the young it is the essential reality, the liberation into the real self. The liberation into the wild air of chaos, the being part of the sun. A long course of merely negative 'freedom' reduces the soul and body both to numbness. They can feel no more and respond no more. Only the mind remains awake, and suffers keenly from the sense of nullity; to be young, and to feel you have every 'opportunity', every 'freedom' to live, and yet not to be able to live, because the responses have gone numb in the body and soul, this is the nemesis that is overtaking the young. It drives them silly.

But there is the other way, back to the sun, to faith in the speckled leopard of the mixed self. What is more chaotic than a dappled leopard trotting through dappled shade? And that is our life, really. Why try to whitewash ourselves?—or to camouflage ourselves into an artificially chaotic pattern? All we have to do is to accept the true chaos that we are, like the jaguar dappled with black suns in gold.

### Review of

*The Station: Athos, Treasures and Men* by Robert Byron; *England and the Octopus* by Clough Williams-Ellis; *Comfortless Memory* by Maurice Baring; *Ashenden* by W. Somerset Maugham

ATHOS is an old place, and Mr Byron\* is a young man. The combination for once is really happy. We can imagine ourselves being very bored by a book on ancient Mount Athos and its ancient monasteries with their ancient rule. Luckily Mr Byron belongs to the younger generation, even younger than the Sitwells,\* who have shown him the way to be young. Therefore he is not more than becomingly impressed with ancientness. He never gapes in front of it. He settles on it like a butterfly, tastes it, is perfectly honest about the taste, and flutters on. And it is charming.

We confess that we find this youthful revelation of ancient Athos charming. It is all in the butterfly manner. But the butterfly, airy creature, is by no means a fool. And its interest is wide. It is amusing to watch a spangled beauty settle on the rose, then on a spat-out cherry-stone, then with a quiver of sunny attention, upon a bit of horse-droppings in the road. The butterfly tries them all, with equal concern. It is neither shocked nor surprised, though sometimes, if thwarted, it is a little exasperated. But it is still a butterfly, graceful, charming, and ephemeral. And, of course, the butterfly on its careless, flapping wings is just as immortal as some hooting and utterly learned owl. Which is to say, we are thankful Mr Byron is no more learned and serious than he is, and his description of Athos is far more vitally convincing than that, for example, of some heavy Gregorovius.\*

The four young men set out from England with a purpose. The author wants to come into closer contact with the monks and monasteries, which he has already visited; and to write a book about it. He definitely sets out with the intention of writing a book about it. He has no false shame. David, the archaeologist, wants to photograph the Byzantine frescoes in the monastery buildings.