

tion, like objects in a museum. They are meant for the thoughtful man in his everyday life ("chalked/ On the sidewalk") to help him resolve the problems of that life, such as the opposites, life and death, considered in nonreligious terms. The man who takes thought (section V) can see unity in the complexities of reality.

### "The Sense of the Sleight-of-hand Man" (CP, p. 222)

The felicitous spiritual events in one's life occur fortuitously ("Occur as they occur"). Felicitous events also occur fortuitously in nature, such as the chance composition of clouds, houses, and rhododendrons, or as the way the clouds change, shape and color as the wind contorts them in the sky. Nature is in this sense a sleight-of-hand man, bringing things about that one least expects. Who could have predicted the movement of the bluejay? In a parallel manner, the poet here improvises metaphors to describe nature: sun rays become spokes of a wheel. The reality of the sun, here captured in the improvised metaphor of the wheel, outlives man's myths about it—the myths die, but the sun keeps rolling around again; and, in another improvised metaphor for the sun, the "fire eye" outlives the gods men derive from it. The poet shifts by association with the word "eye" to another improvised metaphor. As with nature, so with the mind; the operation of the imagination is fortuitous and unpredictable—its metaphors, for the pink-eyed dove and pines that make wind sounds like cornets, the imaginary island, occur as they occur. It may be, therefore, that only "the ignorant man," whose mind works without preconception and without premeditation, thus in a way parallel to nature's operation, in a natural way—it may be that only a man with such a mind can apprehend nature in such a way as to become one with it, "to mate his life with life," that life of nature which is "sensual" and beyond the mind, therefore unavailable to systematic thought or intellectual preconception. (The realm

of nature is to be joined as a "pearly spouse," in a sensual marriage, not in theory.) The "life" of nature is, even in winter when most barren and static, "fluent" like the mind of the poet in this poem which flows from one improvised and unexpected image to another in order to capture it.

### "Of Modern Poetry" (CP, p. 239)

Modern poetry concerns itself with the mind as the mind tries to discover belief that will enable it to confront the contemporary world.<sup>34</sup> Playing on the word "act" in the first line, the poem goes on to develop the metaphor of a play. When the world we know was based on stable tradition, the mind did not have to search for belief: since the culture was stable, one merely had to repeat what was known. But then the whole situation changed and the traditional past became nothing more than a memory, a memento of a time gone by ("souvenir"). Modern poetry cannot be of that dead past, but rather must be of the present, "living." It has to speak to the people of the present in their own language; it has to meet their needs; it has to consider such things as war, and discover how the mind can confront them. Since the historical environment, the "theatre," has changed, the imagination must find a new artistic vehicle to contain our modern experience, poetry must "construct a new stage" within the "theatre" of our environment. On that stage, in that art, poetry must be like an actor whose impulse to act can never be satisfied; here, however, the act is that of the mind as it continually meditates the words which are an exact expression of the mind, words which have the right sound to the "ear of the mind," and which compose, therefore, apt modern poetry. The "invisible audience" of contemporaries should, in fact, find such poetry so apt that it will seem, in listening to it, that it is listening to itself. In creating through his expression the perfect expression of his audience, the poet unites their feeling with his and the feelings of both become identical. The "actor" is the imagination, thinking

like a "metaphysician" in "the dark" of the mind, a metaphysician who transforms the content of his mind into the imaginative expression of poetry; he gives this content the "sudden rightness" of art which is a perfect expression of his mind, "wholly/ Containing" it at a level of aptness beneath which poetry cannot afford to sink and above which it has no need to rise. Poetry must in this way satisfy the mind in the poem, and in doing this the subject is a secondary consideration: it may be of any ordinary, everyday activity; essentially it will not be a poem about a given subject, but one that is concerned with the operation of the mind as it seeks to confront the circumstances of contemporary reality.

### "Asides on the Oboe" (CP, p. 250)

"The prologues are over," states the prologue to this poem. There must be an end to tentative formulations of belief; one must choose "final belief." This being so, the poet proposes "that final belief/ Must be in a fiction."

The first section begins by elaborating on why there is a need to choose "final belief." The old beliefs are dead: the ancient myth of the underworld is "obsolete" ("the wide river," Styx, separating life from death in the "empty land" populated only by shades); Boucher de Perthes, the nineteenth century archeologist, in investigating the prehistoric origins of man, killed the gods of our myths of genesis; our past beliefs, embodied in graven images, have been destroyed by time. We are left with the idea of the "philosophers' man," the ideal of the philosophers as one who understands everything, and understands in human rather than in religious terms. This mythic figure alone is still fresh and real to us ("walks in dew"); he meditates pure thoughts which are nourishment to us ("mutters milky lines"), the "imagery" of a myth pure of time's corruption ("immaculate") in which we can still believe. If one's image of man, as expressed in art (as in music on the oboe), describes man as inadequate, as unable to replace the dead gods, as imper-

fect however god-like ("naked, tall"), there still remains the tantalizing possibility ("impossible possible") of an ideal projection of man, "who has had the time to think enough" to understand and explain the human condition. He would be the man who would stand as the central ideal for all men, self-contained like a globe, in whom all men would be reflected and who, in the reflections he gave back would answer our questions about ourselves. Thus he is "the man of glass," who in his complex reflections, as "in a million diamonds," explains us to ourselves ("sums us up").

The philosophers' man (section II) is described as a "transparence" because, though not real, invisible, he makes things clear; that clarity, in which our questions are answered, pacifies us. He is the spirit of a place, its image, its imaginary projection ("the transparence of the place in which/ He is") and as such, he is that imaginative element of a thing which allows us to fully realize its nature. Thus the philosophers' man takes the season of later summer, non-descript, unspecific, like, presumably, a "peddler's pie," and gives it an imaginative identity, that of August. He specifies it with a particular image of August. He is "cold and numbered" because he is an abstraction, an imaginative projection, unreal, though with an effect on reality ("numbered," as if he were composed of numbers, like an abstract formula). Thus we are provoked to imagine romantic rendezvous, because August suggests itself to us as a season for love ("his cuckoos call").

The catastrophe of war (section III) prevented us from regarding the world as an essentially pleasant and peaceful place (jasmine scented; the poem was first published in 1940—jasmine is a tropical and semi-tropical plant, but "jasmine islands" probably do not refer to any particular battle grounds of World War II). If we did not then find peace through the philosophers' man, we found a true understanding of man, "the sum of men." If we saw life stripped of our illusions about it ("the central evil"), we at the same time saw life as it really is ("the central good"). Thus we accepted death without our old illusions ("without jasmine