Symbolism has been a major influence in giving modern English poetry a new direction and a new vitality. The initiators in France had not foreseen such a future for Symbolism, nor had they been able to evaluate their own achievements. The great Symbolists of France from Baudelaire and Rimbaud to Mallarme and Valery were hardly conscious of any 'binding force', and so never thought of themselves as a 'school', but in dealing with the problems that faced them, they did things for poetry which poets have continued to do ever since. The twentieth century has been the Symbolist century to the extent that almost all the important poets of the West have been affected by Symbolist practices, poets as different as Rilke, Yeats, Eliot, Blok and Lorca.

In England, the literature of the opening years of this century was marked by the feverish anxiety for 'reality', a tendency encouraged by the competition with Science. But Realism, the accurate, faithful, almost photographic reflection of life — we think of an example like Masefield's 'The Everlasting Mercy' — was only one phase through which modern poetry passed. The search for reality — induced by the influential position of Science and the fall in the prestige of poetry — continued, but it gained a new vigour from Symbolism. Poetry could be more significantly related to Reality by redefining its function in a changed world and by a process of revitalization which would enable it to cope successfully with the problems that beset it. That is what Symbolism helped to do. It prescribed a rigorous self-examination on the part of the poet, and a new sense of discipline. It also raised high hopes for poetry. When after the first World War Europe was dazed by destruction and
despair, the poet stepped forward to attempt what the scientist and the politician had failed to do: he thought he would be able to understand life and its problems better. It seemed Shelley's prophecy about the poet becoming the unacknowledged legislator of the world was going to be fulfilled. In Symbolism the English poets found a new inspiration and power, which helped them to understand and reveal reality in a truly significant manner. Among other things, Symbolism brought to poetry a new metaphysical dimension, an element of mystery, which took it nearer religion and away from logic. It seemed there was in poetry 'an unprecedented effort to restore art's immemorial link with the sacred in a desacralized world'. We have, in Baudelaire's view of Evil and Yeats's vision of life as tragedy, for example, an intensity that is truly religious.

But while doing this service to poetry, Symbolism also encouraged certain tendencies such as difficulty, complexity and obscurity, which have now come to be regarded as the characteristic features of modern poetry. The Symbolist conception of poetry as highly specialized knowledge makes it both unnecessary and undignified for the poet to be simple and intelligible. The desire to make poetry something difficult and out of reach of the average reader is common enough among the Symbolists: a poet like Mallarme wants that poetry, like music, should not be within reach of any but the properly qualified. The Symbolist argument is that all kinds of knowledge require specialized training, while almost anybody thinks he is competent to criticize poetry. Consequently, with a poet like Eliot, 'rich in references to a general body of scholarship', reading of poetry becomes an academic pursuit. Such poetry

1 André Malraux: 'The Voices of Silence'.
would also require (and give rise to) special critical methods and 'apparatus'. The concept of the poem itself as symbol has given a new status to poetry, which status is reflected in criticism. Eliot emphasizes the 'autotelic' nature of poetry, which should be considered 'as poetry and not another thing'. Ransom wants us to respect the autonomy of the work itself 'as existing for its own sake', and Warren draws our attention to the status of the poem as a self-sustaining entity, 'a kind of world or cosmos'. All this has also encouraged critics to make close analyses of poems so as to concentrate attention on the activity that takes place within the poem itself and to understand it without the aid of extraneous resources. This method is exemplified in the contextualism of Brooks and Empson and in the syntaxism of Davie. The things that Symbolism has encouraged, such as the new awareness of language, the tendency to minimise the discursive element, the emphasis on the lyric as the essence or archetype of poetry, and the conception of reality as a blend of subjective and objective elements, have all made valuable contributions to the poetry and criticism of the present age. These characteristic elements of Symbolist poetry have also called for special strategies: when Allen Tate speaks of tension, Ransom of 'structure' and 'texture' and Cleanth Brooks of 'paradox', there is a family likeness in them all. The new critical methods seem to be very useful in the detailed explication of modern poems, but is there not a sense of strain in the application of these to much of the older poetry? Modern theories of tension and paradox do not seem to account for the airy grace of a Shelleyan poem or

2 'Selected Essays', p.30.
5 Austin Warren: 'Rage for Order', preface.
the natural, almost primitivistic, quality of a Burns song.

This points to the great difference of modern poetry: poetry in becoming Symbolist has lost in spontaneity and simplicity. Eliot does not have that appeal for the average, unsophisticated reader as Dante, Shakespeare or Wordsworth has. Modern poetry seems to have become specialized, something remote from the interests of the common man. A poet like Wordsworth speaks for all men, Eliot only for the elite. The modern poet, like Baudelaire's albatross, is acutely conscious of being an alien in society. He is something high and different, and therefore one who cannot be expected to occupy himself with ordinary human affairs. He seems to have sacrificed the universality, the all-inclusive quality, we associate with the greatest poetry.

It was this trend that dissident voices like Yvor Winters, Frank Kermode and Kathleen Nott sought to hold in check. The Symbolists had claimed that the value of a poem 'is a cognitive one; ... here, in the poem, we get knowledge of a whole object'; this claim tended to make poetry esoteric. Modern poetry came to be acclaimed for its specialization. An acute intellect like that of Yvor Winters, however, refused to swim with the current. Even in the heyday of Symbolism, he insisted that poetry was a kind of discourse. A poem, for him, was primarily 'a statement in words', though a statement with 'a controlled content of feeling'. The rational statements which a poem makes through its reference to outward aspects of the world and through denoting things, are the 'motives' for the 'emotions' that the poetry arouses in us. A poem has to present some sort of situation, together with a comment or judgment on that situation. 'The rational content', says Winters, 'cannot be

6 Allen Tate: 'On the Limits of Poetry', p.43.
eliminated from words; consequently the rational content cannot be eliminated from poetry. If it is unsatisfactory, a part of the poem is unsatisfactory; the poem is damaged beyond argument. If we deny this, we must surely explain ourselves very fully. Winters distinguishes between what he calls 'rational progression', a full structure of events or arguments motivating feelings, and the modern, symbolistic method of 'qualitative progression', a succession of inadequately motivated feelings. In Winters' view, our emotional response to a poem should be a response to how the poem itself responds to a situation which we are able to grasp even without the help of the poem. To accept such a position would be to find little qualitative difference between prose and poetry; it would then be possible to paraphrase any poem into rational, persuasive prose. Such a conclusion does not appear convincing. A great poem like 'Sailing to Byzantium' gives us a sense of seeing through a magic casement opening out on a rich and unique experience. The separable, paraphrasable 'content' is hardly worth attention. However, when all this is said, it is no answer to the question: why should poetry not have rational content or use discursive language?

The Symbolist's antagonism might have prevented him from using these elements which he associated with Science. The younger poets of today, no longer embittered by Science, seem to favour simplicity and rational content instead of complexity and obscurity. The poet, once again, is 'a man speaking to men'. Poets like Philip Larkin, Peter Redgrove and Donald Davie are nearer the interests of the common man. This recent move perhaps serves to remind us that Symbolism may no longer remain as a ruling force. Symbolism represents, it may be, only a phase, though an important one, in the progress of English poetry.

8 Ibid., p.364.