CHAPTER IV.
Poetry and Experience:

The poet is, etymologically, a maker. Like all makers, he requires raw materials — in this case, experience. Now experience is a matter of sensibility and intuition, of seeing and hearing the significant things, of paying attention at the right moments, but also of understanding and coordinating. Experience is not what happens to a man; it is what a man does with what happens to him. By a happy dispensation of nature, the poet generally possesses the gift of experience in conjunction with that of expression.¹

Poetry and Expression:

Experience, or the ability to have impressions, says Huxley, is common. But the ability to give poetical expression to poetical impressions is very rare. Most of us can feel in a Keatsian way, but almost none of us can among other things write in a Keatsian way. For, in general, any work of literary art, is a device for inducing in the reader impressions of the same kind as those

¹. Texts and Pretexts; Chatto & Windus, 1949; p.5.
which served as raw materials for the finished product; and it may even happen that the impressions induced in the reader's mind are of a higher order of 'poeticalness' than those from which the writer set out.

Sometimes, however, the gift of saying exists alone, in strange divorce from the gift of seeing and understanding. For example, there is D'Anmnsio's thunderous eloquence about next to nothing; and there are Swinburne's melodious variations on all but nonexistent themes. But, generally, with the vast majority of poets, saying and seeing go together. The people who have understood most have been endowed with the gift of telling what they understood.

Huxley quotes Bacon's locus classicus on poetry. Poetry, Bacon wrote, "was ever thought to have some participation of divininess, because it doth raise and erect the mind by submitting the shows of things to the desires of the mind; whereas, reason doth buckle and bow the mind unto the nature of things." This means in modern jargon, is Huxley's comment, that poetry is admirable only when it deals in wish-fulfilments. Huxley does not agree with this view; for while there certainly is, in every language, a huge mass of wish-fulfilment poetry, there is also a great deal of poetry that renders,

or that passes judgment on, man's actual experience — a great deal of poetry, in a word, that 'doth buckle and bow the mind unto the nature of things'. Such poetry is, for Huxley, by far the most interesting and valuable. To an essentially scientific temperament as Huxley's, with its attitude of whole-hearted acceptance of things as they are, being sober is preferable even to the rosier and most agreeable intoxications. The peyote-trances of Swinburne, for example, have always left him commentis, in full possession of his mind, that is, cold. Much even of Shelley's poetry too, with its long-drawn imprecision, is apt to flow past him. Huxley likes things to be said with precision and as concisely as possible. At the same time he admits that certain things can only be expressed at considerable length and in terms of the most improbable metaphors and magic syllables. There are occasions, too, when the poet who would write precisely must be obscure and fantastic.¹

Most of the best poetical descriptions, Huxley feels, are extremely imprecise. Poets are less interested in the precise look of things than in the mind's reactions to them. This reaction can generally be rendered

¹ Texts and Pretexts; Chatto & Windus, 1949; pp.5-8.
quite effectively without precise description; in fact, too precise description may hinder the expression. For example, in Marlowe's account of Leander's appearance\(^1\), the description convinces us beyond doubt of the fact of the boy's beauty; and yet the poet actually says very little about him. There is, in actual fact, no description at all. Marlowe simply lists parts of the boy's body in association with certain names taken from classical mythology. The effect is extraordinary: we see the divine creature and instantly fall in love with him. Huxley enunciates a principle of poetic description: often, he says, the best way of expressing the nature of one thing is by talking about another.\(^2\)

Obscurity in poetry is by no means always to be avoided. Shakespeare, for example, often writes obscurely, for the good reason that he often has subtle and uncommon thoughts to be put into words. So have some of the poets writing obscurely at the present time. Most, however, have not. Their thoughts and the way they see the world, are commonplace, only their syntax is extraordinary.\(^3\)

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1. Vide Appendix for the passage; p.444: (1).
3. Ibid. p.220.
But a certain degree of obscurity is justified when the poet is dealing with certain kinds of experience; for, however miraculously endowed a poet may be, there must be always, beyond the furthest reach of his powers of expression, a great region of the unexpressed and the inexpressible. The rest is always silence. The experience of all those who have wrestled with the problem of artistic expression is eloquently brought out in the following lines of Marlowe, quoted by Huxley:

"If all the pens that ever poets held
Had fed the feeling of their master's thoughts,
And every sweetness that inspired their hearts,
Their minds and muses, on admired themes;
If every heavenly quintessence they still
From their immortal flowers of poesy,
Wherein, as in a mirror, we perceive
The highest reaches of a human wit;
If these had made one poem's period,
And all combined in beauty's worthiness,
Yet should there hover in their restless heads
One thought, one grace, one wonder at the least
Which into words no virtue can digest."

Most poets have been aware of the greatness of the poet's function, have respected in themselves that touch of divinity which made the Romans call the poet and the prophet by the same name. (The ancient Hindus, too, believed that one who is not a rishi cannot be a poet.) But many of them seem to have confused poetry with verse — to have thought that there was something meritorious in the mere act of writing in metre, some quality of sacredness in a metrical composition. The result was that they published, as poetry, stuff no more significant than so much literary chitchat in a Sunday paper. Wordsworth, for example, though he wrote at times poetry of a very high order, often wrote rubbish and, what was worse, published it in his Poetical Works. Coleridge, too, could be very flat at times.

That good poets should sometimes write badly is not, after all, surprising. Auspicious circumstances must conspire with exceptional gifts; the mind must be seconded by its incalculable companion of flesh and blood. The surprising thing, says Huxley, is not that good poets should sometimes write badly; it is rather that they should be so lacking in self-criticism.¹

¹. Texts and Pretexts; Chatto & Windus, 1949; pp. 8-10.
Old Poetry and New:

Huxley has very illuminating remarks on old and new poetry. He has shrewdly observed that simple, primitive people are complicated in their poetry. He makes Mr. Cardan say in *Those Barren Leaves* that Beowulf is couched in a diction more complicated and unnatural than that of the *Essay on Man*. And in comparison with the Icelandic Sagas, Dr. Johnson seems to lisp and prattle. Paradoxically enough, only the most complicated people, living in the midst of the most artificial surroundings, desire their poetry to be simple and straightforward.¹

As for the new poetry, Huxley observes that the changes that are taking place in our thoughts and beliefs, thanks to science, are themselves the new poetical raw material, in place of the old one. The contemporary man of letters finds himself confronted, as he prepares to write about Nature, by the problem of harmonizing, within a single work of art, the old, beloved raw materials and myths with the new findings and hypotheses of science. To take a simple example, what should a literary artist, writing in the English language, do today about nightingales? It is characteristic of Huxley to have noticed

that the spraying of English hedge-rows with chemical weed-killers has wiped out most of their population of caterpillars, with the result that nightingales who feed on them have become rarities. Here is a subject for, among other things, a poem at once lyrical and reflective — perhaps on the effects of science on the very biological basis of a long tradition in poetry.

But it is not the only impact of science on the literary problem of the nightingale. Thanks to the bird-watchers and students of animal behaviour, we now know much more about the nightingale's song than was known in the past. The immortal bird still sings; but she is no longer the Philomel of Arnold and Keats. What is more curious is that T.S.Eliot, a very modern poet, should have used the same traditional raw material of English poetical feeling and expression; so that from a reading of The Waste Land and Sweeney Among the Nightingales one would never suspect that he is a contemporary of biologists like Eliot Howard and Konrad Lorenz; for when he speaks of Philomel he speaks of her as Arnold and Keats had spoken — as a creature singing her song within a merely cultural frame of reference. By the 1920's, when Eliot was writing these poems, the reason why the birds sing was at last clearly understood. Howard and his fellow ethologists had discovered what Philomel's outpourings signified, and that
their purpose was. Philomel, it turns out, is not
Philomel, but her mate; and when the cock-nightingale
sings, it is not in pain, not in passion, not in ecstasy,
but simply in challenge to other cock-nightingales. His
preference for singing at night has also, alas, a similar
embarrassingly simple explanation. Science also explains
why the cock-nightingale suddenly falls silent. When the
eggs are hatched and territorial patriotism ceases to be
necessary, a glandular change within his body puts a stop
to all singing. Eternal pain and passion, the inviolable
voice and the outpourings of ecstasy give place to a
silence, broken only by an occasional hoarse croak.

There is, however, no reason for despair, Huxley
suggests, provided the modern poet is prepared to accept
the findings of science. This new information is itself
a piece of potentially poetic raw material. To ignore it
is an act of literary cowardice. The new facts are, to
the poet, a challenge.¹

Favourite Themes of Poetry:

Apart from the new facts which are awaiting
poetic expression, there are the age-old themes, like
death, pain and misery which have served as subject-
matter of poetry. Writing of the poetry of melancholy,

Huxley says that more poetry has been inspired by the certainty of death than by the hope of immortality. Some day, he says, he would like to compile an Oxford Book of Depressing Verse, which would contain nothing but the most magnificent expressions of melancholy and despair. All the apostles of gloom would be in it. A duly adequate amount of space, for example, would be allotted to Fulke Greville, whose verse cannot be easily rivalled for dark magnificence. It is interesting to note that a passage Huxley quotes in this connection constitutes the matter and inspiration of his own *Point Counter Point*:

"Oh wearisome condition of humanity,
Born under one law, to another bound,
Vainly begot and yet forbidden vanity,
Created sick, commanded to be sound.

What meaneth nature by these diverse laws,
Passion and reason, self-division's cause?"

Thinking of melancholy poets, Huxley indulges in an amusing speculation. If Steinach's rejuvenating operations on the old become normal, it may be that the poetry of melancholy and despair is destined to disappear from literature and a spirit of what William James called 'healthy-mindedness' will inherit its kingdom. It may be that this last of 'eternal truths' — that life is short
and subject to decay — will join the other great common-places which have already gone on the dust-heap of literature. ¹

Pain and misery are easier to describe than happiness, says Huxley elsewhere. Passionate joy is more easily capturable in art; but quiet happiness which is at the same time a kind of melancholy is inexpressible except by an exceptional artist, combining a rare penetration with a rare candour and honesty of mind. The alternative is that a difficult emotion is often described in terms of something entirely different. For instance, Platonic poets, confronted by beauty, may proceed to describe it in terms of theology. Similarly, Wordsworth, stirred by the contemplation of nature, sometimes stumbles doubtfully


Compare Huxley's remarks on the connection of death and all art:

The horror of death and the wish for some kind of survival have raised pyramids, have carved innumerable statues and inscriptions, have given employment to whole armies of painters, masons, embalmers and clergy.

¹'Mother': Adonias and the Alphabet; Chatto & Windus 1956; p.167.

Art and industry have flourished from time immemorial in the rich soil of bereavement and the fear of death.

¹'New-Fashioned Christmas': The Olive Tree; Chatto & Windus, 1947; p.126.
along philosophical byways that are quite parallel to his emotion. Everywhere in literature one sees this difficulty in finding an expression for any undramatic, ill-defined emotion.¹

It should be theoretically possible, says Huxley, to make poetry out of anything whatsoever of which the spirit of man can take cognizance. As a matter of historical fact, however, most of the world's best poetry has been content with a curiously narrow range of subject-matter. Some poet, now and then, more daring than the rest, may set out to extend the boundaries of the kingdom; but for the most part poets do not concern themselves with fresh conquests. All the world is potentially theirs, but they do not take it.²

Poetry and Science:

On the other hand, there are some modern poets who claim that they can write how they like of whatsoever they like. But have they been able to? asks Huxley. Have they, for example, written about science? The marriage of poetry and science has been arranged again and again by ambitions young men of letters; but either the

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1. 'Edward Thomas': On the Margin; Chatto & Windus, 1942; pp.150-51.
engagement was broken off or, else, the marriage was
fertile only of abortions.

On what conditions is the marriage of the two
possible? Wordsworth would answer thus: "The remotest
discoveries of the chemist, the botanist, or the
mineralogist, will be as proper objects of the poet's art
as any upon which he is now employed, if the time should
ever come when these things shall be manifestly and
palpably material to us as enjoying and suffering beings."
In other words, poetry can be made out of science only
when the contemplation of scientific facts has modified
the pattern, not only of the poet's intellectual beliefs,
but of his spiritual existence as a whole — his 'in-
scape', as Father Hopkins calls it. Thus, according to
Wordsworth, Huxley observes, poetry and science are not
irreconcilable. Scientific discoveries can be the subject-
matter of poetry, "if the time should ever come", as
Wordsworth says, when we are able to contemplate them with
a certain emotion.

"If the time should ever come ..." In that if,
Huxley comments, resides our whole problem. If all of
us were as passionately interested in scientific facts

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1. 'And Wanton Optics Roll the Melting Eye': Music at
and hypotheses as in our friendships or sex life, then, obviously, poets would write about them. But the hypotheses and data of science seem important only to a minority. Most men, including the generality of poets, do not find the abstract ideas of science immediately and passionately moving; they only think about them. That is why so few subjects have been made into poetry, though theoretically everything can be chosen for the purpose. Death, love, religion, nature; the primary emotions and the ultimate personal mysteries — these form the subject-matter of most of the greatest poetry. And for obvious reasons. These things are, as Wordsworth wrote, "manifestly and palpably material to us as enjoying and suffering beings."

In fact, the men who feel passionately about abstractions and ideas are very seldom poets. They are men of science and philosophers, preoccupied with the search for truth, and not, like the poet, with the expression and creation of beauty. It is very rarely that we find a poet who combines the power and the desire to express himself with that passionate apprehension of ideas. The combination of poet and man of science is so uncommon that the theoretical universality of art has very occasionally been realised in practice. True, some
contemporary poets have introduced into poetry trains and automobiles and dwelt on industrialism and labour unrest. But there is nothing intrinsically novel about these things; they are a part of our lives today, just as the kings, the warriors, the horses and chariots were part of Homer's life; they affect us daily as enjoying and suffering beings. The subject-matter of new poetry remains the same as that of the old. The old boundaries have not been extended. There would have been real novelty in poetry if it had worked out a satisfactory artistic method for dealing with scientific or philosophic abstractions. But it has not. Which simply means that the poet in whose mind ideas are a passion and a personal moving force does not seem to have arrived.

Even in the past, such a poet was rare, Huxley points out. There was Lucretius, in whom the passionate apprehension of ideas and the ability to give them expression combined to produce De Rerum Naturae. There was Dante, in whose soul the medieval Christian philosophy was a force that shaped and directed every feeling, thought and action. There is much astronomy in the Divine Comedy, but it was astronomy that had modified the pattern of Dante's whole existence. Then there was Goethe, who focussed into beautiful expression an enormous
diffusion of knowledge and ideas. That is all. But in this task of extending the boundaries of poetry into the remote and abstract world of ideas, they have been assisted by only a few poets of a lower order. Huxley mentions a few: the universally knowledgeable Donne; Fulke Greville, that strange, dark-spirited Elizabethan; John Davidson, who made a kind of poetry out of Darwinism; and the most interesting poetical interpreter of nineteenth-century science, Jules Laforgue. Donne even made use of the most 'remote discoveries' of the scientists to express what he felt about love, God, death, and many other 'pattern-modifying' matters.¹

But Huxley does not forget that the introduction of science into poetry presents a problem. Science soon becomes obsolete. Consequently, the scientific references in the poetry of one period are soon likely to become unintelligible. Huxley takes two examples from Donne — one from A Valediction, another from The Extasie:

"Moving of the earth brings harms and fears,
Men reckon what it did and meant,
But trepidation of the spheres,
Though greater far, is innocent."

¹. 'Subject-Matter of Poetry': On the Margin; Chatto & Windus, 1946; pp.28-34.
And

"As our blood labours to beget

Spirits, as like souls as it can,

Because such fingers need to knit

That subtle knot, which makes us man ...."

We realise that Donne did make a most ingenious use of the science of his day to illustrate his private experience. But ours is the universe, not of Ptolemy and Galen, but of Palomar and Jodrell Bank. If we still read Donne, it was because, in his own strange way, he gave a purer sense to the words of the tribe, and because, in those purified words, he movingly expressed certain private experiences very like our own. We do not read him because he was knowledgeable in pre-Copernican astronomy and pre-Harveian physiology. We know that spheres and spirits do not exist and most of us have no idea why the spheres trepidated or how the blood-begotten spirits knitted their subtle knot.

Similar difficulties confront the modern student of Dante. As a poet, a scholar and a man of profound knowledge of science, Dante was saying something extremely definite. But Dante's science is dead, forgotten. Reading the Divine Comedy, the modern student is confronted by passages which are incomprehensible.
We must, therefore, Huxley suggests, make a clear distinction between what is permanent and what is merely transient in poetry. Insofar as the poet concerns himself with his own and other people's more private experiences, he, as Wordsworth says, "binds together by passion and knowledge the vast empire of human society, as it appears over the whole earth and over all time." But when the poet, even the greatest, concerns himself with the other kind of knowledge — knowledge of external facts correlated within a logically coherent system of concepts — he completely fails to bind the empire of human society "over all time." After a few centuries, or even a few generations, his scientific similes and illustrations lose their point and become at last completely incomprehensible. What is more, the more precise the references, the more grotesque will they seem to readers of a later, and scientifically speaking, more enlightened age. More precision itself is a danger. Dante's cosmology, being extremely precise, makes his incidental references to science so obscure. Shakespeare is often imprecise in his scientific and theological references and therefore less obscure to the readers of later generations.¹

¹. See p--- for a fuller account of this aspect of Shakespeare's poetry.
Does this mean, then, that the modern man of letters should have nothing to do with science? Huxley proceeds to ask, and replies that he should try to make the best of all the words in which he has to live — the world of stars and the world of astrophysics, the worlds of gray theory, green life and many-coloured poetry. But Donne and Dante are there to show that, in a matter of centuries or even of years, all allusion to science may become incomprehensible. And yet it is unlikely that present-day science will become as totally obsolete as the science of an earlier day, whose theories were built upon inadequate foundations. The difference between the universe of modern astronomy and the universe of astronomy two or three centuries from now will, in all probability, be a difference only in degree, whereas between Dante’s universe and the universe of modern astronomy there is a difference in kind.

Forty years ago, when Huxley published his essay, "The Subject-Matter of Poetry" in On the Margin, he had asked the question whether modern poetry, as it claimed, had succeeded in extending its province, whether it had succeeded in making poetry out of scientific theory. His answer then and later was the same. The domain of poetry has not been enlarged. When T.S. Eliot was praised for
his extension of the field of subject-matter available for poetical treatment, and inclusion of Christianity, the modern industrial city and the background of European history in his poetry, Huxley pointed out that Christianity had for some time been the subject-matter of many poems, that one could not have written of modern industrial cities before they existed, and that European history had been copiously treated by Victor Hugo and Robert Browning. Eliot is a great poet for other reasons than because he extended the field of the subject-matter of poetry. And this is true of most of his poetical successors. You would hardly think, from their writings, that they were contemporaries of, among others, Einstein and Heisenberg. Of the better poems written since 1921, the great majority do not so much as hint at what Huxley thinks is the most important fact of contemporary history — the progress of science and technology. Insofar as they affect the social, economic and political situation, some of their consequences receive attention from the poets; but science as a growing body of information and system of concepts, as an element in the formulation of a philosophy of nature and man, is hardly ever mentioned. More exclusively even than their predecessors, modern poets concern themselves with their own and other people's more private experiences.
Huxley believes that, if a poet should arise who is able to transform the new materials into literary art, he will be able to treat the age-old and perennially relevant theme of human destiny with a greater depth of understanding and a greater width of reference.¹

Poetry and Social Change:

Again and again, we find Huxley taking what may be called a sociological view of literature; in other words, he is ever relating developments in literature with changes in the environment. One example is his comment on what is known as Nature worship and is widely associated with English poetry. It is not the poets who taught people to worship nature, he says; nature worship is a product of good communications. In the seventeenth century, all sensible people disliked wild nature; one has only to read Pepys's account of a country tour. But during the earlier years of the eighteenth century, the road system was completely overhauled; and it was now possible to look at wild nature in comfort and without serious risk. Poets responded to the invitation of the engineers. It was only after the making of the roads that people began to hold up their hands and bless the country. Untamed,

nature seems not so much divine as sinister, alarming, and, above all, exasperatingly obstructive.¹

Poetry and Imagery:

In one of the sections of his Texts and Pretexts, Huxley comes very near plucking the heart of the mystery of poetic expression. There are two methods, he says, of expressing intense and unanalysable experiences — of rendering them in terms of poetry. There is the method of direct statement and description; and there is the method of symbolic evocation in which the experience is not directly named or described, but only implied; a series of symbolic statements are made, whose separate significances converge on a simple point outside the poem — the experience which it is desired to render. In practice, poets generally employ both methods simultaneously.

In illustration, Huxley quotes three passages of poetry on a similar theme — of ecstatic flight — by Blake, Carew and Shelley, and hands the apple, as he puts it, to Blake and his symbolic method. Neither Carew, with his sharp, high-coloured brilliance, nor Shelley, with his tireless, luxurious and narcotic flow of


Also, compare Huxley's remarks on the effect of climate on our attitude to Nature; p.173.
eloquence, contrives to express the essential quality of what they describe. In this respect, Blake's poem* is superior to either. By means of a series of intrinsically not very striking images, Blake succeeds in rendering all the violence and intensity, all the enormity and supernaturalness of the erotic act. His secret consists in the choice, for his symbols, of images on the cosmic scale of grandeur. It is perhaps because of the superiority of the oblique, symbolic method of poetic expression that some of the best accounts of physical passion are to be found, not in poems about profane love at all, but in the mystics' renderings of their transcendental experiences. The use of erotic imagery to convey mystical experience, Huxley remarks, is widespread. He draws his illustration from Crashaw¹, and notes the significance of the fact that, while few poets should have tried to render the exaltations and agonies of physical love, many who have written of divine love should, without intending it, have given the most precise and intense poetic rendering of the erotic experience from which they scrupulously averted their attention. Huxley sees in this a close relation between religion and sex; and once again he finds his illustration from Blake:²

¹. See the Appendix for the passage; pp. 45-48: (3).
². See Appendix for the whole passage; p. 49: (4).
* 'Lament of Ahania'; see Appendix for the poem; pp. 44-45: (2).
"Are not these the places of religion, the rewards of continence, the self-enjoyings of self-denial? Why dost thou seek religion? Is it because acts are not lovely that thou seekest solitude, Where the horrible darkness is impressed with reflections of desire?"  

Poetry and Mysticism:  

There was a later time when Huxley had learned to take a purer, more detached, view of mysticism. In Time Must Have a Stop, his hero, Sebastian Barnack, discovers, after long and painful experience, that mysticism is higher than poetry. Poetry may be the greatest of the nine daughters of Mnemosyne, goddess of memory; but there is also the life of the spirit. The life of the spirit is life exclusively in the present, never in the past or future; life here and now. There is absolutely no room in it for a voluptuous rumination of the delicious, or bitter, cuvées of thirty years ago. The life of the spirit is life out of time, life in its essence and eternal principle. That is why the mystics insist that memory

must be lived down and finally died to. The saying of John of the Cross, that only after mortifying the memory, one is in a state that is only a degree less perfect than the state of union with God — Sebastian found, at first reading, incomprehensible. But that was, Huxley comments, because, at that time, his first concern was with the life of poetry, not of the spirit. Later he learnt, by humiliating experience, all that memory can do to darken and obstruct the knowledge of the divine Ground.

The life of the spirit, then, is a further stage than the life of poetry. Most poets choose to halt at the earlier stage. Huxley is, however, aware that poets sometimes get glimpses of a 'cosmic consciousness', of the One in all things. The glimpses come as a gratuitous grace, but by themselves they are not sufficient for salvation. At the best, they are invitations to further personal effort. In a great many cases, the invitations are not accepted; the gift is prized for the ecstatic pleasure it brings, and its coming is nostalgically remembered — as in a splendid passage of Childe Harold, or in other memorable passages, in Tintern Abbey and The

1. Time Must Have a Stop; Harper & Brothers, 1944; pp.281-82.
Prelude. 1

It must be because the saints are incessantly preoccupied with only one subject — spiritual Reality and the means by which one comes to the unitive knowledge of that Reality — that their actions are as monotonously uniform as their thoughts; and their biographies remain largely unread. Legion prefers to read about Legion. It is for this reason, Huxley opines, that, in the whole repertory of epic, drama and the novel, there are hardly any representations of true theocentric saints. 2

1. The Perennial Philosophy; Chatto & Windus, 1950; p.21.

For example, here is that famous passage from Wordsworth's Tintern Abbey:

"that blessed mood,
In which the burden of the mystery,
In which the heavy and the weary weight
Of all this unintelligible world,
Is lightened:— that serene and blessed mood,
In which the affections gently lead us on,—
Until, the breath of this corporeal frame
And even the motion of our human blood
Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
In body, and become a living soul:
While with an eye made quiet by the power
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
We see into the life of things."

2. The Perennial Philosophy; Chatto & Windus, 1950; p.57.
Music in Poetry:

Huxley's indefatigable curiosity takes him even into byways of literary criticism. Here, for instance, he discusses the images, in terms of which poets have tried to render music. Music, Huxley points out, has been rendered in poetry either by onomatopoeic means, or else by means of images, themselves non-musical. Onomatopoeia Huxley dismisses with scant courtesy. He is not impressed by mere noise. Browning's 'Bang-whang-whang goes the drum, tootle-tootle the fife'; and even such subtler alliterative effects as Tennyson's 'the moan of doves in immemorial elms, the murmur of innumerable bees', do not, according to him, go very far nor will stand much repetition. Paradoxically enough, in order to express music in terms of language, poets have for the most part to rely on intrinsically non-musical images. These images always belong to one of three classes. The first, where poets express the quality of music and of the feelings which it arouses, is the purely sonorous image. Quoting passages from Strode, Herrick and Milton1, Huxley shows how Strode uses images of touch, suggesting the softness of music by contact with snow and wool. Herrick mingles touch with taste and sight. Milton renders his music in

1. See Appendix for the passages; pp. 419-21: (5), (6) & (7).
terms of touch. Feathers replace the wool and snow of Strode. How delicately voluptuous against the hand — against the cheek and lips — is that smooth dark touch of feathers?

The poet, however, finds sensuous images inadequate when he wants to express the significances and values of music. To render these, he has recourse to two other classes of images — images of Nature and images of the Supernatural. For example, in some lines from Shelley's 'The Woodman and the Nightingale'\(^1\), it is evident that the poet feels the need to escape from the implications of immediacy contained in the pure sensuous images. Music here leads the mind out of itself, gives it access to a wider world — to valleys with their lakes and streams, to open skies and moonlight. Even the scent-image is associated with a landscape — and a landscape, moreover, which imagination must travel as far as India to see.

Many of Shakespeare's references to music are associated with the grandeur and the serenities of Nature. Shakespeare never sets out to give a complete poetic rendering of music: he had the real thing ready to hand — the actual music of voice and instruments. Still, the circumstances in which he writes of music, says Huxley,

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\(^1\) See Appendix for the poem; pp. 421-22: (v).
are significant. He remembers the last act of *The Merchant of Venice*: ¹

"How sweet the moonlight sleeps upon this bank!
Here will we sit, and let the sounds of music
Creep in our ears; soft stillness and the night
Become the torches of sweet harmony";

Or, Oberon's speech to Puck in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: ²

"My gentle Puck, come hither. Thou remember'st
Since once I sat upon a promontory,
And heard a mermaid on a dolphin's back
Uttering such dulcet and harmonious breath,
That the rude sea grew civil at her song,
And certain stars shot madly from their spheres
To hear the sea-maid's music."

He remembers, too, the dying Gaunt who speaks in one
breath of 'the setting sun, and music at the close': it
is in terms of Nature at her serenest that Shakespeare
expresses his reactions to music.

The third class of images, in terms of which
poets have expressed the quality and significance of
music, images of the Supernatural, abound in all poetical

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¹ Act V, scene I, lines 54-65.
renderings of music. For Dryden, for example, harmony is 'heavenly harmony'; the sacred organ inspires holy love; and when bright Cecilia gave vocal breath to her organ,

"An angel heard and straight appeared,
Mistaking Earth for Heaven."

Certain poets, Huxley goes on to say, have tried to give a direct and technical rendering of music. A passage in the eleventh book of Paradise Lost is famed among musicians for its concentrated accuracy:

His volant touch,

"Instinct through all proportions low and high,
Fled and pursued transverse the resonant fugue."

Here, Huxley's own knowledge of music, as of almost everything else, comes into play. 'Fled and pursued' — he nicely observes, describes to a nicety the entries and development of the various themes. 'Transverse' expresses the fact that music is polyphonic rather than homophonic; horizontal, not vertical. And 'resonant' implies the repetitions which are the essence of the fugal form. To one who knows what a fugue is, the lines conjure up precisely a certain kind of music. Browning did something similar in his Master Hugues of Saxe-Gotha. A much more successful attempt in the same kind is 'A Toccata of Galuppi's'. Of all the poets, Huxley sums up,
Browning and Milton seem to have been the two who understood music the best.1

Poetry and Magic:

In another section of Texts and Pretexts, Huxley takes up for discussion the relation of poetry with magic. There are, first, the spells with their compelling music and their phrases thrillingly obscure, setting the imagination working. But spells are not necessarily poetry, nor their authors poets.

There is another kind of magic in poetry, says Huxley. Peel is a master of sound-magic and of that 'magic of irrelevance', which is produced by the introduction into one context of ideas and images which seem to belong to another. The magic of irrelevance, Huxley observes, is one of poetry's most powerful instruments. Poetical phrases are poetical because, in most cases, they contain ideas which are normally regarded as irrelevant to one another, but which the poet has contrived to make relevant. 'Sleep that knits up the ravelled sleeve of care', 'to the last syllable of recorded time', are such phrases, bringing together embroidery and misery, time and spelling. Indeed, Shakespeare's plays are a tissue

of such odd but, as he uses the profoundly significant irrelevances. Every good metaphor is the mating of irrelevances to produce a new and more vivid expression.1

Metaphysical Poetry:

The metaphysical poets were particularly remarkable for the association of the most unlikely ideas; however, in such metaphysical conceits, there is an element of absurdity. When the poet knows his business, the absurdity may actually heighten our pleasure in the beauty; when he does not, the absurdity ruins everything. For instance, in some of Thomas Carew's lines on Lady Mary Wentworth,2

"So, though a virgin, yet a bride
To every grace, she justified
A chaste polygamy, and died,"

the absurdity of the metaphysical conceit does not take away from our aesthetic pleasure or neutralize our serious emotions; it only changes their quality, gives them a new and peculiar flavour.

Such irrelevances are the stuff of most metaphysical conceits. But the seventeenth-century poets also

2. See Appendix for the whole poem; pp.422-23: (9).
employed another device for making the reader 'sit up'. Instead of ranging over heaven and earth for an unlikely similitude to the object under consideration, they sometimes turned a microscopic gaze upon the object itself. The essence of the thing was, so to speak, brought to the surface and revealed itself as being no less remote from, no less irrelevant to, the conception framed by common sense than the most far-fetched analogy.¹

Poetry and Comedy:

Huxley's *Texts and Pretexts* contains several obiter dicta on literature and particularly on some of the less weighty literary genres. In one, Huxley regrets the lost secret of the Elizabethans of being lyrically funny, of writing comic verses that are also beautiful. Compared with the Elizabethan, he remarks, the comic poetry of later times seems, even when actually wittier and more amusing, rather poor stuff. Poor in not being beautiful. A certain natural and easy eloquence distinguished the comic verse of the Elizabethans, just as it distinguished their serious verse. Their fun is in the grand manner. We wrongly make a distinction between the comic and the serious style; for the best comic works have been grand

and beautiful. Witness Rabelais and Aristophanes. The
Elizabethans used the same style for both kinds of poetry.
So did the Jacobeans and Carolines, who had two main
styles for serious poetry — the 'witty', 'metaphysical'
style and the colloquial style of everyday cultured speech,
both employed very effectively in their comic verses. The
flippant style came towards the end of the seventeenth
century, and has remained the accredited style of comic
poetry ever since. Its invention coincides with that of a
special 'poetic diction' for serious verse— of an
artificial language remote from that of ordinary speech.1

_Dictionary in Poetry:_

In another of the _obiter dicta_, Huxley admires
the colloquial ease of the seventeenth century. With the
exception of Milton, almost all the good poets of the
period were colloquial poets. Those high-spirited gentle-
men made poetry by simply talking in their natural voices.
Herbert is gravely colloquial about God; Horrick, gaily,
about girls and flowers. Quoting two sonnets by Charles
Cotton², he points to their light, humorous and easy
diction. He seems to hear a warm and cultured voice dis-
coursing across the dinner table.

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In trying to account for the technique of the sonnets, Huxley shows how, for the poetical heightening of his speech, Cotton relies partly on rhythm and partly on a judicious choice of images. He remarks on the admirable phrasing and on the curious stretching of the syntax until it seems to vibrate under the impact of meaning.¹

Folk Poetry:

This kind of contrast between old verse and new, to the advantage of the former, recurs in other contexts in Huxley. Here, for instance, is a distinction between contemporary folk poetry and the folk poetry of other times. The new folk poetry is meaningless. Old folk poetry is never vague, but singularly direct and to the point, full of pregnant meaning. Modern folk poetry is almost perfectly senseless. Here, instead of the Elizabethan clarity and logic, we are provided with drivelling imbecility by our popular entertainers. Huxley wonders whether our standard of intelligence is lower than it was three hundred years ago. Or whether newspapers and cinemas and radios have conspired to rob man of whatever sense of reality, whatever power of individual questioning and criticism he once possessed.²

¹ Texts and Pretexts; Chatto & Windus, 1949; pp.206-07.
² 'Modern Folk Poetry'; On the Margin; Chatto & Windus, 1948; pp.59-60.
Poetry and Money:

Still another of the obiter dicta in Texts and Pretexts is a marked illustration of Huxley's critical curiosity, with its tendency to nose about in the least likely places. This, for instance, where he discusses the part played by money in literature, and especially poetry. Poets seem so apologetic about it, and their apology often has a touch of comedy. There is very little poetry in which economics are given what the Marxian theorists and the Fordian practitioners would certainly regard as their due.

This fact, says Huxley, has a double explanation, social and psychological. Both pagan philosophers and Christian theologians looked upon money as evil, while the aristocracy thought of economic pre-occupations as vulgar. The poet, if one there was, who wanted to write about money could not run the risk of being considered vulgar as well as wicked.

A Marxian would point out that the pagan philosophers as well as the Christian theologians were, in different ways, economically well off; while the aristocrat was what he was thanks to his wealth. These people had no incentive to discuss economics themselves and had better reasons to discourage other people from
asking awkward questions about their affluence. Hence the taboo on money as a theme for literature. But this explanation, says Huxley, excellent as far as it goes, is not complete. There are psychological as well as social reasons for the taboo. Money is a peculiarly uninspiring theme.

The distresses caused by its lack, though acute, do not lend themselves to poetical treatment. While certain agonies quicken and enlarge, and tend to break out into expression, certain others, on the contrary, seem to numb and contract the spirit. Economic miseries are essentially of the second class; and when poets do try, if at all, to express them, their instincts are not tuned to give an adequate account of worry.¹

But money is not the only thing about which poets are silent, says Huxley, elsewhere. There are also a number of other unconfessable agonies. Poetry generally deals with bereavement, parting, the sense of sin and the fear of death, and other confessable agonies of which one can be proud; they command the world's sympathy. But there are also discreditable anguishes, no less excruciating than the others, but of which the sufferer dare not, cannot speak.²

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¹ Texts and Pretexts; Chatto & Windus, 1949; pp.173-74.
² Point Counter Point; Avon Publications, V-2031, p.183.