Chapter 9: Tension

Toute idée émet un Coup de Dés — Mallarmé.
Alors, entre l'ordre et le désordre règne un instant délicieux — Valéry.
All creation is from conflict — W.B.Yeats.

We have seen that the Symbol is organic in structure. The Symbol vitalizes the poem, bringing about an intimate inter-relation of parts and whole, and uniting in itself the various meanings and currents of feeling in the poem. The Symbol also gives us a sense of movement : it reflects in its pattern the dynamic quality of life. There is constant agitation in a symbolic poem, yet nothing runs into chaos. Everything is brought into a pattern which gathers all, and transmutes all into its own likeness. There is a rage for order, and that order is wrested out of disorder.

The very act of poetic creation involves struggle. That is why Shelley said that poets are

Cradled into poesy by wrong
And learn in suffering what they teach in song.

We find a similar idea in Yeats who said that poetry is born out of the evil luck of the author, who has to pay its price in pain. The poet suffers, and suffers alone. His is a life of contemplation rather than of action, and contemplation draws him to silence and solitude : then he experiences both the pangs and the joys of creation. The poet's imagination fuses the joy and the pain in a symbol. The Symbol is the poet's victory over the tension, the moment of vision :

Poets and artists must go from desire to weariness, and so to desire again, and live for the moment when vision comes like terrible lightening.

That victory gives the poet a sense of peace and satisfaction, and 'calm of mind,
all passion spent'. But, the peace implies the passion. The peace is not a static condition. A state of complete rest has been identified by the poets themselves with death. The beauty of the Lotos Land represents a condition where 'all things are at rest': it also suggests a stultifying atmosphere, where human voices sound as 'voices from the grave'. It is much complete calm that Coleridge speaks of in the lines:

Day after day, day after day,
We stuck, nor breath nor motion;
As idle as a painted ship
Upon a painted ocean...

Then, there is the enchanted ground in Goethe's 'Faust', where pilgrims might not tarry 'lest sleeping we never awake more'.

True poetry never comes out of passivity; it springs from joyous strength. Art, as Nietzsche said, is the 'great will to life'. The poet does not merely watch something beautiful and record his sense of self-satisfaction. The poet creates by himself, out of recalcitrant elements, a thing of beauty. In beauty, 'contrasts are overcome, the highest sign of power thus manifesting itself in the conquest of opposites'. The poet is perpetually discovering new relationships, new patterns, new harmonies; he has always the sense of 'something evermore about to be'. The 'great poets are indeed those who make harmony ring out of every discord'. As a poet has expressed it:

Dust as we are, the immortal spirit grows
Like harmony in music; there is a dark Inscrutable workmanship that reconciles Discordant elements, makes them cling together In one society......

Disorder constantly calls out to the poet if only because his nature is so sensitive. And that disorder is a necessity to him, part of his very existence.

3 Ibid., p.245.
4 Wordsworth: 'Prelude', Book I.
Once Charles Lamb remarked (in another context): 'I am made up of queer points, and I want so many answering needles'. The poet is like that: his sympathy reaches out to so many things, all of which he takes in at the same time. From this welter of experiences he tries to bring out a pattern, an order. The multitude of experiences and the confusion is a challenge to the poet, who begins work only when thus challenged:

In order that he too may bring into play his characteristic transformation, he must be provided with disorder. It was Coleridge perhaps who first remarked about the poetic imagination, bringing about a 'balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities'. In our own times, the idea has been reflected in I.A. Richards's conception of the poem as bringing about 'the equilibrium of opposed impulses'. He distinguishes poems which achieve this equilibrium from those which are made out of 'sets of impulses which run parallel, which have the same direction': poetry of the latter type cannot be considered as of the highest order. In poetry of the highest order, the impulses are 'more than heterogeneous, they are opposed': in such poetry irony is an essential element. Richards makes it clear that 'Irony in this sense consists in the bringing in of the opposite, the complementary impulses'. After Richards the element of tension has come to be regarded as an essential feature of all good poetry. To Cleanth Brooks, the structure of the best poems is a structure of paradox, contradictory elements are brought together and resolved into a unity. Poetry

... unites the like with the unlike. It does not unite them, however, by the simple process of allowing one connotation to cancel out another, nor does it reduce the contradictory attitudes to harmony by a process of subtraction. It is a positive unity, not a negative.

Tension and its harmonization give a dramatic quality to poetry: we get a sense of action, which makes it all the more appealing. The function of tension

5 Paul Valéry: 'Melanges'.
as a moving force in the poem is also emphasized by R.P. Warren, who writes:

Can we make any generalizations about the nature of the poetic structure? First, it involves resistances, at various levels. There is a tension between the rhythm of a poem and the rhythm of speech ...; between the formality of the rhythm and the informality of the language; between the particular and the general; the concrete and the abstract; between the elements of even the simplest metaphor; between the beautiful and the ugly; between ideas ...; between prosaisms and poeticisms ... This list is not intended to be exhaustive; it is intended to be merely suggestive. But it may be taken to imply that the poet is like the jiu-jitsu expert; he wins by utilizing the resistance of his opponent—the materials of the poem. In other words, a poem, to be good, must earn itself. It is a motion toward a point of rest, but if it is not a resisted motion, it is a motion of no consequence. ... And a good poem must, in some way, involve the resistance; it must carry something of the context of its own creation; it must come to terms with Mercutio. ... And all this adds up to the fact that the structure is a dramatic structure, a movement through action toward rest, through complication toward simplicity of effect.

Warren is right in pointing to tension as a necessary structural element in all good poetry, but his emphasis of the variety possible in the selection of tensions seems to be misleading. It is easy to observe this element even in such all-embracing conflicts as those between life and death, good and evil, order and disorder, reality and appearance: such thematic dichotomies could be found in almost any literary work. It could be said that any situation in life or in literature has an element of implicit paradox. 'Of such universal contraries, not restricted in their applicability to any kind of work, whether lyric, narrative or dramatic, it will be easy enough for us to acquire an adequate supply, and once we have them, or some selection of them, in our minds as principles of interpretation, it will seldom be hard to discover their presence in poems as organizing principles of symbolic content.'10 It is such an approach that leads Wilson Knight to see in all Shakespeare's plays conflicts of 'death themes' and 'life themes', 'music' and 'tempests.' The tensions that the Symbolist poet deals with are not avoidable elements; to him tension is

10 R.S. Crane: "The Languages of Criticism and the Structure of Poetry", p.128.
The Symbolist had no less an inevitable element in the very act of creation. The Symbolist had no less an aim than to embody his vision of Reality in the poem. Reality, he found, was full of contradictions. A poet like Baudelaire would not be satisfied unless he was able to see all the contradictory aspects of life. It was found that Good could not be understood fully without knowledge of Evil.

The Symbolists felt that their imaginative vision of Evil could take them nearer Reality. Poets like Baudelaire, and before him Villon and Dante, had this kind of imagination: and,

They and their kin earn contemplation, for it is only when the intellect has wrought the whole of life to drama, to crisis, that we may live for contemplation, and yet keep our intensity.  

To the great Symbolist poets, who found the greatest realities were inseparable from life, life itself was full of conflict. As Yeats said, we begin to live when we consider life as a tragic play. In the world,

All perform their tragic play,
There struts Hamlet, there is Lear,
That's Ophelia, that Cordelia,
Yet they, should the last scene be there,
The great stage curtain about to drop,
If worthy their prominent part in the play,
Do not break up their lines to weep.
They know that Hamlet and Lear are gay;
Gaiety transfiguring all that dread.

The 'gaiety' comes from the resolution of the tragic conflict. This is paralleled in the poem by the achievement of what Dylan Thomas called the 'momentary peace' of a satisfactory poem. This idea is similar to Nietzsche's view of tragedy as the 'great will to life' which springs from exultant strength.

The wisdom that tragedy brings is joyful, because the zest for life expresses itself through tension. The great artist is one who creates in a moment of joy and strength, not one of weakness. Great art is an affirmation of life,

11 W.B.Yeats: 'Rodos Chameleonos'.
and the greatest art is that in which the affirmation is made in the face of all that challenges life. The Symbolist therefore recognizes and includes all contrary elements. This is why the Symbolist does not refuse to deal with ugliness and disorder; indeed he welcomes them because they are a challenge to the poet who is expected to create a beautiful work of art. He holds that beauty is not to be found, but is to be created, by the artist. He struggles against disorder, and gains order out of that disorder. In creating beauty, 'contrasts are overcome, the highest sign of power thus manifesting itself by the conquest of opposites'. This process accorded with the Symbolists' concept of poetry as a means of presenting Reality in all its aspects. The Symbolists tried to bring in all experience into the realm of poetry — even such elements as dreams, nightmares and delirium — in an effort to increase the fullness and concreteness of poetry. Thus they could claim to give a more complete view of Reality than Science; and, though they admitted that in the creative act no cognitive element might be present, they believed that the creative act was an indispensable foundation of all knowledge. For a poet like Valéry, creation is perfect knowledge: therefore, 'Inventer, c'est ce comprendre'. We have a similar view of poetic creation in Yeats, who considered poetry as giving access to a special kind of knowledge not available to the intellect,

... the levelling, rancorous, rational sort of mind
That never looked out of the eye of a saint
Or out of a drunkard's eye.

It is such knowledge of Reality that establishes a high place for poetry, and makes it superior to Science which restricts itself to 'externalities' and 'generalities'. All these views are founded on the belief that the poet's first task is the exploration of Reality. The Symbol helps the poet to explore Reality: it also becomes his 'way of reducing the real world to manageable

13 Nietzsche: 'The Will to Power', p.245.
proportions, and of revealing its patterns'. The 'real' world referred to here may be the external world or that inward world of man's mind which Wordsworth called 'the haunt and the main region of my song'. The Symbolist, however, believes that in the symbolic poem there is a synthesis of these two aspects of reality, the objective and the subjective, the external and the internal.

It is this which makes the Symbolist constantly endeavour to project his vision of reality into a symbol, giving it, as it were, a life or super-life of its own, outside his subjectivity. One way that the Symbolist found of doing this was to project himself into his 'opposite', which is both impersonal and a higher form of existence. This 'dédoublement', as Laforgue would have it, enabled the poet to objectify his experiences, giving them a symbolic value. This 'anti-self' often took the form of a character like Baudelaire's Giantess: 'La Geante' is neither a narrative nor a descriptive poem, but the objective form or symbolisation of an intensely felt experience. In other poets too we find this poetic endeavour 'of being someone else'. So, we find that 'the poet Mallarmé becomes the Faun of his dream and lives the myth of a metamorphosis even as Rimbaud became the drunken boat'. Laforgue's Pierrot, though a character taken from legend, is used in this symbolic manner, and becomes a projection of the poet's own experience: hence, evasive as Pierrot might be, 'there is not a shadow of a lie in him'. Pierrot actually represents a 'dédoublement', the poet and his 'opposite' in one person. This is one way of creating and overcoming the tension between the emotions of the poet and the realities he sees.

Tension presented its greatest problem to the Symbolist in the field of Language. The Symbolist poets of France in the last century were consciously experimenting with language and its organization in poetry. This kind of approach, in full consciousness, to the problems of language continues, and is the usual attitude in poetry to-day. Language, normally discursive and conceptual in nature, offers resistance to the poet, particularly to one who tries to use it symbolically. The Symbolist has often 'to force, to dislocate, if necessary, language into his meaning'. The French Symbolists went further than this in trying to take advantage of the very resistances offered by language. The modern poet has vastly benefitted by their experiments, and he continues, willingly, what Eliot has called 'the intolerable wrestle with words and meanings'.

Language is, by nature, an open system of references, and is subject to the relations of normal experience. To use a metaphor, the poem is a ship which the poet sails on the dangerous sea of language, over the same sea which is used for the traffic of normal discourse: the sea is dangerous to the poet because he goes off the accepted routes. His ship too is not of the safe sort: it may be a crazy boat, like Rimbaud's, floating at will on the wild waters and exploring the strange things around, or it may be a strange ship haunting, spectre-like, the regions of the known (like Mallarmé's ship in 'Un Coup de Dés'). But the ship takes complete command of whatever part of the sea it is in.

The poet works with words, but in the poem he creates a new system of language, different from that we find in prose or in ordinary conversation. The poem has a unity and independence, which makes it a world in itself. It is not subject to external or arbitrary forces or to change: the poet does not

like even the slightest alteration in the order of words he has given us in the poem. This is because the poet has created a certain order or system of words which is self-sufficient and complete: or, as Valery says, 'Le monde du poème est essentiellement fermé et complet en lui-même'. How does the poet create such a 'closed' system of language? This question, in one form or another, has been asked again and again in modern times. Seldom has a satisfactory answer been given to this question.

In one of his brilliant books, Cecil Day-Lewis, keeping the chaotic appearance of modern poems in view, asks the question: 'Can we define some active principle making for poetic association?' He then speaks of 'that unifying force — the intensity of feeling which alone ... can take the place of poetic reason in fusing together and controlling the images of pure perception': but all trail of the question of poetic unity is lost in the mists of archetype and of 'The eternal spirit's eternal pastime'. The fact, however, remains, that if we have to know anything about the unifying force in the poem, we have to approach it as a piece of language, something in which language has attained a special quality. A literal reading of the poem ( = reading it as if it were prose) would not help. As I.A. Richards has warned us:

... the aim of the poem comes first, and is the sole justification of its means. We may quarrel ... with the aim of a poem, but we have first to ascertain what it is. We cannot legitimately judge its means by external standards (such as accuracy of fact or logical coherence) which may have no relevance to its success in doing what it set out to do, or, if we like, in becoming what in the end it has become.

But even Richards cannot get at this internal principle of unity except through the language used in the poem; and when he tries to do this, he does not get much

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19 Ibid., Chapter XII.
because the words of a poem, he finds,

... are as ambiguous in their feeling as in their sense; but though we can track down their equivocations of sense to some extent, we are comparatively helpless with their ambiguities of feeling. We only know that words are chameleon-like in their feeling, governed in an irregular fashion by their surroundings. In this 'psychical relativity' words may be compared with colours, but of the laws governing the effects of collocation and admixture hardly anything is known.

One answer to the question of the principle making the poem a closed system, is given by Elizabeth Sewell in her book 'The Structure of Poetry'. According to her, poetry holds a balance between order and disorder 'not by fixation but by movement, by bringing order out of disorder, and disorder out of order, transposing sense and nonsense in a perpetual process'. The poet achieves peace or order or equilibrium between the forces of order and disorder by making use of the tendency of language to flow simultaneously in two contradictory directions, towards sense and nonsense (represented, according to Elizabeth Sewell, by logic and nightmare): 'Alors, entre l'ordre et le désordre règne un instant délicieux'. The poem is the exquisite and brief moment of poise born out of the tension between disorder and order.