The Crises of Modern Poetry

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Poet, poetical sense, poetic dwelling: a poet is the one who writes poems, and to write poems is a way to express his poetical sense, so as to achieve a state of poetic dwelling. The one who has poetical sense, however, is not necessarily a poet, he might be a sage, or a philosopher; and the title of a poet does not necessarily assure him a poetical sense, notwithstanding the fact that a large number of them do have it. To have a poetic dwelling, it is necessary to have a poetical sense, and to have a poetical sense, it is necessary to keep his spirit of infancy never dying, which in turn makes it necessary to have a world of Great Harmony. And because a world of Great Harmony is hard to find, a poet is doomed to fare hard, unless he can give up his integrity, and do after the fashion of the world, cringing for a living. “Modern
poetry” here I understand as vers Libre, or free verse, down from Walt Whitman to the present; the while covers also the small portion of metrical verse written by modern poets like Robert Frost. As for the crises of modern poetry, it is not a new topic. The doubt upon poetry and the poet occurred as early as Renaissance, when Sir Philip Sidney in the age of Queen Elizabeth I wrote An Apology for Poetry in response to Stephen Gosson’s The School of Abuse, dedicated to no other person than Sidney himself. In the Apology, Sidney defends the dignity of the poet, tracing the high regards for him in the ancient times of Greek and Rome, reaffirming the two functions of poetry, namely, to entertain and to edify. Almost three centuries later, a similar challenge confronted poetry and the poet again, this time mainly against Romanticism, when a critic named Thomas Love Peacock wrote an essay frivolously, The Four Ages of Poetry, against which it is now Percy Bysshe Shelley, who wrote A Defence of Poetry, safeguarding the function and position of the poet and poetry as a whole. “The Four Ages”, designated by Peacock, are the age of iron, of gold, of silver, and of brass, which are further expounded correspondingly later as the bardic, the Homeric, the Virgilian, and the Nonnic. His own is the age of brass. Shelley refuted Peacock’s views trenchantly, borrowing ideas from both Plato and Aristotle. His regard for poetry and the poet is high. “It (poetry) strips the veil of familiarity from the world, and lays bare the naked and sleeping beauty which is the spirit of its forms.” (Leitch, 714) This corresponds to say that a poet is a lamp, as is summarized later by Abrams in his The Mirror and the Lamp. A poet lights up the object he meets, so he is not merely an imitator. To Shelley, a poet is “of the highest wisdom, pleasure, virtue and glory”, and “the happiest, the best, the wisest and the most illustrious of men” (Leitch, 715). A poet inspires, predicts the future, and moves people forward. He is the unacknowledged legislator of the world. Our own time is not far removed from both Sidney and Shelley’s, yet much more advanced and complicated, and poetry and the poet are suffering a situation much more severe than ever before.

I . The Decaying of Poetical Sense

“Poetical sense”, originally “poetical sense in the mind”, comes from Waldo Emerson’s Nature, a representative work of American Transcendentalism, whose Chapter One says: “When we speak of nature in this manner, we have a distinct but most poetical sense in the mind. We mean the integrity of impression made by manifold natural objects.” (Perkins, 335) To have a poetical sense in the mind
signifies to live close to nature, a simple life and thinking that prefers spiritual life to material, so that it goes in opposite directions against social progress, for social progress signifies civilization, and civilization in turn implies rules and regulations, and a complication of human cognition. As a result, the more progressive a society is, the more liable it is for human being to be materialized, and to lose his self, and his living and imaginary spaces to be infinitely squeezed out, so that the easier it is for poetical sense to get lost.

Poetical sense in the mind is but a rare thing, and those who have it are mostly a poet, a sage or philosopher, for which the ancient Orientals claim the most of them. The reason is that Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism are prevalent there, and the former preaches for an active participation in social life, and setbacks and disappointment are inevitable, hence the Confucians abound with despondence and frustration, and then they tend to convert to the latter two, which uphold detachment and seclusion from society. That is why the Buddhist and Taoist teem with hermits, who favor an austere and unfettered life. Yanhui is admirable, “[w]ith rice to eat, water to drink, and a mean lane to live in, while a distress to others, a great joy to Yanhui” (Confucius, 69). Alone but not lonely, poor yet happy, free and far from all vulgarity, that is a sage. No wonder that his master Confucius praises him as “virtuous”. Lucky is Tao Yuanming, disappointed from official career, he can still sing “Homeward, Ho!” (Tao Yuanming, 243) and “pluck chrysanthemums with pleasure/ And see the Southern Mount in leisure” (Tao Yuanming, 113), residing in an ideal peach garden created by his own imagination. The same may be said of Wangwei and Libai, the former “Sauntering along till the end of the brook, / I take a rest and watch the clouds appear” (Xu Yuanzhong, 55) and the latter writes, “All birds have flown away, so high; / A lonely cloud drifts on, so free. / Gazing on Mount Jingting, nor I / Am tired of him, nor he of me.” (Yuan Xingpei, 21) What a free and easy mind, almost beyond this world! Such poetic sense in the mind we read rarely in Western writings; even if we meet one by chance, it is likely discounted, for although most of their civilizations start much later, but they develop much faster. The only exception might be Diogenes, the representative Cynic of ancient Greek, whose abandonment and carefree lifestyle wins even the admiration of Alexander the Great. A well-known anecdote recorded by Plutarch’s Life of Alexander about this great philosopher is that, Alexander once pays a visit to Diogenes, enquiring anything he lacks, “yea,” he answers. “that I do: that you stand out of my sun a little.” (Zhang Zhixiang, 140) The latecomers, however, can not be
so free-minded. Shakespeare is quite a man of the world, but even he could sometimes write something unworldly. In *As You Like It*, the banished old Duke is contented with the present reclusive life in Forest of Arden, compared with the past court life, which is full of intrigue, hypocrisy, and bloodshed. This drama is noted for its description of nature, and the memorable gem pieces of ditties and melodies. For instance, the old Duke's courtier Amiens sings thus:

Under the greenwood tree
Who loves to lie with me,
And turn his merry note
Unto the sweet bird's throat,
Come hither, come hither, come hither:
Here shall he see No enemy
But winter and rough weather. (II. v.1)

Here they take delight in the life among nature, plain and pure, in direct contrast to that in court. The monologue of King Henry VI, in *Henry VI*, Part III, can be cited as another example. Tired with the life in court, even Henry VI yearns for an honest and unsophisticated pastoral life of a shepherd. Although it is expressed through the mouth of a dramatic persona, who can deny that it might also be the inner voice of the playwright himself:

O God! methinks it were a happy life,
To be no better than a homely swain;
To sit upon a hill, as I do now,
To carve out dials quaintly, point by point,
Thereby to see the minutes how they run,
How many make the hour full complete;
How many hours bring about the day;
How many days will finish up the year;
How many years a mortal man may live... (II. v. 21)

Also noticeable enough is Alexander Pope's gem piece, *Solitude*. Read it, one can hardly help venerating this extraordinary man, a small stature, a great mind, the last stanza of it run:

Thus let me live, unseen, unknown,
Thus un lamented let me dye,
Steal from the world, and not a stone
Tell where I lie. (Palgrave, 133)
Pope longs for a plain and quiet intellectual life, to earn his daily bread all by himself, so that independent and self-relied, to breathe the free and fresh air, and he has to a certain extent realized his wish, for he has kept celibate for life, with no seeds and bondages left behind. The aspiration of these two Western thinkers and poets is comparable to the afore-mentioned Chinese counterparts. Nevertheless, the one who cherishes the most poetical sense in the mind is Henry David Thoreau. He shows a negative attitude toward modern civilization, secluding himself from society by living in a cabin built by himself near Walden Pond, preferring a free, simple, and intellectual life, declaring, “A man is rich in proportion to the number of things which he can afford to let alone.” (Perkins 467) And it is obvious that Thoreau is greatly influenced by Oriental philosophy, such as Buddhism, Confucianism, and perhaps Daoism.

However, such kind of high and noble aspiration can rarely be seen, when human society has entered into the era of industrialization and urbanization. In modern society, William Butler Yeats can be counted as the one to have showed such a poetical sense in the mind. His *Sailing to Byzantium* is nostalgic, revealing the poet’s disappointment with modern life. Such a depressive mood is showed clearer in his *The Lake Isle of Innisfree*, the last stanza of which reads:

I will arise and go now, for always night and day
I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;
While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey,
I hear it in the deep heart’s core. (Greenblatt, 2025)

Here modern civilization is symbolized by “roadway”, “pavements grey”. But the poet will leave them; it is a call from his innermost; so he will arise and go now, and go to a lake isle named Innisfree, where he plans to build a small cabin, sow some beans, listen to the humming of the bees on the green groves, the linnet fanning its wings, from the morning to the evening, and from the evening to the morning, a living all by himself. He wants to flee from modern society, and to live a simple life, close to nature like a recluse. Why and wherefore Yeats has such a wish? Perhaps we can find some annotations from his contemporary Thomas Hardy’s poem *The Darkling Thrush*, for the mood and tone of the whole poem expresses so well the Zeitgeist around the fin de Siècle. The second stanza reads:

The land’s sharp features seemed to be
The Century's corpse outleant,
His crypt the cloudy canopy,
The wind his death-lament.
The ancient pulse of germ and birth
Was shrunken hard and dry,
is And every spirit upon earth
Seemed fervourless as I. (Ferguson, 1155)

Cool and cold colored words abound in the whole poem: frost, spectre-grey, weakening eyes, desolate, broken lyres, haunted, etc.; these are the words used in the first stanza, creating an atmosphere of winter's bleakness and depression. In the next stanza—corpse, crypt, death lament, shrunken, hard and dry, fervourless, etc.—these words have sketched out a scene of hopelessness. In the third stanza, the darkling thrush occurs at last. But alas, it is "frail, gaunt, and small", with blast-beruffed plume. Nevertheless, it is right out of this darkling thrush's singing voice that the poet gets some hope. This poem is written at the last day of the 19th century, and it seems the oncoming new century is beyond any hope. Decadent, listless, moribund, etc., a true description of the spiritual state of modern Western society, which Yeats lives in, tells us partly why he wants so earnestly to flee from it.

From the examples given above, we can find easily decay of poetical sense in the mind from the ancient to the modern, a degradation from high to low, from a practicable reality to a hard to reach ideal, an imagination, nay, a wish, in a word, a retrogressive line in opposite to that of social progress. Limited to the level of their knowledge and world outlook, a comparatively simple social structure, and deficiency in material life, it is natural for the ancient to have less desire, to live a life simple but full of poetical sense in the mind, and it is not difficult for them to have a poetic dwelling. Yanyuan as mentioned above, for example, lived in the 5th Century, B.C.; next to him was Wangwei and Libai, who lived in the heyday of Tang Dynasty. And when it came to modern times, especially in the Western world, human being strode forward from the Renaissance, the age of Enlightenment, to the age of Capitalism, and the social structure became more and more complicated, the living space for human being smaller and smaller, and the poetical sense which the ancient cherished and enjoyed withered day by day, at last into a luxurious dream, a wish, and a utopian ideal, and poetic dwelling could be realized only through imaginary world created in literary and philosophical works, as Shakespeare, Pope,
Yeats, etc. had done. That is, for the ancient, they live as they wish, while for the modern, they can only wish what they cannot live. That is the difference. And things can only be worse when it comes to our own time.

II. The Unrealistic Poetic Dwelling

In a world of knowledge explosion with fast development of modern science and technology, it is not realistic for one to have a poetic dwelling, even if his spirit of infancy lives on, with a decaying poetical sense in the mind. The metamorphosis of human being changes into a huge beetle, as described by Franz Kafka, and Herbert Marcuse’s “one dimensional man”—designating the embarrassing state of human being’s involuntary loss of identity, under the powerful force of modern industrialized society—live not only in works, but abound around us, including ourselves.

The unrealistic poetic dwelling means first of all a spiritual crises, characterized by the falling down of religious beliefs, and meanwhile the rising up of multiple trends of thought. At the end of 19th century, Friedrich Nietzsche declared through the mouth of a madman that “God is dead” (Gott ist todt) (Nietzsche, 2001: 120); what a sage he is, as an insightful doctor that diagnoses accurately the malady of the spiritual world of the West, which is undergoing a most severe spiritual crises of beliefs never met before! Several centuries earlier, Isaac Newton set the seemingly disordered macrocosms in order with his famous law of universal gravitation, and he could still find a consolation by ascribing to God the original cause and driving force behind the universe. But when human civilization entered into the 19th and 20th century, the belief in a great shielding God collapsed and disappeared without any hope of repairing. What aggravated this crises were psychoanalysis theory represented by Freud, and existentialism that pervaded throughout the whole Western world then. It is Freud that guides our attention to the unconscious for the first time in human history. Libido, the instinct of life and death, id, ego, superego, Oedipus Complex, dreams are compensations for unfulfilled wishes, sublimation theory, etc.; the last fig leaf on human being is stripped off. These theories are shocking, making us see ourselves clearer, while more likely to send us into despair: there is but a niggard distance between human being and the other animals. But the cruelest thing is existentialism, that exposes before us the absurdity of our existence without any reserve. Samuel Beckett’s Waiting for Godot, and Albert Camus’s The Myth of Sisyphus make us realize the embarrassing state of human being. Whether
Godot would come tomorrow or not is left for the future to answer, or just let it alone, but as human being we see our own figure clearly from Sisyphus. Gracious enough is Camus that grants us with some solace, when he says in the end, “The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.” (Shapiro, 129)

Next to it is the double-edged sword effect of scientific and technological advance. In the early 20th century, Albert Einstein’s Relativity Theories built up a new view of time and space for human being, and correspondently his understanding of the world made a great leap forward. Physics entered into the micro world, the era of quantum theory: nucleus, proton, neutron, meson, quark, etc., and Newton’s classical mechanics was held invalid here. Likewise biology began its micro-age of genes. In the macro world, astronomy initiated their journey for seeking extraterrestrial intelligence, extragalactic system, the origin of the universe itself, etc. and new terms and conceptions like black hole, Big Bang, dark matter, antimatter, etc., dazzling and puzzling though, intruded into people’s daily life willy-nilly. But not long after, people began to experience the sharp edge of the progress of science and technology. The First World War broke out in 1914, and such massive anti-personnel weapon as Tank, plane, and gas made their debut. The internecine extermination of each other betwixt the so called “paragon of animal” had no match on earth. Not long after the end of World War I, World War II set in once more in 1939, with a much larger scale and atrocity. The mushrooms soaring up above Hiroshima and Nagasaki proffered human being a rare chance for the first time with the taste of an atomic bomb, and awakened him from his pipe dream about modern science and technology, and banning for nuclear weapon experiments and proliferation had been an important counterpoise in the games played by the super powers of the world ever since. Development, ever advancing, at all cost, until in 1962 Rachel Carson’s Silent Spring tolled up a clarion, made people realize how miserably our living condition had deteriorated: the greenhouse effect, global warming, El Nino, etc.; could the environmental pollution on earth turn worse? From then on, terms like environmental protection and sustainable development have gone into currency along with our daily life. This is our home; how is it in the sky when we look from the stars? With the successful carrying out of the Apollo Moon Project, and the Mars Project respectively, the last mystical veil of the stars is cruelly disclosed. Arid seas everywhere, and dead silence covers all over the Moon, the palace disappearing, together with Diana, and Chang’e, the traditional Chinese
goddess of the moon. How about the Mars? Even worse than the Moon. The imaginary space for poetic dwelling has been squeezed more and more into chains of mathematical symbols and formulae, dull and cold. At the crossing of the new millennium, internet received a swift development with a speed of geometric progression, spreading its influence over every corner and walks of life. In an instant, nationalities disappear, and races, nations, and our globe is unified into one group, yea, the global village, and all of us have one common name, “netizen”, regardless of age, sex, status, and we are but one of the billions negligible network terminals connected points by a huge net, speaking the same language, whose name is called “bit”. As a matter of fact, the baneful influence of science and technology over poetry had been perceived by the sensitive Edgar Allan Poe as early as the early 19th century, which was well expressed in his Sonnet—To Science.

However, the progress of natural science is not independent of the realm of spirit; they interact with each other. For example, a direct influence of World War I over the spiritual area was the collapse of the traditional value system, once a great pride of the Westerners, together with the emergence of “the Lost Generation”. Then as if wholly unintentional, a despondent young poet named Thomas Stearns Eliot made some complaints, quite personal. This poem was later sent to Ezra Pound, and he deleted almost half of them, and had it published at last, which was The Waste Land. The criticisms meagerly deigned upon this poem in the beginning were mixed with both applause and censure. Yet gradually the tide turns overwhelmingly positive, until it was praised and raised up by the critics as an era-making masterpiece to have expressed well the spiritual world of the early 20th century. Similarly, the end of World War II brought not much propitious omen for the world. Winston Churchill’s “Iron Curtain” speech declared the end of the hot war, and the beginning of a cold one. Since then the two great camps had vied all out for the sphere of influences, and human being had ever been haunted by nuclear war. Thereupon “the Beat Generation” was born betwixt these hot and cold wars, represented by Allen Ginsburg’s Howl. Under the present circumstances, it is a great luxury, a fond dream, to have a patch land for a poetic swelling, even though there is some Thoreau or Wordsworth, who cherishes sincerely the intention to build a cabin in the wood, to live by a pond, self-relied, aloof from the outside world’s ups and downs. More than seven billions of people have crowded upon this small globe, leaving no corners untouched by human being. To make it worse, around the middle of the 20th century, such passions like poetic dwelling was crashed to pieces by the
new cosmic outlook: since the origin and the future of our universe is still a big puzzle and myth, who cares for the trifling midget earth?

III. The Loss of Beauty

Vers Libre had presented itself early on the realm of poetry, but failed to find a solid base to stand on, until the 19th century in North America, when a poet raised up high his bundle of Leaves of Grass, and announced before the whole world, "Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan the son." (Perkins 896) This formally claimed its right of existence, and since then it spread and dominated, and became a major form of poetry all over the world. Whitman's style is noted for his fond of using parallelism, catalogue, anaphora, ridding of the fetters and shackles of conventional metrical verse like rhythm, and rhymes. He uses a natural verse line as a unit instead, which increases the momentum of poetry, while sacrifices variety.

Art is but a nickname for rules and regulations. Although uncomfortable in some way with fetters and shackles on, metrical verse has its peculiar charms when well disposed. Once they are rid of, it frees the verse, but reduces the threshold of admittance for poetry, thus leaving a trouble behind. And as for the forms of Whitman's new style, it throws off the old, only to wear a new one. We do get some pleasures from reading Whitman's poems, preconditioned that it is but for a short time. Otherwise read on a little, when tens and scores of lines start with the same word like "And" or "The", a sense of monotony inevitably sets in. For instance, in Song of Myself, No. 15, there are more than 30 lines beginning with "The", with one or two exceptions. We have a similar case in the same poem, No. 33, in which also more than 30 lines start with "Where":

Where the she-whale swims with her calf and never forsakes it,
Where the steam-ship trails hind-ways its long pennant of smoke,
Where the fin of the shark cuts like a black chip out of the water,
Where the half-burn'd brig is riding on unknown currents,
Where shells grow to her slimy deck, where the dead are corrupting below;
Where the dense-starr'd flag is borne at the head of the regiments [...] (Perkins, 903)

With such large an amount of lines in the same structure rushing to the eyes, we have but small doubt that Whitman relies too much upon the biblical and epic way of cataloguing, and we can hardly help thinking that the author might be a man dull and of little flexibility.
Similar to the case of William Wordsworth, a doubt would occur quite naturally to us, when we read Whitman’s poems, that is, where on earth is the difference of poetry and prose? In “Preface to Leaves of Grass”, we meet paragraph after paragraph of lines, which through type setting can be changed into Whitmanean verse lines, and many poems in Leaves of Grass, on the contrary, could well be turned into Whitmanean prose paragraphs, when the stanza forms are removed. The third paragraph in “Preface to Leaves of Grass”, for example, reads:

Their manners speech dress friendships—the freshness and candor of their physiognomy—the picturesque looseness of their carriage [...] their deathless attachment to freedom—their aversion to anything indecorous or soft or mean—the practical acknowledgment of the citizens of one state by the citizens of all other states—the fierceness of their roused resentment—their curiosity and welcome of novelty—their self-esteem and wonderful sympathy—their susceptibility to a slight—the air they have of persons who never knew how it felt to stand in the presence of superiors—the fluency of their speech—their delight in music, the sure symptom of manly tenderness and native elegance of soul [...] (Perkins, 869)

Compare it with the last stanza of No. 2 in Song of Myself:

Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the origin of all poems,
You shall possess the good of the earth and sun, (there are millions of suns left,)
You shall no longer take things at second or third hand, nor look through the eyes of the dead, nor feed on the spectres in books,
You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things from me,
You shall listen to all sides and filter them from your self. (Perkins, 882)

With these two juxtaposed together, if we change the above prose paragraph in verse stanza, who could deny that it is not a poem? Likewise, turning the under verse stanza into prose paragraph, who could deny that it is not prose? It might be a great flattery, to say one speaks like a poem, and a poem like a prose, but imperceptibly the door of mediocrity is opened.

Besides, Whitman favors much apostrophe, interjection, and exclamatory marks. Truly it is outspoken, but if not controlled, it is liable to be shallow and formalistic, pioneering the slogan verse of today. Let’s cite No. 2, in When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d for instance:

O powerful western fallen star!
O shades of night—O moody, tearful night!
O great star disappear'd—O the black murk that hides the star!  
O cruel hands that hold me powerless—O helpless soul of me!  
O harsh surrounding cloud that will not free my soul. (Perkins, 937)

But ironically enough, the most impressive poem in the whole thick collection of *Leaves of Grass*, would not likely be long poems like *Song of Myself*, which is more than 1000 lines, nor *When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd*, which is written for commemorating President Lincoln, but some other short ones. The one written also for Lincoln, *O, Captain! My Captain!* is so popular that it is selected into school text books, however, it is the only poem in Whitman’s canon written in traditional metrical form.

After the rise comes the fall, as it is a rule for all things under the sun. When it comes to the 29th century, *vers libre* entered into the age of obscurity, represented by T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and Maria Rilke. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, *The Four Quartets*, etc., while enjoy a high reputation and influential, are items hard to approach for common readers. Especially the former, it is a great torment to read it, a twofold trial for both intelligence and temperament, requiring no small patience and fortitude, but a reader gets little pleasure after a harassing reading. Allusions overflow with the whole poem, and the obstacles constructed by more than five foreign languages is no joking matter. Poetry is not the arena for showing erudition after all. Similarly, as for Ezra Pound, the "il miglior fabbro", that is, "the better artisan" or "poet", (Perkins 1461) as awarded to him by Eliot, is of the same kind. Another highly appraised poem is Rilke’s *Duineser Elegien*, or *Duino Elegies* in English, which together with Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, are generally regarded as the two masterpieces of the Western world in the early 20th century. Nevertheless, personally speaking, I prefer Rilke’s *Die Sonette an Orpheus* and other short ones to his *Duineser Elegien*, or other poems written by Heinrich Heine, Goethe, and Hölderlin. When it comes to the middle and after of this century, the ones who still carry Whitman’s banner with them we cannot find many but one, and he is Allan Ginsburg with his *Howl*.

Two other poets have to be mentioned for the form of modern poetry, namely, Emily Dickinson, and E. E. Cummings, both of whom are noted for their rebellious style, trying to make some innovations in poetic form. Dickinson is Whitman’s contemporary. Her style is betwixt *vers libre* and metrical verse, but we can find little proofs that these two figures have ever exerted influences upon each other. Dickinson’s poetry is filled with images, dashes, capitalized key words other than
proper nouns, and with or without rhythms and rhymes at will. Cummings goes even a little further. He refuses to capitalize the first letter of the beginning word of each verse line, brackets what he pleases, and splits words and sentences ad lib to make fanciful enjambments. Such efforts show clearly their dissatisfaction with the existing poetic conventions and forms. It should be tolerated as an innovation, but not necessarily to be imitated. Using such kind of innovation once is OK, but twice and more would be a bore, and it is liable to send the readers into aesthetic fatigue, for these innovations carry little aesthetic beauty with them, except for their innovative spirit. And just because free verse is simple and free in form, it is very likely to be out of control. Take William Carlos Williams' *This Is Just To Say* for example:

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I have eaten
the plums
that were in
the icebox

and which
you were probably
saving
for breakfast

Forgive me
they were delicious
so sweet
so cold (Perkins, 1515)
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To tell the truth, I doubt that, how Matthew effect of great personage has acted in helping this poem to be published in the end. Were it not signed with somebody like William Carlos Williams, but with any other nonentity, would the wastebasket be its first and last resting place, when it is sent to the editor? The success of Williams in this poem opens the Pandora's Box for modern poetry, for thousands upon thousands notes like messages are produced daily, and the ones who wants to have a drink from the Pegasus are so numerous, only that they lack Williams’ genius and good luck.

One more thing to be pointed out, beside poetic forms, we can still find some other factors that contribute to the loss of beauty of modern poetry, such as the change of subject matter, the shifting of aesthetic taste, etc., but as time and energy
are limited, and to trace them all out is beyond my tether, so for the time being what I can do is to leave it at that.

IV. Stepping down from the Altar

From time immemorial the poet enjoys a high position, especially after Plato designated the poet as the spokesman of the Muses in Ion: “These beautiful poems are not human, not even from human beings, but are divine and from gods; that poets are nothing but representatives of the gods, possessed by whoever possesses them.” (Plato, 942) But in modern times, the holy and mysterious halo around the poet disappears gradually, the position of him is likewise in peril, and he has to encounter challenges from many sides.

First of all, the substitution of the conventional functions of poetry. In the Western world, poetry has ever been endowed with two functions since the ancient times of Plato, Aristotle, and Horace, that is, to edify and to entertain, and this is passed down to the later generations as a tradition. However, when it comes to the age of modern times, these two functions fade out and are marginalized with the days go by. Fictions, dramas, newspapers and magazines, films, televisions, and other popular audial and visual media, etc. have been formidable rivals in stealing away the readers’ favor from poetry. In the time of Internet, things become even worse. There are countless handy ways to get oneself relaxed and informed. More often than not, one needs only to get himself connected with the internet through a computer to surf all over the world with a click of a mouse. Poetry is an art to say something in a roundabout way, and to appreciate it requires first much cerebration and foreknowledge in poetry, no match for the easy and direct approach provided by fiction, drama, and the multimedia. Secondly, the popularization of writing makes the poet no longer a myth. Free verse removes the bound of conventional rhythm and rhyme, lowers down the threshold of writing poetry, thus paves the way of the downfall for itself unconsciously. Everybody is a poet-to-be, and the internet helps it come true. Poetry is for expressing one’s aspiration and emotions, for which all have some kind or other. Today, one needs only to be able to click the keyboard, typing some words and punctuations or not, click the “enter” key, and then repeat the game again. Soon one has something like a poem on his screen, which can be approached by all, only if one will, and who can deny it the title of “poem”? Just as Nietzsche has said ominously in a passage about reading and writing from Thus Spoke Zarathustra, “That everyone is allowed to learn to read ruins not only writing
in the long run, but thinking too.” (Nietzsche, 2006:28) Poetry nowadays are too easy to produce, and a poet too cheap a thing to make, then who cares for poetry and poets? Thus it is equivalent to be a pronouncement of death warrant for poetry and poet altogether, with a respite, of course. Even in the time of Shelley, modern poetry as a whole has already been blamed by Peacock as “rubbish”, and “querulous, egotistical rhapsodies”, the contemporary poets been ridiculed as “a semi-barbarian in a civilized community […] robber of time” (Leitch, 693). Let alone in our own time, a “poet” drifts into a laughingstock universally, almost a nickname equivalent to “lunatic”, a psychotic or something like that. Furthermore, modern poetry has to meet powerful challenges from traditional metrical verse for its meager existence. For those classical verses have withstood the test of time, and the poetry reader would rather go to them for entertainment and instruction, than go to the free verses, whose value is still to be judged by time. Anyhow, time and energy are too dear to waste in a highly hustling and bustling modern society.

The decaying of poetical sense in the mind, the unrealistic poetic dwelling, the loss of beauty, and the poet’s stepping down from the altar—in such circumstances, what can our poet do? In old times, our poet could realize his poetic dwelling through writing, whether he had poetical sense in the mind or not. Petrarch fell in love with a lady named Laura, and his passion was not requited, so he wrote her poetry for life, which were the famous sonnets left behind by him. Goethe fell out of love, he sublimated this experience, and the world henceforward enjoyed an excellent novel titled Die Leiden des jungen Werthers. Yet what would happen when the same thing take place to a modern? Would he write it out to kill his sorrow? Not necessarily so lucky, because he has so large a choice before him, and they are much more efficient than writing. He can switch on the TV set, or go to the cinema, immersing himself in a world made up of light, electronic, sound and color. Or he can visit various kinds of massage center, sauna room and clubs. But internet makes all these even simpler and unnecessary, for he can surf in the virtual world with one hundred identities, chatting, making friends, playing games, visiting video websites, or anything else he wants to do, outshining Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde far and away, who have but duple personalities. The same situation confronts the reader, for he does not live in a world of vacuum. To Shelley, the skylark is “blithe spirit”. (Palgrave, 270) But where is the skylark to a modern, living in a world of steel concrete, with a breathtaking high speed of development? Even if there is one, who
could tell that the crying skylark soaring and circling around in the sky is not out of thirsty, hunger, and angst, for it can hardly find a shelter on the earth any more.

Modern poetry has its advantages, and its disadvantages are also obvious. It is not possible to return to the ancient time, nor is it wise to stay where it is. Each popular form of the metrical verses has their own time and heyday, insurmountable for the later ages, such as the poetry of Tang Dynasty, the English blank verse, sonnet and heroic couplet, etc.. The latecomer can have a try in the old form for fun, but not so seriously, for he can never surpass the predecessor. In addition, with the decaying of poetical sense in the mind, the unrealistic poetic dwelling, the loss of beauty, and the poet's stepping down from the altar, the fountainhead of modern poetry dries up, so that the crises modern poetry is undergoing is hitherto unprecedented in history. Will modern poetry succeed to get out of this crises, and when, and will poetry as a whole decline? We can only leave it to time for an answer. Fortunately, the loving of poetry is a human nature inborn, and it can be suppressed, and abated, but never wiped out completely. In any time and any age, there are people who are writing and reading poetry. Looking around the world, poets are still shedding sweat persistently in the realm of gold, and there are no evident signs to show that poetry is in decline. This fact can well be substantiated through the awarding of Nobel Prizes for literature in the half past century. The prizes were awarded to poetry, three times in the 1960s, five times in the 70s, three times in the 80s, five times in the 90s, and two times altogether for the first 12 years in the new millennium so far, and to be exact, in the year of 2009 and 2011 respectively. Claps for the beloved ones of the Muses who are still ploughing in the field of poetry.

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