Poetry in the Free World

CARLTON CULMSEE

Our so-called civilization is, from significant viewpoints, largely chaos; a chaos of abundant and rich raw materials, but still a chaos. Not the chaos from which God decreed cosmic order, but the sort that one would have seen if he had wandered among pioneers who had just disembarked with their gear from a stern-wheeler on the Missouri in the early 19th Century; piles of food and clothing and bedding and weapons, with swarms of children playing, and men and women pacing up and down all starry eyed for a land which they both desired and dreaded.

We have, of course, functioning institutions which we more or less share with other countries of the free world. However, the real edifices of our culture remain to be built. We have many mansions, but most of them lack the spires that fill the chest with pride and lift the eyes to a far vision.

The free world is accused from within and from without of being a church without a steeple, a pyramid without an apex, an altar without a fire. We have been compared to a torchlight procession with the torches unlighted, or a flock of children rolling hoops which bump clumsily along because one segment of each hoop—and that the most important segment—is missing.

True, religious zeal is not a marked characteristic of our age. We have, moreover, lost several secular faiths. One is a belief that physical science will produce a heaven on earth; another is a conviction that a socio-political system will automatically produce unselfish, dedicated, superior human beings. But many of us still cling to a hope in the *responsibly creative individual.* On the other hand, we must concede that our serious cultivation of a life of the mind and spirit is confined to limited spaces, and even in those it struggles against weeds and drought.

Dr. Culmsee is dean of the College of Humanities and Sciences at Utah State University.

Perhaps a better image of our Occidental civilization than the just-landed pioneers is a church in Italy. Not long ago I stood on the Piazza Michelangelo looking down on the little city of Florence which, as you know, was once the cultural capital of Europe. I could see the broad dome of the cathedral and beside it the campanile of Giotto. This bell-tower created by the so-called Father of Renaissance Art has been widely admired and imitated in Europe and even the New World.

Although the bell-tower is a beautiful structure, it is also a colossal irony. It must make Giotto unhappy as he walks with his friend Dante in some spirit realm, for it is not what he intended. Oh yes; he designed what we see; but he intended a soaring spire which would have meant an addition of more than 80 feet to the height. The spire would have given the cathedral a markedly different character. Towering above that mass of marble with its elaborate geometrical figures, and even well above the dome, the bell-tower would not only have summoned people to worship; it would have said, "There below is a man-made mountain of stones and pillars, of dark against white, symbolizing man's mixture of love and violence; but we can all, at our best, detach ourselves, as this bell-tower is detached, and send our thoughts rising with unity fuelled by despairing hunger or hope, up into the highest places as this spire does."

But if my sources are correct, construction of this campanile was halted just at the point where the spire was to have begun, and a little hump of a roof was put on at a level far below what Giotto had visualized.

That bell-tower, splendid as it may be, is truncated, decapitated; it is like the statue of David with the head lopped off, the head with its eyes of serene courage gone.

That spire would have lifted high above the dome of Our Lady of the Flower, and high above the tower of the signoria, which is now the loftiest structure in Florence, a collared pinnacle of sturdy secularity. It would have transfigured the landscape as well as the cathedral itself, and made another Florence than the one we see from the hills on either side.

As a matter of fact, we do not, of course, need to concern ourselves for the comfort of Giotto's soul, or for the skyline of Florence. But the truncated bell-tower is a symbol of something vastly important to all Western civilization.

We find a dark interpretation in Mary McCarthy's *Stones of Florence.* She declared that ". . . . a terrible mistake was committed here, ... between Giotto and Michelangelo, ... that had to do with power and megalomania or gigantism of the human ego." Obviously she means the exaggeration of individualism, the assumption of a demigodlike posture when humanity shifted from a God-centered view of the world to a man-centered view. There is something to be said for her belief. The Existentialist of a pessimistic cast of mind finds that he cannot draw back from an isolation which, however gallant it may be, is also grim and lonely. As Leo Spitzer averred, ". . . . man fears nothing more than isolation in the universe."

We need not, however, feel forced into ultimate despair or even scorn of our individualism. Our task is not so much to be brave during our last hours (like the Spartans "on the sea-wet rock" who, awaiting certain death before the Persian hordes, "sat down and combed their hair"). Rather, our task is to recognize two factors: the bounteousness of our resources, ill-assorted and ill-organized as they may be; and the possibilities for our creativeness amid the chaos.

We can, no doubt, view the change between Giotto and Michelangelo as a tragic error. We can refer to the Reformation as "the spiritual catastrophe" which "put an end to the Gothic Age with its impetuous yearning for the heights"; we can add that "the vertical outlook of the European mind was forthwith intersected by the horizontal outlook of modern times."

Incidentally, those last two sentences were written by a Protestant, not by a Catholic; and besides, that writer did not think of the Reformation as unrelieved calamity, for he conceded that the Gothic Age was marked by "geographical confinement" and "a restricted view of the world."

Furthermore, I feel that the enduring effects of the Reformation are owing to the stupendous advances of science

as we know it. But in any event, there appears to be no doubt, to repeat the phrases of C. G. Jung, that "the vertical outlook of the European mind was . . . . intersected by the horizontal outlook of modern times." Further to quote Jung, "Consciousness ceased to grow upward, and grew instead in breadth of view, as well as in knowledge of the terrestrial globe. This was the period of great voyages, and of the widening of man's ideas of the world by empirical discoveries . . . after nearly 400 years, the leading European thinkers and investigators . . . . came to regard the mind as wholly dependent on matter and material causation." Jung felt that this "horizontal perspective" was a reaction against "the exclusively vertical perspective of the Gothic Age." But he was, obviously, not reconciled to the prevailing tendency of our time to "account for everything on physical grounds . . . ."[1]

I would not, however, have you understand that I am rejecting what has come to us since the Renaissance; the mechanical marvels and creature comforts, and the avalanches of knowledge which have poured down upon us from a hundred peaks. We can admittedly complain more about having too much than too little. One of our most serious problems is one of assimilation. To use a commission merchant's figure, we have carloads of food rotting on a million sidetracks. Even so, we have mental and spiritual dyspepsia. We are sluggish from over-eating of facts. As pictures of destruction which could be wrought by new, more terrible weapons are flashed before us by our statesmen to frighten us into digging nuclear bomb shelters, or by Red leaders to frighten our statesmen, we are coming to yawn in the stupefaction of overstuffed children. We are coming to feel that there is something unreal about these stories; they sound a bit like tales of giants and ogres used to frighten children into being tractable.

This problem of surfeit, of over-abundance in knowledge, is not really too embarrassing. Most of us solve it by simply ignoring the fact that facts are multiplying in every sub-

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[1]C. G. Jung, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1933), pp. 173-7.

ject, and next year will be multiplying even more rapidly. Specialization and electronic devices in our computing centers will help us digest the sheer mass. For aid in interpretation, synthesis, illumination, we must have recourse to books of inspired scholarship such as *The Phenomenon of Man,* by Teilhard.

What seems to me to be our most serious difficulty is our need for spiritual readjustment. Certain kinds of radiation can, it is said, affect a person for years without his becoming conscious of them. But having a cumulative effect, they can make him appear to suffer from sudden illness. Something like that has occurred in recent centuries. We went along congratulating ourselves on becoming more worldly wise, more disciplined and objective in thought, less subject to illusion, less *subjective,* in fact—and then something occurred that convinced us we might have to pay more than daily toil for what we had been receiving.

I suspect that in times to come, the Reformation, strictly defined, will take its place in history as a movement in criticism of the Roman Catholic Church and its instruments and practices of the time. It will be seen to have accompanied the Renaissance and to have shared in it, but will take second place to the broader reformation of human thought which included the Scientific and Industrial Revolutions. Conversion to the principles of natural science, as we moderns conceive of it, has been the great revolution. And although in the main we are grateful for all this wealth poured into our laps, we are still intensely aware of something else: the malady which leads to unhappiness even among those most favored. There is this paradox which causes us, on the one hand, to laugh at the *Angst* of the professed Existentialist but, on the other, to pity ourselves for possessing our own brand of deep-seated anxiety or dread or discontent. Not only German but every language has a word for it, several words for it. Take your pick!—anxiety or dread or insecurity or disillusionment or world weariness.

You and I may disagree as to the reason for this sickness of the soul. But upon the existence of it we can find more agreement than upon almost any other question of this ques-

tioning time. And at this convention of poets I suspect that there will be general agreement about a cure for the malady.

The illness of our time is a desperate one, a disease which either engendered such monsters as Hitler and Mussolini and Stalin, or bulwarked and weaponed them for their insane brutalities. It might even bring about the end of our civilization, even the end of the glory of human consciousness. Perhaps those horror stories are not mere tales to frighten children. But this sickness is one which I think you poets are perhaps best fitted to remedy.

This is an intensely practical matter. This is a matter of sanity and survival; and beyond that, of progress in the upper reaches of the human mind.

This is a matter of the resiliency, the health, of the spirit. We Americans have had a dynamic impetus and courage, but perhaps no more than other nationalities; perhaps our national youth has been more blessed with natural resources and with a bright new technology with which to exploit these resources. At least we have shared a dynamic spirit with other human beings.

Dr. Jean Gottman, who has been doing research upon what he terms Megalopolis, the continuous stretch of cities and suburban areas from north of Boston to south of Washington, finds much to admire in that vast urban complex. He wrote:

> ". . . . If our modern Megalopolis has withstood as well as it has the march of time, this must be ascribed to an exceptional degree of diffused and stubborn dynamism. It is to such a spirit, which endures only in a free and changing society, that one should look for the key to successful growth and development of an urban region. Local natural endowment, the brilliance of leading experts, the logical excellence of proposed plans, are of little value without that spirit diffused among the people."[2]

The nourishment of this spirit is a matter of great concern. A general despair, the rising of the miasma of self-pity, the loss of wonder and awe—these could bring fearsome hazards; these we can as poets strive to counteract.

I am not suggesting we organize as a cult for rituals of shallow optimism and issue a manifesto. Each should do it in

[2]Annual Report, *Twentieth Century Fund* (New York, 1960). p. 35.

his own way, and his own way may be a tragic way or a bitter way. A work of art, as Jung wisely declared, is never unequivocal; there will be ambiguities, there will be paradoxes and downright contradictions. For in a free society the mind must sally forth untrammeled. But there should be honesty and a seeking for the depths of our strength, so that we may again feel that impetuous yearning for the heights, and feel it with confidence.

What is more, I believe that we have grounds for confidence. The world is, I feel, nearing a new birth of wonder, of reverence. But I do not believe that this Renaissance is inevitable, a necessity of history. It is, however, a necessity for our survival and development. You and I must labor to bring it to pass. We cannot, I fear, relinquish our responsibility altogether to institutionalized religion. Not that I would disparage the worthy toilers in the churches, those honestly struggling to restore a primitive vitality, a spiritual robustness, to modern life. But, unhappily, there sometimes appears to be a spiritual sluggishness or laziness often content with threadbare phrases which are actually dangerous to the idealism and awe of the young.

You, the poets, are aiding all the churches because you are bringing about the downfall of false doctrines of the cult of objectivity, which was based upon distrust of the "subjective," of mind, that is, and hence also of spirit. You aid by restoring freshness of vision, by reviving wonder. You, at your best, give glimpses of the universal basis for religious feeling.

For poetry, at its best—perhaps always when it is sincere—is, after all, essentially religious. As Veneta L. Nielsen wrote in her monograph *Under Sound,* "Poetry is the divine light shed upon experience, human experience; it is therefore religious in nature; it is therefore metaphorically always about love."[3]

Be grateful for what science has done for you without losing yourself in a secular faith in scientism, which often proceeds from a materialistic complacency through spiritual vacuum, to emptiness and despair. Know that the horizontal

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[3]Veneta L. Nielsen, *Under Sound* (Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 1958), p. 9.

growth of knowledge will go on, through every university, every great research foundation, through the military services and government agencies; but do not be borne down and crushed by the daily freshets of new data, and made to feel ashamed of your own contribution, which is both indispensable and higher. For to you is left the distillation of true meaning from the masses of fact; to you is left the rearing of those pinnacles and minarets above the flood plain. That plain is deep in sediment fat with fertility; but it needs such as you to light torches and rekindle fires on forsaken altars, to build the spires upon the structures left unfinished by frustrated Giottos.

You the poet can best reconcile the splendid if unruly creativeness of the individual with the need for essential unity. The true poet is not selfish. As a thinker to whom I am much indebted has said, ". . . . the poet . . . . knows that a purposiveness out-reaching human ends is the life-giving secret for man."

And you know, probably best of all, that this gallant new world of science, of industry, yes of poetry, exists ultimately for the purpose of bringing to birth a new world soul. It will be a task, a complex of innumerable tasks, often of sore difficulty. But do not let discouragement enervate you. In the harsh but hopeful words of William Meredith,

> Poems are hard to read
> Pictures are hard to see
> Music is hard to hear
> And people are hard to love . . .
> But whether from brute need
> Or divine energy
> At last mind eye and ear
> And the great sloth heart will move.

You the poets know, as did the great saints, what Robert Fitch termed "the mysterious efficacies of love." He continued, "For if one will not love, one will not learn. It is only love that yields insight."[4] You demonstrate love when

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[4]Robert E. Fitch, "Science and the Saintly Sentiments," *Columbia University Forum* (Spring, 1960).

you bridge the abyss between your own private anguish and ecstasy, and the universal needs of men.

There is, as Teilhard wrote, "that irresistible instinct in our hearts which leads us toward unity. . . . " ". . . . this fundamental vibration which seizes us when confronted by nature, beauty, music. . . ." And he cried, "Resonance to the All—the keynote to pure poetry and pure religion." He linked with these the "expectation and awareness of a Great Presence."[5]

Take with you my best wishes as you go forth to delight in reading poetry, and as you alternate between anguish and exaltation while you write your own poems. And wherever you are, you can remember, in even your darkest moods, that there is wonder in us and a power deep as our roots go, far back even into the inanimate, and beneath, back to some spiral nebula of intense luminosity. We are, as Eiseley wrote, "compounded of dust and the light of a star," from the most ancient of times down to the current chlorophyll which, humble though it may be, weds earth and sun for us.

You at your best are makers and shapers, working in that chaos I spoke of at the beginning. We have evolved far from the spiral nebula of old. We have a mounting dignity and wisdom as we adventure among the stars on this rotund space vessel of ours. Whatever there is of power and majesty in the universe, we share in it or we can if we are at once modest and aware. We have laid our hands upon the mighty potencies in the chest of the universe; we must not use them to return this globe once more to a fiery incandescence of mindless gases. It is your task as poets to help deal with this chaos, to mold shapes of meaning and to bring a new birth of wonder and reverence for the splendors about us.

In ending, I would say as earnestly as I can, "Peace be with you." But not the peace of peace conferences, with everyone glaring suspiciously at everyone else, nor the peace of drowsy meadows and ruminating cows; rather the peace that is heart-swelling storm, that Clinton Larson wrote of

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[5]Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man* (New York: Harper, 1959), p. 266.

in his poetry drama *The Redeemer.* Peter speaks to Jesus saying,

". . . . I wander as your voice
Gathers me from the net you cast
That I take and cast for you.
My soul awaits the storm
Of your prayer in me."

Young Dr. Thomas Dooley (you recall his heroic work among the stricken natives in Laos) spoke of the quality of vital spiritual peace before he died. He said, ". . . . the storm around me does not matter. Nothing human or earthly can touch me. A wilder storm of peace gathers in my heart. What seems unpossessable, I can possess . . . . What is unutterable, I can utter . . . ."[6] This strength I wish you with all my heart as you write and sing in the months to come.

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[6]"The Ultimate Victory," *This Week,* June 25, 1961, p. 2.