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# SENSE AND SENSIBILITY IN MODERN POETRY

WILLIAM VAN O'CONNOR

*Sense and Sensibility*  
*in*  
*Modern Poetry*

BY

WILLIAM VAN OCONNOR

UNIVERSITY PAPERBACKS

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First printing, 1963

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## Preface

SOME of the material in this book has appeared in articles.<sup>1</sup> Each of the articles has been reconsidered and reabsorbed into the general problem considered in this study. The problem was formulated in a manner and to an extent somewhat comparable to its final form when I became aware that those who concerned themselves with certain problems—with the attitudes of various generations toward faith in the literal truth of religious or political beliefs as opposed to myth, judgment as opposed to fancy, abstract, denotative expression as opposed to imagistic or symbolical expression, “scientific” or objective expression as opposed to subjective expression, etc.—were concerned with ramifications and consequences of the same phenomenon T. S. Eliot had touched on lightly in his now famous account of the “dissociation of sensibility.” In analyzing the diction and idioms of poetry subsequent to the Jacobean, Eliot noted many attempts to split language into an emotional component and into an intellectual component, to express objective, *genuine* thought in an abstract, nonmetaphorical language and to allow subjective, *poetic* thought only a subsidiary, supplementary function. The language of abstraction, in other words, tended to be a vehicle for thought in poetry, whereas the language of metaphor, when not merely serving a supplementary function, tended to be vague and misty. Consequently, Eliot said, poets often have been ruminative, on the one hand, or sentimental, on the other. The attempt to keep intellect and emotion at opposite poles

1. In *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*, *Meanjin Papers* (Australia), *A Comment* (Australia), the *Sewanee Review*, the *Kenyon Review*, the *American Scholar*, the *University of Kansas City Review*, *College English*, the *Quarterly Review of Literature*, the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, and the *New Mexico Quarterly*.

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has had the effect of causing poets to think and feel by starts and has caused them to lose the art of expressing strong emotion and keen insight at the same time.

Eliot, as subsequent observation has indicated, was seeing the matter in too limited a focus. He laid the blame for the changes in poetic idioms on Dryden and Milton, as though the language later poets used had been formed not by the society as a whole but by its great poets. Critics after Eliot, and indebted to him, have been able to see that the changes in language were a part of the consequences of the adaptation of a culture to the scientific viewpoint.

This attempt at adaptation tended, as Lewis Mumford says, to throw the weight of emphasis in intellectual matters outside man himself, into the objective world. Post-Renaissance man, therefore, he continues, has overemphasized the objective, the quantitative, and the measurable in opposition to the subjective, the qualitative, and the nonmeasurable. This cultural history and influence, he concludes, is behind modern man's emphasis on practical knowledge, his willingness to exchange faiths and constructed systems for hard, cold (and isolated) facts, and his preference for stark realism as well as his frank dislike for poetry.

That many artists have felt themselves isolated because of these popularly held views is readily understandable. And that artists individually and as members of movements have in reaction explored the depths of a highly subjective and personalized realm is equally understandable. The modern poet consequently has felt himself impelled to devise not only standards of value to whatever extent this is possible but interrelated bodies of symbols (myths) which will enable the reader not only to understand but to *experience* his attitudes and perceptions. Understandable, too, is the phenomenon of the twentieth century having given rise to at least two generations of poet-critics; the poet cannot function freely as a poet until he sees with some clarity his role in a society that has lost its supernatural sanctions for values and has tended to exclude the artist. In

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the first chapter of this study, "The Dissociation of Sensibility," I have tried to indicate the breadth of this critical problem and the work of contemporary critics who are aware of it. And in subsequent chapters I have attempted to treat its implications as they can be observed in the body of modern poetry.

Among the many who have assisted me through suggestions and general criticism, I am especially indebted to Professors R. L. Ramsay, Robert B. Heilman, Edwin S. Miller, Robert Penn Warren, Alan W. Brown, and William York Tindall. I am greatly indebted to Professors Marjorie Nicolson and Lionel Trilling, as well as to my wife, Mary Allen O'Connor.

I am also deeply grateful to the Rockefeller Foundation, whose grant assisted me in undertaking this study.

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UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

W. V. O'C.

## *Preface to the Paperback Edition*

*Sense and Sensibility in Modern Poetry* was published shortly after World War II, when the modern critical movement was beginning to transform the study of English in colleges and universities. Therefore it probably carries some of the fervor that discussions of literature at that time usually generated. In the past few years we have been watching the end of modernism in various ways, and I have tried to outline and analyze this in a recent book *The New University Wits, and the end of modernism*. It is interesting to me to think of the two books in relation to each other. Clearly T. S. Eliot was right when he wrote about the literature *entre les deux guerres*. Modernism did produce a great literature; as it recedes in time it does not diminish in magnificence.

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, DAVIS

William Van O'Connor

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## CHAPTER ONE

### *Introduction: The Dissociation of Sensibility*

*It is science, ultimately, that makes our age different, for good or evil, from ages that have gone before.*—BERTRAND RUSSELL

A PART of the corpus of modern criticism is the attempt to explain the effects of scientism on post-Renaissance poetry. It is an investigation of certain theories and attitudes which as by-products of the scientific movement affected not only the actual writing of poetry but the respect in which poetry has been held. It is not an indiscriminate attack on science.<sup>1</sup>

The separation of rational thought, in so far as this is possible, from the mythic and the emotional was necessary apparently for the functioning of the scientific mind and the employment of the scientific method. Subsequently, it has become apparent that suspicion of the emotions and the restriction of their functioning have had dire effects. It has become apparent that the subjective world of desire, imagination, and myth is, in the complex economy of human nature, the world from which arise ideals, morality, and esthetic expression. To establish a dichotomy of the emotional and the intellectual, and to suspect the "subjective," fosters distortions of many kinds.

The source of the distortions has been variously attributed. One critic tends to find it in Johannes Kepler's invidious comparison of objective and subjective qualities, in the suggestion that truth is solely objective and verifiable.<sup>2</sup> Another tends to see the trouble arising

from Descartes's division or disjunction of "mind" and "matter."<sup>3</sup> For poetry this meant the assumption of the existence and life of "ideas" separate and distinct from matter and therefore from symbol and metaphor. Yet another will find the source in Francis Bacon<sup>4</sup> or Thomas Hobbes,<sup>5</sup> each of whom encouraged "the monopoly of the scientific spirit over the mind." All were a part of an intellectual climate that was beginning to favor the intellect at the expense of the emotions.

This emphasis upon the intellectual constantly held to at the expense of a great many basic emotional needs has become pervasive in the entire thought and activities of the post-Renaissance world. The by-products, as it were, of the emphasis may be seen in contexts ostensibly social, moral, linguistic, or esthetic. In an examination of modern poetry we find certain preconceptions which seem to be the result of attempts to evaluate all experience in terms of attitudes and beliefs popularly held to be scientific. Among them is the assurance that *reality* has to do with physical, objective, measurable facts and that such ideals as love or mercy or the values in various moral systems, being the product of human imagination, are somehow unreal.

All post-Renaissance poetry as interpreted by certain contemporary critics, then, appears to have been influenced by the scientific emphasis. (Neoclassicism de-emphasized the irrational and the mysterious and, in so doing, expressed a faith in the power of rationality. The Romantic Movement was the reaction. Nineteenth-century naturalism was a later "scientific" expression in that it encouraged literal realism and detailed description of objective situations. Symbolism was the reaction.<sup>6</sup>)

The belief that fancy or imagination was the "irrational" faculty and judgment the rational faculty restricted the writing of poetry in various ways.<sup>7</sup> Following the Romantic Movement, however, emotional and highly subjective expressions were encouraged, as though in reaction from the former restrictions. Unfortunately, the

## INTRODUCTION: THE DISSOCIATION OF SENSIBILITY

belief that intellect is somehow opposed to emotion and to art persisted.<sup>8</sup> By and large, nineteenth-century poets accepted Hobbes's division between judgment and fancy. Consequently, the nineteenth century witnessed bodies of poetry from which a precise intellectuality was carefully excluded. There was a tendency toward sentimentality. There was an effort to call up emotions through the use of standardized symbols. And, beginning in France, there was an attempt to separate the "aura of feeling" around words from the "rational content" at their center.<sup>9</sup> Chief among T. S. Eliot's contributions to English poetic theory and practice, perhaps, has been his concern that intellect be restored to poetry.

Certain other seventeenth-century attempts to make knowledge "objective" affected the writing of poetry. There was a classification of experience into the dignified and the mean, the "poetic" and the "nonpoetic," the serious and the frivolous. Knowledge was to be held in stable categories. (The division of intellect and emotion into separate categories led to an emphasis upon abstract, denotative, logical language.)<sup>10</sup> Consequently, there was an avoidance of metaphor and ambiguity. The emotion which had to be generated, if there was to be poetry at all, frequently was aroused by wit, irony, and overstatement as well as by the employment of metrical forms. The point is that the poets were obliged to effect a compromise with categories of objective knowledge.)

(Behind this question of language was the question of the nature of the imagination and the freedom of the poet to express what his imagination created.) Ultimately, the problem resolves itself into whether or not certain products of the imagination are to be accepted as genuine knowledge to the same extent, say, that the principles of science or the products of logical thought are.<sup>11</sup> The distrust of the imagination we inherit arises from our assurance that only what is measurable is really true.

Eliot has striven in his poetry to reunite thought and feeling—to transform an "observation into a state of mind," to achieve "a di-

rect sensuous apprehension of thought into feeling."<sup>12</sup> There have been various poets, however, who preferred not to follow Eliot's lead. Some of these have been members of schools attempting various types of pure poetry.<sup>13</sup> It may be observed that most of these types favor the emotional at the expense of intellect. Conrad Aiken, for example, has attempted to employ "only the most delicately evocative aspects" of "emotions or things or sensations." He has aspired to write a poetry of hint, overtone, and suggestion. Both the Imagists and the Objectivists have striven to ignore or to be indifferent to idea. The emphasis has been upon the image or object in isolation. There seems to be implied the suspicion that the only genuine knowledge is the knowledge we have of objective fact. In so far as they suggest a distrust of the transforming power of the imagination and a fear of large systems of belief, they are obviously of our time.<sup>14</sup>

The tendency of modern poets, on the other hand, to write a highly imaginative, personalized poetry is in reaction against veristic forms of poetry, those in which a denotative, nonmetaphorical language was encouraged, as well as the acceptance of stable rules and attitudes.<sup>15</sup>

Further, many esthetic principles behind modern poetry can be related to the dichotomy of thought and sensibility. Poets have been concerned with a language of indirection—with concretion, wit, irony, tension—in which feeling and tone may be understood and experienced as something more than supplementary to abstract meaning. The emphases upon appropriate rhythms, metaphor, ambiguity, and dramatic statement are all means of making the emotional integral in the poetic statement. It is as though the modern poets were proving that ideas are not merely abstractions, meanings packaged and then handed back and forth, but that they may be made deeply meaningful only when they are expressed in a language that simultaneously involves the sensibilities and the intellect.



## INTRODUCTION: THE DISSOCIATION OF SENSIBILITY

The dissociation of thought from sensibility is a theme running throughout Eliot's criticism. The significance of it dawned upon Eliot apparently when he was studying the differences between Elizabethan and later poetry. "In Chapman especially," he says in "The Metaphysical Poets," "there is a direct sensuous apprehension of thought into feeling which is exactly what we find in Donne." And in the same essay the perception and feeling of unified thought and sensibility he calls experiencing thought "as immediately as the odour of a rose."

Something, he asserts, "happened to the mind of England between the time of Donne or Lord Herbert of Cherbury and the time of Tennyson and Browning." Thereafter, however, he discusses the matter only in terms of literary influence: "In the seventeenth century a dissociation of sensibility set in, from which we have never recovered; and this dissociation, as is natural, was due to the influence of the two most powerful poets of the century, Milton and Dryden." This explanation might have seemed to be satisfactory in the case of Milton had his language of magnificence and grandeur been a strong and continuing influence. But Milton's language was not successfully imitated. The most basic influence did not originate with Dryden; it affected him. Under the influence of the scientific temper he attempted to separate the intellectual from the emotional, the abstract language of judgment from the fanciful language of images, and the serious from the mean. The attempted separation of thought from feeling meant alternative poetries of thought and feeling. "The sentimental age began early in the eighteenth century and continued. The poets revolted against the ratiocinative, the descriptive; they thought and felt by fits, unbalanced; they reflected." Eliot might have pointed out that the poets subsequent to the Jacobean lived in an intellectual milieu—they did not cause it—in which thought and feeling were believed, popularly at least, to be opposed

That sensibility is integrally related to intelligence has signifi-