

HART CRANE is a difficult great poet, but very good, even great, poetry need not be overtly difficult. A. E. Housman is a clear instance, and there are many others. There are also difficult poets who at first look easy, but are not. Walt Whitman proclaims his accessibility, but his best poems are subtle, evasive, Hermetic, and call for a heightened awareness of the nuances of figuration.

Difficulty in great poetry can be of several, very different, kinds. Sustained allusiveness, as in the learned poetry of John Milton and Thomas Gray, demands a very high level of reader's literacy. Cognitive originality, the particular mark of Shakespeare and of Emily Dickinson, requires enormous intellectual agility as the reader's share. Personal mythmaking, as in William Blake and William Butler Yeats, at first can seem obscure, but the coherence of Blakean and Yeatsian myth yields to familiarity.

I think that poetry at its greatest—in Dante, Shakespeare, Donne, Milton, Blake—has one broad and essential difficulty: it is the true mode for expanding our consciousness. This it accomplishes by what I have learned to call *strangeness*. Owen Barfield was one of several critics to bring forth *strangeness* as a poetic criterion. For him, as for Walter Pater before him, the Romantic added strangeness to beauty: Wallace Stevens, a part of this tradition, has a Paterian figure cry out: "And there I found myself more truly and more strange." Barfield says: "It must be a strangeness of *meaning*," and then makes a fine distinction:

It is not correlative with wonder; for wonder is our reaction to things which we are conscious of not quite understanding, or at any rate of understanding less than we had thought. The element of strangeness in beauty has the contrary effect. It arises from contact with a different kind of *consciousness* from our own, different, yet not so remote that we cannot partly share it, as indeed, in such a connection, the mere word "contact" implies. Strangeness, in fact, arouses wonder when we do not understand: aesthetic imagination when we do.

*Consciousness* is the central term here. As Barfield intimates, consciousness is to poetry what marble is to sculpture: the material that is being worked. Words are figurations of consciousness: metaphorical of consciousness, the poet's words invite us to share in a strangeness. "A felt change in consciousness" is one of Barfield's definitions of the poetic

effect, and I relate this to what fascinates me most in the greatest Shakespearean characters—Falstaff, Hamlet, Iago, Lear, Cleopatra—the extraordinary changes that come about when they *overhear* themselves. As James Wood remarks, actually they become conscious of listening to Shakespeare, because in overhearing themselves, what they are hearing is Shakespeare. They become themselves more truly and more strange, because they are "free artists of themselves" (Hegel's tribute to them).

The work of great poetry is to aid *us* to become free artists of ourselves. Even Shakespeare cannot make me into Falstaff or Hamlet, but all great poetry asks us to be possessed by it. To possess it by memory is a start, and to augment our consciousness is the goal. The art of reading poetry is an authentic training in the augmentation of consciousness, perhaps the most authentic of healthy modes.