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POETS AND THE THEATRE

Audiences, Producers, Plays, Poets, by T. S. ELIOT. Eliot, Auden and Shakespeare, by HUMPHREY JENNINGS. Some Notes on Mr. Yeats' Plays, by LOUIS MACNEICE. What About the Theatre? by RUPERT DOONE.

Poems by A. J. M. SMITH, DYLAN THOMAS, E. V. SWART, DAVID GASCOYNE. Book Notices by CHARLES MADGE, GEOFFREY GRIGSON, etc.

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THE FABER BOOK OF MODERN VERSE

Edited by MICHAEL ROBERTS

A comprehensive anthology, from Hopkins and Yeats to the younger poets of to-day, of all the poets who have counted in the development of poetry in the twentieth century. Its arrangement and choice is such that it is not merely a collection of fine poems, but the best possible critical introduction to modern poetry. 7/6

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POETS AND THE THEATRE

The occasion for this number—with which NEW VERSE completes a third year of publication—is the queer case in which poets in England now find themselves if they are interested in writing plays. Such an interest comes, largely, out of the pronouncements of Mr. Eliot, who is the father, or god-father, of such plays as there have been. He opens this number with a comment and with advice from his own experiments. Mr. Jennings, who is not sentimental about society or the theatre (see his contribution to *The Arts To-Day*) criticises the beginners, Mr. Eliot and Mr. Auden, for putting too much of their horrid selves into their hateful works and offering us self-situations when we need world situations. Mr. MacNeice examines the one poet of value and experience who has faced theatre problems with a theatre to help him during many years. The English theatrical help now is the Group Theatre under Mr. Rupert Doone, the fourth contributor ; and it is the Group Theatre which provides the queer case. The Group Theatre is not good enough—let us be frank—for the poets it is trying to train in dramatic sense. Its season this year and previous activities have been informed by the amateurism, it seems to outsiders, of pretending only to be serious, of pretending to have a group feeling and purpose (to the observer this “groupishness,” as a unity, seems as false in its way as an Oxford Group), when it is socially-cum-æsthetically in the half-light, and much less worldly even than its chief poets ; and technically in presentation and performance it has seemed as distressingly second-rate as the Old Vic, its actors knowing neither their own bodies, their own tongues, their own minds or the times they are living in.

One is inclined to be content with the Group Theatre now as better than no theatre ; but we wish that Mr. Doone and his associates would humbly discover that they have at least as much to learn about selecting, pruning, giving and acting plays as Mr. Eliot or Mr. Auden have about writing them. We should like less prancing and bad dancing, less complacency, less guidance, and more stiff thinking combined with spontaneity. If we don't have these things the Group Theatre will be just a laugh and a bad laugh.

P.S.—What the Group Theatre might be, and what plays in verse might be, in Mr. Auden's view, is suggested in seven aphorisms,

printed with the Group Theatre programme for the recent performance of *Sweeney Agonistes* and *The Dance of Death*. But the Group Theatre is as far short of his aphorisms as Group House Parties are short of a vital critical and creative religion.

AUDIENCES, PRODUCERS, PLAYS, POETS

It becomes much more difficult to find anything worth saying about dramatic verse, once you begin trying to write it. And theoretically, we should leave theory about contemporary drama until we have produced some contemporary drama to theorise about.

We admit that we cannot expect to produce a new dramatic literature until we have the audiences and also the producers capable of helping the poets to write for the theatre. On the other hand the producers are checked until they have enough dramatic repertory with which to feed and train the audiences. I believe that the deficiency of plays is more serious at present than the lack of producers or of possible members of audiences. We need not assume that the possible audiences represent one class rather than another, or one political tendency rather than another. So far as the dramatic artist is concerned "the people" is everybody except the present occupants of the stalls at the more expensive theatres.

In a period in which dramatic verse is the normal theatrical form we may suppose that a poet has better opportunities of learning to be a good playwright than he has to-day. But at any time it is probably more possible for a poet to learn how to write a tolerable play, than for a playwright to learn how to write tolerable verse. Yet the poet who starts to write plays, to-day, should not expect to turn himself into a *very* good playwright. He must learn to work hard at an unfamiliar task for which he probably has no native gift, and to learn when (as well as when not) to be guided by those who know the theatre better than he does. As he is attempting to do something new on the stage, he will inevitably theorise a little about what he is doing : but I think he will be wise

to aim at the minimum, rather than the maximum amount of theory, and for the most part keep his theories to himself. That does not exclude him from communicating to his colleagues any practical lessons he learns in the course of his experiments.

The audience does not come to see what he does, in order to rally round a theory, but to be interested and excited. The indispensable merit of a verse play is that it shall be interesting, that it shall hold the audience all the time. And it will not do that, if the audience is expected to do too much of the work. This is a very good exercise for poets, who seem to forget often that poetry, even to be readable, should be interesting.

Second, the interest should be one interest throughout, not merely a succession of interests, or of momentary surprises. The play should have form : it needs more form than an ordinary conversation piece ; it must have "dramatic form" and also the *musical pattern* which can be obtained only by verse ; and the two forms must be one.

Third : no models, only suggestions. Continual effort of self-criticism to find out what one can do and what one can't, to build one's form on one's strength. This is expecting of the dramatic poet only the self-knowledge of the successful boxer or tennis-player. To violate every precedent, and break every rule except those mentioned above, if that will help to exploit one's strength and render harmless one's weakness.

T. S. ELIOT

ELIOT AND AUDEN AND SHAKESPEARE

Instead of the inevitable arguments as to whether *The Dance of Death* is or is not an 'improvement' on *Paid on Both Sides*, or whether *Murder in the Cathedral* forms 'an integral part of Mr. Eliot's poetical development,' I propose the nastier comparison of Messrs. Eliot and Auden with Shakespeare.

"If you were asked to point out the special features in which Shakespeare's plays are so transcendently excellent, you would mention perhaps that his stories are not put together and his characters are not conceived, to illustrate any particular law or principle. . . . He

builds his fabrics as nature does, on right and wrong ; but he does not struggle to make nature more systematic than she is. . . . An inferior artist produces either something entirely immoral, where good and evil are names, and nobility of disposition is supposed to show itself in the absolute disregard of them—or else he will force on nature a didactic purpose ; he composes what are called moral tales . . . and the result is not poetry but only splendid manufactures.” (J. A. Froude, “The Science of History.”)

I do not mean that Mr. Eliot has oversystematised his history of Becket, or that Mr. Auden has stepped beyond good and evil, or even that they are both over-didactic : the application of Froude’s words is far more definite and searching than that. Compared with Shakespeare, Messrs. Eliot and Auden have oversystematised their own positions. And it is through this oversystematisation—through a suppression, wilful or not, of certain elements—that ‘manufacture’ arrives, however splendid.

“*So far as poetry attempts to improve on truth, it abandons truth, and is false to itself.*” (J. A. Froude : *ibid.*)

And so far as a poet attempts to make nature more palatable by sacrificing the complexity of ‘real life’ positions to the ‘theatrical’ selection expected in a play, he sacrifices the play itself and his own poetry.

The world of Mr. Auden’s play contains many inhabitants, topics, and jokes already familiar : the bright world of tomorrow which is not so bright, the England of English history books, agriculture, Jews, hotels, the poor little city clerk, life in the raw with birds and rabbits, God and Sin, birth control, little boys and Adonises, airmen and others ; and the impression on Mr. Auden’s readers has always been understood to be that this width of outlook and wealth of material was a very refreshing contrast to the insularity and intellectuality of modern English poetry. Actually in *The Dance of Death* Mr. Auden’s trick consists in an opposition of the above elements sufficiently clever and sufficiently rapid to keep one from considering whether they are fairly presented and whether the oppositions represent conflicts outside Mr. Auden, or other than ‘theatrical’ positions.

In 1580 the limitations of a dramatist were most likely to come from his only including the obvious exterior world in his work

and from excluding himself. And the supposed untidiness of Shakespeare and want of 'poetic justice' as defended by Froude are indexes to the presence of himself, and to the inclusion of his own position in his statements, suggesting and looking forward to the increasing part to be played in 17th, 18th and 19th century society by the individual. But in 1935 the situation is almost exactly opposite: every writer in the world puts his horrid self into his hateful works: the problem now is how to present more of the world, by itself.

If we complain that Mr. Eliot's play has no 'entertainment value,' or that it is not enough for Mr. Auden to offer us a charade and to expect us to treat it as a grown-up play, we really mean that neither poet is presenting sufficient of 'the known world' to justify men in the world regarding their works as of practical value, of any kind. 'Practical value' would not necessarily be achieved by the play's containing definite conclusions or 'useful information' (these exist: the Church is smugly pictured as "triumphant in adversity," strengthened by the murder of Becket, and Marx appears as a *deus ex machina*). But also it is not necessarily by presenting 'poetic statements' which avoid definite conclusions, that 'the truth' is to be found. It is as easy for poetry to become 'manufacture' as for morality. Our ideas on these matters have become very biassed by the fact that Shakespeare found it more and more necessary to use poetry and poetry only, to harmonise his world for him (or more plainly, to cover the gaps). And for him it worked: conflicts of poetry and materialism were to become dead important for the next three hundred years and to make 'Richard II' and 'Hamlet' into prophecies. But nature is no longer going that way: Faust and Becket and their tempters are no longer relevant symbols, and Mr. Eliot's present 'poetic diction' and Audenesque tricks, such as the Knights' prose address to the audience, are the clearest possible sacrifice of poetry to 'manufacture.' Late Shakespeare used prose 'gentlemen' to help out the action, but that was before Stendhal: now such prose is only 'back to Shakespeare.'

These two plays actually of course represent a groping towards 'the world' by individualist poets: but only manage to remind one of the 1900 distinction between the 'fine' and 'applied' arts. Instead of using the world as a purge the poets have taken their little troubles into it; but if they think the theatre is going to help

them out of individualism they are far, far wrong. The only theatres which are going to look at what they have to offer are composed of persons who have all the poet's idiosyncrasies and none of his gifts, and who will welcome him in as a supporter of individualism, in the name of Shakespeare.

The theatre is no longer a symbol of the world, but society is in far too muddled a state for its poets to afford to waste their energies in the pleasantly limited worlds of clean fun and self-torture. The alternative being that "It needs a great strength to practise contemplation of delusion."

HUMPHREY JENNINGS

SOME NOTES ON MR. YEATS' PLAYS

People are very stupid about Mr. Yeats as a dramatist; they say 'the poetry of the plays never touches the poetry of the lyrics' or, of a play like 'The Resurrection,' 'the best thing is the songs in it.' Yeats' plays being unities written for the stage, (1) he could not possibly have written his dialogue in *lyrical* verse, (2) as for the lyrics spoken or sung by chorus or persons outside the action, much of the world's drama has something 'outside the action' in it and that does not mean that it is outside it merely for you to put it in your scrapbook.

Take Yeats' own remarks on tragedy. In an essay on 'The Tragic Theatre' (1910) he launches a well-merited attack on the modern predominance of character—'in mainly tragic art one distinguishes devices to exclude or lessen character.' In an essay on the Noh plays of Japan (1916) he prefers 'an aristocratic form of drama' addressed to an audience of forty or fifty, a ratio of remoteness and intimacy—'I hope to have attained the distance from life which can make credible strange events, elaborate words.'

His use of masks and stylised dancing removes from life, but he prefers this removal in the intimacy of a drawing-room. 'These masked players seem stranger when there is no mechanical means of separating them from us.' The players and the action are to be as strange and yet familiar as the people and actions in dreams. N.B.—We must not fiddle too much after symbols in these plays (taking down the engine)—'Though I might discover what had

been and might be again an abstract idea, no abstract idea must be present.' This is very important. Compare Cocteau's *Orphée*. People would not laugh so much at Yeats' spiritualism if they realised that there is a third thing besides literal acceptance and a merely algebraic symbolism. The myth, Yeats insists, in his plays is not subordinate to any prior intention or subsequent reflection upon it.

Yeats' drama is of a piece with his philosophy. He believes in 'the eternal circuit' rather than in progress. As against Shaw and Ibsen. (Did Ibsen, however, believe in progress? Or is there not more balance—circularity—in his plays than Yeats would admit?) In Yeats' heroic Irish plays there is a balance between hero-worship and Buddhist resignation; with common villainy or madness a spark leaping between them. Yeats' horizontal juxtaposition of themes—fool, hero and saint—answers to his always implicit vertical theory of regularly repeated phases.

Technique :—Economy in total length, images and decoration. He notes with approval in the Noh plays the habit of 'playing upon a single metaphor'; compare the white heron in *Calvary*. As for the caste it becomes scantier and scantier—two characters in *A Full Moon in March*. His verse dialogue ever since *The Countess Cathleen* has been in a very simple regular blank verse. (He might have tried the more broken verse of Pound?) In *The Resurrection* the substituted very simple prose is seen at its best. Neither his prose nor verse dialogue is either realistic or 'poetic.' A third thing again.

A word to imitators (if any) :—Yeats is a very single-minded or whole-minded artist. Take hints if you like but for God's sake don't imitate him. You would have to be him first, which you're not. He has a superficial resemblance to other anti-realists. At the moment we shall probably agree with him in scrapping, to a great extent, character. But not necessarily in scrapping the other things which for him belong to character; nor yet in aiming at the positive values which he substitutes for realist vitality. Take psychology. Yeats treats psychology in drama as an annex to realistic character-drawing. But it is possible that psychology will crystallise, become Byzantine enough to yield its own dramatic *a priori*, rigid and powerful as the tenets of an accepted religion.

The plays done by the Little Theatre in their recent Yeats Festival were a poor choice. The dance plays unfortunately need

dancers. Read *At the Hawk's Well*, *The Only Jealousy of Emer*, *Calvary*, *The Resurrection* (no dancing in this), *A Full Moon in March*. Then notice in a much earlier play, *On Baile's Strand*, the use of the Fool and the Blind Man, who like the Three Musicians of the dance plays are both out of the action *and in it on another plane* (compare the dreamer in some of his own dreams). The end of this play, in the best sense of the word, is a triumphant piece of tragic naiveté. The modern poet-dramatist must achieve this naiveté. But not, probably, in Yeats' way. We may even do it by being Communists, or again by playing to the groundlings. There is no space here to analyse the interrelations of belief, propaganda, escape and entertainment. An appreciation of Yeats, as of any other dramatist, would require such analysis.

LOUIS MACNEICE

WHAT ABOUT THE THEATRE?

Because my scope in this article is limited to a few hundred words, I shall be forced to generalise. Of art in general then, to begin with, I hold that it is a part of life and not a decoration. I serve art in the Gothic mode and not in the baroque. If you judge an art solely by fixed criteria within that art, you reduce all to æsthetic taste, art for art's sake. The old application of absolute truths to works of art must be dispelled. There is no such thing as an interpretative art: the actor does not interpret the poet's words, he recreates them. All arts are creative.

Theatrical art is an art of the body. It is presented by living people in action. Its peculiar function is dynamic, because it is passed so soon as it is delivered. This is an essential point in the nature of theatrical art. The printed page is static and lonely: its effect private and intimate. But theatrical effect is dynamic and communal. That is its thrill. For this reason the art of the theatre is necessarily co-operative. It represents a life of action and the senses: without the co-operation of any one of the arts therefore, it lacks something, it is incomplete. The most important element in the theatre is not the actor, the producer, the painter, or the poet: it is the dramatic content, that invisible fluid that moves the audience, a chemical compound of the ideas of all who have given their ideas to the production. And these ideas will change with the

life from which they are drawn. The theatre has lagged behind the life it serves. New forms are wanted to express the life of to-day.

But the inventive theatre to-day is faced with innumerable difficulties. There is first the problem of place. As drama regains its primary communal function, not the stage only, but the whole theatre, auditorium included, becomes the legitimate field of the action. Consequently it is vitally necessary that the auditorium should be built in such a way that from every seat a view of the whole auditorium is commanded by a simple turn of the head. Then there is the problem of personnel: such co-operative art as we require is impossible except with a company of actors working in complete sympathy (by which I mean a single approach and style of acting). But such a company without unlimited endowment is impossible to maintain. Actors must live through the long and strenuous period of rehearsal, and it is inevitable that the most talented will be drawn away into film or repertory companies where five days' rehearsal is deemed sufficient for the production of *Hamlet*, or *The Trojan Women*, or *Buckie's Bears*. The problem of training becomes therefore totally a financial problem.

But the theatre needs more than the co-operation of the company of actors. It needs artists, poets, musicians. The history of the gradual secession of poets from the theatre is a long and a sad one. To-day the poet is lonely and unread, and the theatre is in need of ideas. Poetic drama cannot be written from a distance, cannot be written without a working knowledge of the theatre and a willing and humble co-operation with the other collaborators in the eventual production. The poetic dramas of Shelley, Browning and Swinburne are examples of fine literature but ineffective theatre. The printed page is private, and while the poet remains private he detracts from his own importance and from the social importance of poetry. He must be prepared to co-operate with those around him in the theatre, to become a sort of secretary of ideas.

Only then, by co-operating with the essentially popular art of the theatre (as witness Russia, where the theatre public is just eleven times as large as the film public), by using and making his own its essentially popular forms, as W. H. Auden has already started to use the Musical Comedy form to present serious satire, will the poet give the drama that dynamic content it needs, and make poetry once more a social force, not the rarefied preserve of a privileged minority.

RUPERT DOONE

ARP'S RANDY RANT IN THE COMFY CONFESSION BOX

Many a young insomniac, yet unweened
From that old powdered wetnurse, Mother Moon,
Dabbles about her dugs for half a night,
Whipping the curdlike fancies to delight.
In narrow cot doth such an one abide,
Himself the baited hook, himself the bride.
He dreams the green translucent future keeps
To gasp beside him, and make deep his sleeps.
He finds the moonmilk bittersweet and goatish.
Alas ! I find it brackish, something brutish.
If I, on raspy canvas tossing sleepless,
Oozing a clammy itchy sweat, keep less
Than weepless eyes, keep bloody humpy back,
It is to weep the most what most I lack,
The sins of youth so craftily avoided,
—What every beardless bonny boy did—
The sins of age so prematurely met,
(*Hear my most grievous fault*) the incalculable debt
Of the mind to the swine's snout fearfully denied,
And the natural heart perversely villified.

A. J. M. SMITH

QUIETLY TO BE QUICKLY, OR OTHER OR ETHER, A SONG OR A DANCE

To be
To be quietly
To be quietly to be.
To be quick
Not this but that.

To be
To be either
To be either

Or other
Is this a bother?
Take ether.

Some see
This is not that
This is what
Some see
Some see this
Some see what
Not all see.

Quietly to be quick
Not this but that
Other or ether
Do you see.

A. J. M. SMITH

TWO POEMS

I

Tired of eating kisses and the arms that gad,
I went walking with a more elaborate myth.
Went out of the town with a cynical mouth,
The self satcheled on shoulder and an eye on good.

Was pleased as a Jill the first day on field.
Watching clouds smoulder, moving among trees,
The beetles ticking till the day had failed,
I, chewing the grass, as pleased as these.

And pleased on the fifth, a large day on field.
With what an abundant rhetoric
The white birds flourished and flowed to a rick!

But on the tenth day a want was foaled.

Under the neglected rib a bitter leaf.
Sight shut to a field where there wasn't any meaning.
An itch in the wind, and a white bird waiting one morning
Hunched on the gable, ready to leave.
Sharper and sharper the south side froze
Choking the grass. Desire muttered,
Protecting her throat over the last fuse.
In the deep pond no wish mattered.

The compass is broken, the mouth slack as a wound,
Which way, which way, with nothing on shoulder ?
The grip gone on good and the eyes loose in the wind,
Which way, which way, with hope hard as a boulder ?

II

Walk on to headland height, the naked cliff.
Here isn't lyrical fall, arms spreading
Like flowers, head handsome as bird, poised,
But a sharp nine hundred feet to the sea.

Should you walk nearer, where the abrupt edge
Nudges at death, topped by your own dizziness
Over, the surprised cry must give up
Midway, and the disgraced mouth know
Death of the whole head. Many as pores
Shall be holes in your body. Limbs,
Taken by air, before beach robbed of, buried as blood.

Read of your death. And read here, where wind like an axe
Cuts arms from summer, deprives seed of a signature,
And visiting teeth of salt bite rock-deep,
Famishing earth of water, O read here
That nothing is yours but the sharp granite,
The original bone. Let fall in the wind
That button from friend, this last week's letter from woman,
For nothing survives but to each his own private
Minimum of bone. The isolate cliff,
Shaking from shoulder earth, summer, and seed, alone is real.

Possess this private mastery with no sorrow.
That man who looks bare self in face
Discovers the gull's mystery, forgets his misery
And is safe. O black gull, black gull,
Whose effortless conversion into wind
Amazes, teach us from land release,
That sharp taking to air where no flattery is,
And we be as one, who drifting down there,
Is drifting as power would drift over sea face.

E. V. SWART

“THE TRUTH IS BLIND . . .”

The light fell from the window and the day was done
Another day of thinking and distractions
Love wrapped in its wings passed by and coal-black Hate
Paused on the edge of the cliff and dropped a stone
From which the night grew like a savage plant
With daggers for its leaves and scarlet hearts
For flowers—then the bed
Rose clocklike from the ground and spread its sheets
Across the shifting sands

Autumnal breath of mornings far from here
A star veiled in grey mist
A living man :

The snapping of a dry twig was his only announcement. The two men, who had tied their boat to a branch that grew out over the water's edge, and were now moving up through the rank tropical vegetation, turned sharply.

He raised his eyes and saw the river's source
Between their legs—he saw the flaming sun
He saw the buildings in between the leaves
Behind their heads that were as large as globes
He heard their voices indistinct as rain
As faint as feathers falling
And he fell

The boat sailed on
The masts were made of straw

The sails were made of finest silken thread
And out of holes on either side the prow
Gushed endless streams of water and of flame
In which the passengers saw curious things :

The conjurer, we are told, 'took out of his bag a silken thread, and so projected it upwards that it stuck fast in a certain cloud of air. Out of the same receptacle he pulled a hare, that ran away up along the thread; a little beagle, which when it was slipped at the hare pursued it in full cry; last of all a small dogboy, whom he commanded to follow both hare and hound up the thread. From another bag that he had he extracted a winsome young woman, at all points well adorned, and instructed her to follow after hound and dogboy.'

She laughed to see them gazing after her
She clapped her hands and vanished in thin air
To reappear upon the other bank
Among the restless traffic of the quays
Her silhouette against the dusty sky
Her shadow falling on the hungry stones
Where sat the pilot dressed in mud-stained rags

He knocked the fragile statue down
And ate her sugar head
And then the witnesses all gathered round
And pointed at the chasm at his feet :

Clouds of blue smoke, sometimes mixed with black, were being emitted from the exhaust pipe. The smoke was of sufficient density to be an annoyance to the driver following the vehicle or to pedestrians.

The whispering of unseen flames
A sharp taste in the mouth.

DAVID GASCOYNE

THREE POEMS

I

The hand that signed the paper felled a city ;
Five sovereign fingers taxed the breath,
Doubled the globe of dead and halved a country ;
These five kings did a king to death.

The mighty hand leads to a sloping shoulder,
The finger joints are cramped with chalk ;
A goose's quill has put an end to murder
That put an end to talk.

The hand that signed the treaty bred a fever,
And famine grew and locusts came ;
Great is the hand that holds dominion over
Man by a scribbled name.

The fingers crust the dead but do not soften
The crusted wounds nor pat the brow ;
The hand rules pity as a hand rules heaven ;
Hands have no tears to flow.

II

Should lanterns shine, the holy face,
Caught in an octagon of unaccustomed light,
Would wither up, and any boy of love
Look twice before he fell from grace.
The features in their private dark
Are formed of flesh, but let the false day come
And from her lips the faded pigments fall,
The mummy cloths expose an ancient breast.

I have been told to reason by the heart,
But heart, like head, leads helplessly ;
I have been told to reason by the pulse,
And when it quickens alter the action's pace
Till field and roof lie level and the same,
So fast I move, defying time, the quiet gentleman
Whose beard wags in Egyptian wind.

I have heard many years of telling,
And many years should see some change.

The ball I threw when playing in the park
Has not yet reached the ground.

Regard the moon, it hangs above the lawn ;
Regard the lawn, it lies beneath the moon.

III

I have longed to move away
From the hissing of the spent lie
And the old terror's continual cry
Growing more terrible as the day
Goes over the hill into the deep sea ;
I have longed to move away
From the repetition of salutes,
For there are ghosts in the air
And ghostly echoes on paper,
And the thunder of calls and notes.

I have longed to move away but am afraid ;
Some life, yet unspent, might explode
Out of the old lie burning on the ground,
And, cracking into the air, leave me half-blind.
Neither by night's ancient fear,
The parting of hat from hair,
Pursed lips from the receiver,
Shall I fall to death's feather.
By these I would not care to die,
Half-convention and half lie.

DYLAN THOMAS

PASTORAL AND PROLETARIAN ART

Some Versions of Pastoral. By William Empson. (Chatto and Windus. 7s. 6d.)

The discussion about art and propaganda is usually embittered by a warlike and scornful attitude on the part of the protagonists. Mr. Empson has found a way of beating the sword into a pruning-hook. Proletarian art, he says, is a form of pastoral ; and in pastoral the poet recognises certain qualities peculiar to the masses—vigour, life in accordance with nature, peacefulness, etc.—which he himself lacks and perhaps needs : and by adopting the pastoral language and convention, he himself becomes a swain.

The subtlety of this position is that it illustrates in itself the

attitude which it describes. Mr. Empson's essay on Proletarian Art is pastoral. Propaganda appears as Peace-in-terms-of-War (shock brigades on collective farms), and Pastoral is War-in-terms-of-Peace (contests between shepherds, amœbean dialogues). To identify the two is to impose a poetic armistice on all artists to whichever side of the class-struggle they may belong. The middle-class intellectual who joins the communist party is joining the shepherds ; and perhaps it will encourage him, when he thinks that, partaking in the squalor and bitterness of the de-classed life, he partakes in the laborious fight against the Earth (economic conditions, reality) from which pastoral poetry emerged at Ascrea.

It needed someone of Mr. Empson's intellectual vivacity, social curiosity and ascetic cynicism to think out a formula so liberating, because he is in the lucky position of being removed from immediate political struggles, and yet sufficiently self-confident intellectually not to feel this to be a source of inferiority. A good many of the other essays, which are all bound to appear subsidiary, after the first liberating thesis, were perhaps written *before* the first essay, and in consequence they seem almost as if waiting for the liberation which the first essay provides. In his preference for minor poets, and somewhat minor lines of attack, Mr. Empson seems in these other (though brilliant and valuable) essays to be still feeling the constriction of an earlier critical period. Just as Mr. Eliot, in order to avoid the Miltonic colossus, took as his models Donne, just before Milton, and Dryden, just after Milton, so Mr. Empson is more at his ease with Marvell than with Milton, though as commentary on a commentary, his essay on Bentley on Milton is a precedent for future critics. Possibly Mr. Empson will one day write a book entirely devoted to Milton. His beautiful analysis of a stanza from Gray's *Elegy* suggests that he is perhaps the English critic best capable of dealing with the social implications of Milton's Heaven and Earth mythology. Another stroke of genius was his choice of *Alice in Wonderland* to illustrate the metamorphosis of the pastoral in nineteenth-century England. Never has the unconscious mind been more curiously at work underground than in England at that time ; strangest of all, the poet (or interpreter) himself was unconscious of what he was doing. The history of pastoral indeed reached its dead-level when the literature of pretence became sovereign in itself, while the reason for pretending was forgotten, or neglected.

ON SPONTANEITY

Petron. By Hugh Sykes Davies (Dent. 2s. 6d.)

Facile. By Paul Eluard (Editions G.L.M. 30 fr.)

Mr. Hugh Sykes Davies' *Petron* is cousin to Chirico's *Hebdamoras*, and second-cousin-twice-removed to Lautréamont's *Maldoror*. The publisher's blurb mentions Beddoes and Julian Green; while Mr. Herbert Read, in a recent article in *The New English Weekly*, has actually placed this work of Mr. Davies' (and, even more boldly, Mr. George Barker's *Janus*) in the surrealist category. It is rather difficult to justify this classification. For though Mr. Davies has obviously read the surrealists and their predecessors most thoroughly, his method of writing is just as obviously different.

"If that which comes to me from down there has form, I will give it form," wrote Rimbaud in one of his letters; "if not, I will leave it formless." And that is what any surrealist would say. One cannot help wondering, then, whether Mr. Davies really does *think* in language such as this:

It is the serpent who has passed, the serpent who, so long twisted with the vulture in inextricable combat, has at last relaxed his hold, yet still relentless, makes his way to the mountains.

One cannot help wondering whether *Petron* genuinely is an "interior hero," a projection of genuine obsessions and inner conflicts, or whether he is merely an ingeniously manipulated puppet, made to dance to a fantastic tune that Mr. Davies once overheard in a library. Be that as it may, this is a curious and often exciting book, worth reading more than once.

There can be no question of premeditated style or imagery in *Facile*, the four most recent poems of Paul Eluard. No other living writer has achieved such perfect spontaneity. The emotion of love, so twisted and difficult a thing in the work of most contemporary poets, becomes verbal here without the least hesitation or constraint. *Facile est bien. Facile est beau sous tes paupières*: it is as simple as that. We cannot but accept such genuine clarity; it is only too rare a gift. The poems are accompanied by deliciously candid nudes by Man Ray, which form an integral part of the text, as Blake's drawings do in his prophetic books.

D. E. G.

AIR GUN

First Poems (though that isn't so. See British Museum catalogue). By Rayner Heppenstall. (Heinemann. 3s. 6d.)

We believe Mr. R. H. as a poet to be absolutely a BORE.

He is a sluggish bore, a Hopkins-Binyon bore, a tangle of pimpled laurels bore,* a costive bore, a really I do not know Sir James Frazer bore; always absolutely a BORE. He is also a yearning, blind, deaf, word-gargling, 1930 book-bedded, prose-snipping, egg-bound bore, a bore not yet beyond B.O. breast-fingering poems, a bore pretending to purpose, a culture bore; this kind of King's Medal bore:

*These you are. Yet be you chiefly that which slow
Process of roots, with clutch on earth-stuffs that stir
This thick plant-food into fire, signs, cannot blur,
As pure response, pure act: which you will not know.*

A BORE always as a poet, and a very small bore luckily.

P.S.—Since this bore declares, "About half of these poems have appeared before: in *The Adelphi*, *Everyman*, *The Gryphon*, *The Listener*, *The New English Weekly*, *New Verse* . . ." we declare that only one ever appeared in *New Verse* and we're sorry for that.

A Short Survey of Surrealism. By David Gascoyne.
(Cobden-Sanderson. 7s. 6d.)

"It is the avowed aim of the surrealist movement; taking this attitude as our point of departure, surrealism profiting from the discoveries of 'In the pages that follow I intend to treat the subject,' I think I may remark here that although I *have*, I should like to acknowledge my thanks to MM., etc."

Thus D. E. G. (July-September, 1935) explains the personal relationship which exists between him and surrealism.

No, I am not being flippant at the expense of Mr. Gascoyne's book, which is really admirable. But words, which lie about quite inertly on the floors of newspaper offices, begin to explode when loaded into the breeches of guns.

I therefore wish, with the least possible fuss, to point out this

* See Poem XVIII, "O tangle the pimpled laurel!"

simple fact : that difficulties of style are real. That is to say, if Mr. G. wants to know what forces of repulsion or attraction bind him to or repel him from the magnetic fields of Paris, the best way for him to begin will be to ask himself just what difficulties of style, grammar, vocabulary, even spelling,* he feels arising within himself when he starts to write on the subject.

Everything is calmer now than it was immediately after the war or immediately before it, or even one hundred years before that. The "weight" and "tranquillity" of the U.S.S.R. is being gradually imparted to the whole world. The British Fleet steams slowly and calmly through the blue Mediterranean. In the industrial areas a healing sunshine falls on acres of half-ruined factories. The more people try to create war, the more peaceful everybody becomes. It would therefore be impossible, short of complete self-intoxication, to pretend that to-day "They want to break everything down in order to liberate—what?" Those were the days of the Bastille.

Surrealism is now in its academic period—the period of explanation and anthologies—the wider public. While we are young our energy is intense : when we are old our scholarship will be profound.

CHARLES MADGE

Besides books reviewed in this number readers of *NEW VERSE* should also take notice of *CHRISTIANITY AND THE SOCIAL REVOLUTION* edited by John Lewis and others (Gollancz. 6s.)—a discussion of society, communism and religion by Joseph Needham, John Macmurray, Julius Hecker, Reinhold Niebuhr, and among others, W. H. Auden, whose article on "The Good Life" companions his article in *The Arts To-Day* in its secondary

* P. xii, synonymity; p. 16, precosity.

A SHORT SURVEY OF SURREALISM

Illustrated

DAVID GASCOYNE

7s. 6d. net

This book is an explanation of one of the most important intellectual movements since the War. Mr. Gascoyne's work is not merely a history of the birth and growth of Surrealism but a thorough analysis of the main ideas which are embodied in the movement. It is believed to be the first comprehensive book on this subject to be published in English.

COBDEN-SANDERSON
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relevance to his own poetry ; *THE NEW BOOK OF ENGLISH VERSE* edited by Charles Williams (Gollancz. 7s. 6d.), a queer, ill-balanced collection with a long introduction and long notes full of wind and thistles : collectively an uncritical conservative-modern valuation, which could not avoid good things between Chaucer and Hopkins ; *THE YEAR'S POETRY* 1935 (Bodley Head. 6s.), compiled again by the Dismal Trinity, Gerald Gould, D. K. Roberts and John Lehmann, on the principle that we must get in all the boys from Mr. Yeats to Mr. David Gascoyne. The worst rubbish comes from that old Jane, Edith Sitwell and her plump brother Osbert, from Humbert Wolfe, Laurence Binyon, W. H. Davies, Herbert Palmer, Hugh Macdiarmid, W. J. Turner, Michael Roberts (mountaineering again : he must see Freud), William Plomer, Ronald Bottrall, the bird who won the Royal Medal, and of course John Lehmann and Julian Bell. The book certainly does "represent" the piping posturing feebleness of the highbrow underworld. Mr. Macneice is there, it is true (but we have had his poems before, just as we have already had the poems by Yeats and the choruses by Auden). Mr. Auden's "In The Square" (The Six Beggared Cripples) and Mr. Dylan Thomas's "Poem in October" give a decent return at least for six shillings.

Mr. F. O. Matthiessen's *ACHIEVEMENT OF T. S. ELIOT* (Oxford University Press. 7s. 6d.) seems to us a useful, well-informed introduction to a queer topic. Mr. Matthiessen all through is introducing himself to, *and into*, Mr. Eliot. Mr. Eliot is all round him : he can get a free view of the country and mountains all round Mt. Eliot ; and so he provides less criticism than material for criticism. His book does begin with a biography of Mr. Eliot as detailed as any obituary we are ever likely to have.

Ideas of Order by Wallace Stevens ; Mr. Yeats's *A Full Moon In March ; Epilogue : A Critical Summary* edited by Laura Riding ; Mr. de la Mare's *Poems 1919-1934* and Mr. Norman Cameron's *Winter House* we hope to comment upon later.

HURRAY

"My wife has given me the most intense, the most ecstatic pleasure I have ever known or am ever likely to know, and, more important still, this is not a pleasure that passes in a night."
John Beevers, *World Without Faith*, p. 301.

Christmas 1935

TO Readers of *New Verse* who are not attracted by the conventional 'Xmas Gift Book,' and who feel that Christmas cards, however decorative, are somewhat ephemeral, we commend Dent's half-crown series of contemporary verse. Well made, pleasing to read and handle, these books are admirable gifts. Authors represented include Edwin Muir, W. J. Turner, Gerald Bullett, Conrad Aiken, Ll. Wyn Griffith. Readers of *New Verse* may be especially interested in Norman Cameron's *The Winter House*, Clifford Dymont's *First Day*, and Hugh Sykes Davies' prose poem, *Petron*. These are adventurous books. 2s. 6d. net each.

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SELECTED BY GERALD GOULD,
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