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Charles D. Abbott

POETRY IN THE MAKING

THE COLLECTING of manuscripts has long been a function of many libraries and a passion with some bibliophiles. The literary researcher is usually able to find somewhere, in the vaults of an institution or on the shelves of a well-wishing private collector, manuscript materials that are pertinent to his work. Such materials are likely, however, to be disappointingly fragmentary. They may be handsome copies in the author's handwriting of his finished product, identical in every comma with the already published text. Or they may be the version which immediately preceded the copy which went to the printer, and in which the variations from the familiar are comparatively unimportant. Or they may be an early draft which differs so remarkably from the final work as the world knows it that the scholar is bitterly chagrined to discover that all the intermediate versions, which must have tied this early draft to what came after, are nowhere to be found.

However valuable sentimentally such memorials are, they do not provide the scholar with the complete materials which he desires. He would like everything that went to the making of the work he is investigating: the rapid and often chaotic notes that show the first impulse towards creation; the rough draft in which the material begins to take shape; the intermediate versions, however many there may be, through which the composition progresses towards its final form; the proof-sheets, if they contain revisions; and the final form itself as seen in the printed text. With such a *dossier*, consisting of absolute completeness for six or eight poems or essays, or for two or three novels, from different periods of the writer's career, the scholar could see his author

at work, could follow the active creation step by step, could understand the processes of thought which produced the final work. Such a *dossier* would constitute, in fact, a kind of biography of the author's mind. If such materials existed for the past, the critic could check his theories against a body of quite palpable evidence, and could develop his interpretation of the literary phenomenon with more authority.

But such complete materials do not often exist for the past, and it is obviously too late now to bring them into being. Every scholar who works on a literary figure does what he can to unearth them, and he is lucky if he can discover even a few fragments that are to his purpose; he almost never succeeds in uncovering the whole life history of a poem's or essay's development. Such *dossiers* have to be made at once, as soon as possible after the work is published, and they can be made only with the author's assistance. It is, therefore, only the living writer, or the recently dead whose families can still supply the documents, who can be represented in all the fullness desirable.

At the Lockwood Memorial Library of the University of Buffalo we began two years ago our efforts towards the building up of a collection of these materials for contemporary poetry written in English. We did not want just any manuscripts; we wanted special collections of manuscripts that would show, in the fullest possible way, how typical and significant poems were written. And we hoped to see represented in our files every poet who, by the standards of any existing school of criticism, was of interest or importance—sociologically, historically, or aesthetically. The whirligig of taste is too variable for us to trust our own judgment as to what the likings of the third century from now may be in regard to poetry.

The purchase of such manuscripts was out of the question. Not only did we have no funds commensurate to the purpose, but values were too unsettled. Such materials as we wanted, if they existed at all, had seldom found their way to an open market, and we could not tactfully attach arbitrary prices to the work of so many different poets. Our only hope was to enlist the aid of the poets themselves, who might see the importance of what we were endeavoring to do. We thought that many of them would be interested and many were. But there was no doubt that, if we were to win their permanent interest, it would be necessary to see each one personally and explain in detail the purposes which we were trying to fulfill. This our funds would not permit, until the Carnegie Corporation came to our rescue with an experimental grant which would enable me to see and talk with as many poets as could be crowded into a three months visit to the British Isles. Thus began the second lap of our race against time to acquire and to preserve these tangible evidences of how the poet's mind works. The first lap, conducted by letters alone, had been quiet, steady, a useful jog-trot of acquisition; the second was a terrific burst of speed, almost too strenuous, but achieving results that far surpassed our expectations.

The British poets were more than merely cooperative; they were intelligently interested, magnificently generous, and hospitable to a degree that was occasionally embarrassing. I saw over a hundred of all types and ages—the celebrated and the relatively unknown, the traditional and the revolutionary, the serious and the playful, the complex and the simple, the popular and the unpopular. Some, to be sure, were more sympathetic than others, but none that I met was unwilling to help towards the furtherance of our project. From most of them I was at once able to

get characteristic manuscripts, the beginnings of the *dossiers* we shall continue to expand; from the rest we have the promise that they will forward such materials when they have them.

The uses to which such a collection can be put are extremely varied. As an eminent scientist has pointed out to me, it will provide the psychologist with tools which he has not hitherto possessed for the investigation of that seemingly most inexplicable phenomenon, the creative imagination. When he has at his disposal documents which trace the whole development of a poem, from its first key-phrase or its first visual image, through every allusion or turn of thought by means of which the theme is advanced, both those that are discarded and those that are strengthened into a final solidity, he has something specific upon which to base his theories. He no longer has to say that *probably* the poet's line of thought was thus and so; he can say what it definitely was. And if he can carry his investigation through enough such courses, perhaps he can arrive at valid conclusions concerning the artist's creativeness and the steps by which it is achieved. I am not a psychologist; I do not know what the psychologist can do in his efforts to establish general principles, but the equipment for his work will be available and I hope he will use it.

I do know, however, to what purpose the literary investigator can utilize our collection. The prosodist, for example, can learn more about the elaborate metrics of *The Testament of Beauty* from the emendations that crowd the pages of its first draft than he can from any amount of study given to its finished lines. The grammarian can discover more about the individual poet's varieties of syntax from the trial constructions recorded in early versions than he ever could deduce from the polished final form. And, most important of all, the interpretative critic can find here

the best possible elucidation of a poem's content. With so much corroborative evidence at their disposal individual critics will find it somewhat more difficult to read into a poem two quite different meanings. Much contemporary poetry is accused, often unjustly, of being unnecessarily obscure. It is amazing how frequently the seeming obscurity will vanish when the author's method of working is understood, as it can be understood if one takes the trouble to follow the poem's growth step by step.

Take, by way of illustration, a poem by Stephen Spender. One of our most instructive exhibits consists of the large notebook which he used for working out most of his poems from 1931 to 1933. In it appear version after version recording every change, every deletion and addition. Many of the poems are so elaborately and so variously rewritten as to defy any attempt at brief description, but one (with some omissions and some telescopings) lends itself very well to fairly succinct analysis. It is a comparatively simple poem called *The Pylons,* well-known to every admirer of Spender's work—a strong and vivid lyric, built round the sharp contrast between the disappearing placidity of rural England and the spectacular energy of the machine age as symbolized in the trail of pylons marching over the downs:

> The secret of these hills was stone, and cottages
> Of that stone made,
> And crumbling roads
> That turned on sudden hidden villages.
>
> Now over these small hills they have built the concrete
> That trails black wire:
> Pylons, those pillars
> Bare like nude, giant girls that have no secret.
>
> The valley with its gilt and evening look
> And the green chestnut

> Of customary root
> Are mocked dry like the parched bed of a brook.
>
> But far above and far as sight endures
> Like whips of anger
> With lightning's danger
> There runs the quick perspective of the future.
>
> This dwarfs our emerald country by its trek
> So tall with prophecy:
> Dreaming of cities
> Where often clouds shall lean their swan-white neck.

Through four pages of the notebook this poem takes its shape. It begins with a simple distich, housing the central figure out of which the whole picture is to be developed.

> They trek the tall perspective of the Future
> Where often the cloud shall lean its swanwhite neck.

Here is the germ of the poem, which must grow into something more complete, more explicit, more detailed. The first start at expansion is unsuccessful, a brief, flat line,

> They stand above our little hills

which is unhappily developed through several rewritings into

> They stand with weeping hands and with strange pity
> Above our small chalk downs
> Like girls of a tall race, unused to country,
> Graceful, deprecating,
> And debonnair from towns

This, which obstinately refuses to take on the compactness of form the poet wants, is abandoned, and a new start is made:

> Above our small chalk downs, where winding roads
> Meet hidden villages, and loads
> Of stones, the secret of these hills, lie on the paths
> The pylons wreathe
> Their tendrils of sad wire

This is better. The image of stone, the old stone which is the

genuine backbone of the country, suggestive of its centuries-old changelessness, can be played up in contrast to the new, proud concrete pillars which are the symbols of the future. But still the form has not shaped up, so, after having thrown off a figure

> Like the huge compass arm
> That swings to its prodigious north

which won't fit in at all but which serves admirably, in a changed form, for the beginning of a later poem, he makes a fresh beginning, and this time the form develops itself naturally out of the contrast between the stone and the pylons:

> The secret of these hills is stone and cottages
> From that stone made
> And crumbling roads
> That turn on sudden hidden villages
>
> Now over these small downs, they have built the pylons
> Tall concrete pillars
> That trail black wire

It is to be a four line stanza, the terminal lines longer than the middle ones, and with each pair linked either by rhyme or by suggestively similar sounds. The second stanza causes some trouble but is at first left as:

> Now over these small hills they have built the concrete
> That trails black wire:
> Pylons, those pillars
> Nude like a race of girls that have no secret.

And the third comes with little effort,

> The valley with its gilded, evening look
> And the green chestnut
> Of comfortable root
> Are withered like the parched bed of a brook.

Then, after considerable verbal ingenuity has been exercised over a variety of minor changes, the concluding stanzas evolve:

> But far above, and far as sight endures,
> As quick as thunder

> And with its danger
> There moves the swift perspective of the future,
>
> Which, dwarfing hills and valleys in its trek
>
> *　*　*　*　*
>
> *　*　*　*　*
>
> And often the cloud shall lean its swanwhite neck.

At this point he starts at the very beginning again with a new copy. The early stanzas receive little revision, but the fourth takes on its later form, and the poet is ready for his struggle with the fifth which must properly enclose the thought of that first distich, towards which the first four stanzas have been building. It offers difficulties:

> That dwarfs our emerald custom by its trek

"Custom" is important. Into that one word is packed the long, quiet history of these hills before electric currents were dreamed of, but it won't do. In this position it is too puzzling; yet its content must go into the poem. Therefore, he goes back to the third stanza, and the chestnut's roots are made "customary" instead of "comfortable."

> That dwarfs our emerald country by its trek
> So tall and yet with pity
> Dreaming of cities
> Where often the cloud shall lean its swanwhite neck.

The note of "pity," the pity of the pylons looking down upon the customary hills, has been struck before, but it doesn't ring quite true. It is not big enough. "Prophecy" comes in instead, and the poem, except for further minor corrections, is finished.

This, in rough outline and with the omission of many interesting small revisions, is the history of the making of *The Pylons.* Most of the poems in Spender's notebook present more complicated problems of composition and of thought than does this

relatively direct example, but its interpretation will serve to suggest what more capable scholars will be able to extract from our collection, when it contains such materials for the whole of modern poetic activity.

We have still a long way to go. Our files are not yet so rich as to breed any complacency on our part. Though American poets have been already most generously responsive to letters, it is unlikely that they will be fully represented until we have been able to see them individually, as we have seen their British colleagues. Personally to seek their aid is the next item on our *agenda.* And then there is the question of the books and periodicals which are vital equipment to such a collection. We want every first printing of every significant modern poem and every subsequent printing which may incorporate textual revisions. This means that we must acquire a vast number of books and magazines which it is not always easy to find and which are frequently unpleasantly expensive. But we have made a good start; already the collection of printed materials is extensive. As it approaches completeness, it will constitute, with the *dossiers* of manuscripts around which it is growing and to which it is the necessary complement, a laboratory for research in the field of poetry such as we believe has not hitherto existed. And, when we have completed the primary labor of collecting, we hope to make available, by means of the new microfilm processes, the most important of our holdings to scholars situated anywhere throughout the English-speaking countries.

Charles David Abbott

OUTLINE OF A POETICS[1]

PART III

SYMBOL — RHYTHM — METAPHOR

NO HUMAN soul will ever see the infernal regions described by Dante. No one will ever visit a heroic isle where Correggio's women and Michelangelo's men have immortal physical life, brought into being by a Pygmalion or by a sculpturing Prometheus. The supernature of art is not of time nor place: it is Utopia and Uchronia. No man disembarks there from a phantom ship, nor is anyone thrown on that shore from a winged horse. This supernature is not another form of nature and the artist does not give knowledge of absolute perfection of the hypersensible world, but the feeling of it or, better still, the need for it. He does not describe such a world, he symbolizes it. Art is the synthesis of real and ideal. This synthesis, however, is not attained by any process of logic, but by allusive and symbolic likeness.

The first and fundamental symbol is rhythm. In space, rhythm means the representation of every point as if it necessarily determined the location of every other point within the chosen limits. In time, rhythm means the representation of each moment in a given succession, as if all preceding and subsequent moments converged towards it. Symmetry unifies space; rhythmic line unifies and extends time spacially. In this world of discontinuity and successions, rhythm or proportion indicates the need for ubiquity and simultaneousness and thus merges time with eternity, space

[1]This is the third of a series of three articles written in Italian by G. A. Borgese and translated by Frances Keene and Lucille Bunzl. The author wishes to acknowledge the help of Edouard Roditi.—ED.