WILLIAM PACKARD:

Poetry in the Theatre — 1

(This is the first in a series of six essays on the general subject of poetry in the theatre. In this one, we shall consider the conventions and traditions which have shaped the great ages of poetic drama in the past: the Greek theatre, the Elizabethan theatre, and the Japanese theatre. We shall look at the lack of poetic tradition in our own theatre, and try to find out why modern verse drama has not been so successful as it might be.

In future essays, we shall consider the use of certain poetic devices in the theatre — especially the devices of imagery and metaphor—and see how the literary metaphor is radically different from the theatrical metaphor. Christopher Fry, for example, may have a marvelous grasp of literary metaphor, but his theatrical metaphors may not be so compelling and immediate as, say, the dramatic metaphors of Tennessee Williams.

We shall also consider the problem of spoken poetry — the problems of the actor in approaching a poetic text — and the way that certain playrights [most notably Shakespeare] have given indications of pace and mood, which the actor can discover if he looks carefully at the printed page before he begins to create his character.

We shall examine how language can obscure dramatic character and plot and action, instead of helping to develop them. It is always a problem for the poet to know when to go out on a wonderful flight of rhetoric, to know *how much* poetry is enough poetry. Too often, modern audiences feel they are being bombarded by a bard, when so much language is thrown at them that they lose sight of the dramatic action. So this is especially the problem of the contemporary *verse* playwright.

Finally, we'll try to give some estimate of the prospects for the future of poetry in the theatre. It will not be easy, and there are no easy formulae for success, because verse theatre is one of the most difficult of all art forms. There is so much that is in the way of a successful prose play — the jungle of commercial theatre, the necessity of having a 'smash' hit in order to pay production expenses, etc. , . . and it is the same story for off-Broadway, and even the university theatres have their own shortcomings which have to be taken into consideration.)

THERE HAS BEEN A GREAT deal of work done, in this century, on poetic drama. The plays of Yeats, Eliot, Fry, Anderson, Dylan Thomas — these are all attempts by recent and contemporary poets to use a modern poetic idiom in the theatre.

How are we to achieve poetic drama in our own time? I wish I knew. I'm not even sure I know what poetic drama is, or what we mean when we talk about' poetry in the theatre.'

What exactly do we mean by this phrase? It is, yes, as you say, 'poetry' in the 'theatre.' Yet we do not have a working definition at our fingertips, though we think we know, and have some idea of what is meant by ' poetic drama' and ' verse theatre.'

Let me give a practical example of the difficulties in trying to clarify this. Suppose we were setting out to teach a course in poetic drama. What texts would we choose to include? Would we limit the course to only those plays which have been written in the form of verse — like those of Maxwell Anderson, Christopher Fry, and T. S. Eliot? Or, would we extend our definition to include those plays which are poetic in language, even though that language is written as prose — like those of Dylan Thomas, Sean O'Casey, and John Millington Synge? Or, would we also insist on considering those plays which are poetic in scope, even though they may be written in prose and sound like prose and are intended as prose — like the plays of Chekhov, Genet, Brecht, Ionesco, Samuel Beckett, and even Tennessee Williams?

Another example of the difficulties of trying to define poetry in the theatre is illustrated by a passage from a play, the lines of which *seem* to be poetic in their use of rhythms and repetitions:

> You've been at that cake.
> You've been at my cake. You've been at my cake, haven't you?
> That cake was for Mick. It was for Mick, it wasn't for you.
> I bought it for Mick. It was for when he comes home.
> What do you mean — never mind!
> Well I mind! I don't want him in that kitchen.
> Tell him to keep out of it.
> It's not much, and it's not mine, but I mind very much.
> Why couldn't you leave it alone?

Taken out of context, these lines could very easily be mistaken for poetry. The fact is, they are lines of dialogue assigned to Phoebe in John Osborne's THE ENTERTAINER;[1] and while the play itself is highly stylized, it is certainly not generally considered to be an example of poetic drama. We could make similar experiments with other prose plays, finding isolated passages in which the language takes on a texture of expression that seems to be poetic — such as those of Edward Albee, particularly WHO'S AFRAID OF

[1] BANTAM edition.

VIRGINIA WOLF? and TINY ALICE. Both plays contain passages of extraordinary imagery coupled with remarkable locutions; but on the whole, we accept them as being written in the realism of prose. They are essentially conversational; and, again, we would not wish to consider them as examples of poetic drama.

We are beginning to see some of the difficulties of trying to talk about poetry in the theatre. We see that it is not so easy as saying ' anything that is poetic, and anything that is in the theatre.' When we say ' poetic drama,' we must mean a great deal more than language spoken by actors on a stage. But then — exactly what do we mean?

Poetry in the theatre could be, very simply, just a simple poem, such as the one which concludes Shakespeare's TWELFTH NIGHT. A clown comes out on stage and sings a very simple lyric by way of saying good-bye to the audience. But this absolutely charming and fine Elizabethan lyric doesn't tell us anything about what happened in TWELFTH NIGHT, or how Shakespeare used poetry in the theatre to tell the very complicated story.

We know what poetic drama has meant in the past. Poetry had a very specific role in the Greek theatre, and it also had a very specific role in the Elizabethan theatre — and looking outside our Western tradition, we find that poetry has had a very specific role in the Japanese theatre. Let us look at these great traditions to see how poetry was used by the playwrights in creating a poetic drama. This may help us to determine how we would like poetry to function in our own theatre.

During the performance of a Greek tragedy, there was an altar of Dionysius located onstage in full view of the audience. Because of the presence of this altar, there could be no overt violence done onstage — and so Medea kills her children offstage, Clytemnestra murders Agamemnon behind closed doors, and Oedipus plucks out his eyes unseen, within the palace gates — and all of these acts were reported to the audience by means of messengers in long speeches which gave a marvelous opportunity to the poet to develop a poetry of description. Then, there was the convention of the Greek chorus, which chanted and sang and danced throughout the play; and this gave the poet an opportunity to develop his own themes and ideas in a poetry of general statement. Here is an example of a choral passage from OEDIPUS AT COLONUS by Sophocles, as translated by William Butler Yeats:

Endure what life God gives and ask no longer span;
Cease to remember the delights of youth, travel-wearied aged man;
Delight becomes death-longing if all longing else be vain.

Even from that delight memory treasures so,
Death, despair, division of families, all entanglements of mankind grow,
As that old wandering beggar and these God-hated children know.

In the long echoing street the laughing dancers throng,
The bride is carried to the bridegroom's chamber through torchlight
and tumultuous song;
I celebrate the silent kiss that ends short life or long.

Never to have lived is best, anciept writers say;
Never to have drawn the breath of life, never to have looked into the
eye of day;
The second best's a gay goodnight and quickly turn away.

One other convention in Greek tragedy is worth mentioning at this point, in terms of the role of poetry in the theatre: the rapid back-and-forth exchange of dialogue between the leading characters onstage, which takes the form of alternate lines of verse called stichomythia. This device helps to create the dramatic tension and suspense of a scene, as in the famous recognition scene from the ELECTRA of Sophocles.[2] Electra is holding an urn which, she believes, contains the ashes of her dead brother, Orestes; however, Orestes is still very much alive, and he appears to her in disguise. Notice how swiftly the dialogue proceeds:

Orestes: Hush! — no such word! — Thou hast no right to lament.
Electra: No right to lament for my dead brother?
Orestes: It is not meet for thee to speak of him thus.
Electra: Am I so dishonoured of the dead?
Orestes: Dishonoured of none — but this is not thy part.
Electra: Yes, if these are the ashes of Orestes that I hold.
Orestes: They are not; a fiction clothed them with his name.
(he gently takes the urn from her)
Electra: And where is that unhappy one's tomb?
Orestes: There is none; the living have no tomb.
Electra: What sayest thou, boy?
Orestes: Nothing that is not true.
Electra: The man is alive?
Orestes: If there be life in me.
Electra: What? Art thou he?
Orestes: Look at this signet, once our father's, and judge if I speak truth.
Electra: O blissful day!
Orestes: Blissful, in very deed!
Electra: Is this thy voice? .
Orestes: Let no other voice reply.
Electra: Do I hold thee in my arms?
Orestes: As mayest thou hold me always \

[2] Transl., R. C. Jebb (RANDOM HOUSE ed.).

This rapid back-and-forth exchange of dialogue helps to create the dramatic tension and suspense of a scene — and it also disciplines the playwright, preventing him from going off on any long poetic passages when it is more important to deal with the situation right there on stage.

The Greek theatre, then, did have very definite conventions, which the poet had to respect. There was the offstage violence, which had to be reported by a messenger; there was the Greek Chorus, which was given a poetry of general description; and there was the stichomythia, or rapid exchange of dialogue. Of course, these are only a few of the many conventions of the Greek theatre, as found in Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripedes, Aristophanes, and Menander. But they suffice to indicate that the poet was writing within the form of conventions, respecting certain traditional ways of saying something, and that he was not free to do as he pleased with poetry in the theatre.

The conventions of the Elizabethan theatre were to a great extent determined by the physical dimensions of the stage itself. An Elizabethan poet knew that he had so many various levels and effects at his disposal, and he could shape his play accordingly. Because there were balconies, inner and outer rooms, curtains to hide behind, trap doors, and a large forestage for direct address to the audience, the poet was naturally attracted to certain typical dramatic situations, such as the balcony scene, the eavesdropping scene, the play within a play, and of course, the soliloquy. This long monologue, the soliloquy, provided an opportunity for the poet to get inside the mind of his character and write his most private thoughts, as in this excerpt from the opening soliloquy of RICHARD III:

> I, that am curtail'd thus of fair proportion,
> Cheated of feature by dissembling nature,
> Deform'd, unfinish'd, sent before my time
> Into this breathing world, scarce half made up,
> And that so lamely and unfashionable,
> That dogs bark at me, as I halt by them;
> Why, I, in this weak piping time of peace,
> Have no delight to pass away the time,
> Unless to see my shadow in the sun,
> And descant on mine own deformity:
> And therefore, since I cannot prove a lover,
> To entertain these fair well-spoken days,
> I am determined to prove a villain. . . .

[3] Falstaff ed. of *The Works* . . ., ed. by George Long Duykinck from the 1632 folio (HENRY T. COATE & *Co.*—1859).

Richard III, standing on the forestage and talking directly to the audience, is able to prepare that audience for the violence that is to come. As a matter of fact, considering the wholesale butchery and blood-letting that takes place in RICHARD III, it is difficult to think of a better beginning. If the audience were not introduced immediately to the villain and given some sort of explanation or motivation for what he is about to do, chances are no one would believe the play. But, because of the direct confrontation at the very outset, we are prepared to watch Richard kill off everyone who stands in his way as he reaches out for the crown. This soliloquy is a very effective example of poetry in the theatre.

Another convention of the Elizabethan stage was the lack of scenery, which forced the poet to incorporate the imagery of time and place into the text; thus, the poetry also serves as running commentary and program notes to the dramatic action. Here is a remarkable speech, in which Shakespeare not only creates a picture of a dramatic situation — two armies in the dead of night, facing each other and waiting for the morning — but also fixes the time and place in our minds, better than any clock or set design could do. I am speaking about the Prologue to the fourth act of Henry V. Notice how the imagery of the speech changes subtly from darkness and night to sunshine and daylight when King Henry appears; by the end of the speech, there can be no doubt in the mind of the audience as to the outcome of the day's battle. Shakespeare is going to convince us, through the simple use of imagery, that Henry represents the forces of daylight sent to overthrow the forces of darkness:

> Now entertain conjecture of a time,
> When creeping murmur and the poring dark,
> Fills the wide vessel of the universe.
> From camp to camp, through the foul womb of night.
> The hum of either army stilly sounds,
> That the fix'd sentinels almost receive
> The secret whispers of each other's watch:
> Fire answers fire, and through their paly flames
> Each battle sees the other's umber'd face:
> Steed threatens steed, in high and boastful neighs
> Piercing the night's dull ear; and from the tents
> The armourers, accomplishing the knights,
> With busy hammers closing rivets up,
> Give dreadful note of preparation.
> The country cocks do crow, the clocks do toll,
> And the third hour of drowsy morning's nam'd.
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> • • •
>
> O! now, who will behold
> The royal captain of this ruin'd band
> Walking from watch to watch, from tent to tent,

Let him cry " Praise and glory on his head! "
For forth he goes and visits all his host,
Bids them good-morrow with a modest smile,
And calls them brothers, friends, and countrymen.
Upon his royal face there is no note
How dread an army hath enrounded him,
Nor doth he dedicate one jot of colour
Unto the weary and all-watched night;
But freshly looks and overbears attaint,
With cheerful semblance and sweet majesty;
That every wretch, pining and pale before,
Beholding him, plucks comfort from his looks.
A largess universal, like the sun,
His liberal eye doth give to every one,
Thawing cold fear, that mean and gentle all,
Behold, as may unworthiness define,
A little touch of Harry in the night.
And so our scene must to the battle fly;
Where, O for pity! we shall much disgrace —
With four or five most vile and ragged foils,
Right ill-disposed, in brawl ridiculous —
The name of Agincourt. Yet sit and see;
Minding true things by what their mockeries be.[4]

This speech is called a Prologue, although it actually serves a variety of purposes. As I noted, by the end of the speech there is very little doubt in our minds as to the outcome of the next day's battle — and in fact it was an overwhelming English victory. Shakespeare has prepared us for it, by the use of poetry in the theatre, poetry which not only expresses the dramatic situation, but also located the action in time and space, and through the use of imagery, affects our feelings about the course of the action.

Now let us look briefly at the Japanese theatre of the Noh, which has a tradition of its own dating back to the Fourteenth Century, to the first Noh actor and playwright, Zeami Motokiyo, who was a contemporary of Chaucer and Joan of Arc. The poetry of the Noh, like the poetry of the Japanese haiku and tanka, is a very indirect poetry — oblique, elusive, and evocative rather than straightforward and explicit. It suggests much more than it states. In this sense, it is closest to the poetry of the French Symbolists, that of Mallarme' and Verlaine and Rimbaud. Here in an example, from a classical Noh play, IKKAKU SENNIN, by Zenou Komparu. The Shite, a hermit with long black hair and a grotesque mask, is sitting inside a cave. When we first see him, he says:

[4] Ibid., Note 3.

I scoop water from deep streams with my magic gourd,
I call forth all my art.
I lift up clouds that have folded over forests
and I make them boil swiftly,
then I play music.
But I play alone.
The mountains rise up high above the river banks.
Green leaves suddenly become the color of blood.
I play music and I play alone in autumn.[5]

This may seem to be simple enough, but consider what has been said in these nine lines. It is autumn, which implies melancholy and nostalgia, a mood of sadness. The hermit is a wizard; he talks about his magic art, and then he describes the beautiful countryside. But remember that he is sitting inside his cave. That is, he does not actually see the countryside he is describing. It only exists in his mind; and therefore we sense that he does possess a perspicacity that is a remarkable part of his magical powers. Added to this, he tells that he is alone; and we sense the poignance of the great man, the great magician, someone like Prospero who has a magic wand and is able to do all kinds of things — although he is shipwrecked on a lonely island. Now of course, this is a great deal to read into these nine lines — and you can imagine how difficult it is for a Western actor to come to terms with such an allusive use of language when he is accustomed to having his character indicated more explicitly in the text. And yet, as I have suggested, this is the role of poetry in the Noh theatre — to evoke and to suggest rather than to spell out.

What does the role of poetry in the Greek and Elizabethan and Japanese theatres tell us about the role of poetry in the theatre, generally? Perhaps it tells us nothing more than this: that at different times and places, poetry has had a different role, and has had to adapt itself to different conventions, according to the various requirements of a theatrical form. And so all we need to do is to find out what the requirements of our theatre are, and we shall be close to discovering what the role of poetry has to be here.

I wish it were as simple as that. Because in our time, a playwright —• whether working in poetry or prose — can choose from an infinite variety of styles and theatrical forms: he can write for a proscenium arch, the so-called 'fourth-wall' theatre, the arena theatre, the three-sided theatre; he can make use of all sorts of electronic and technical effects for the staging of his play; he can use a variety of styles of lighting, set design, and costumes; in short, he is free to create his own theatrical conventions. The sky's the limit. When we look for

[5] English version by the author.

any sort of enduring tradition in our theatre (I am speaking of the American theatre), it seems that the only one we can point to with any confidence is the tradition of the American musical theatre. If you heard that a road company was planning to do OKLAHOMA! in Dallas, Texas, you would be reasonably sure that the part of Curly would be cast in a certain way, and costumed in a certain way, and approached by the actor in a certain way. Alas, you could not say the same about a production of HAMLET in San Francisco, or even a production of DESIRE UNDER THE ELMS in New York. We are living in an age of experimentation and interpretation, which can be wonderfully stimulating and exciting, but which does not do much toward the preservation of a convention and a tradition.

The lack of any fixed convention in our theatre, then, is a major reason why poetic drama has not been able to find its form. This is the reason poets have tended to reach back to previous theatre traditions— in the way Eliot reached back to the Greek tradition in MURDER IN THE CATHEDRAL, the way Maxwell Anderson reached back to the Elizabethan theatre in his verse plays, even in such a contemporary work as WINTERSET.

But then, what about poetry in the theatre? So far, I have just been suggesting some of the difficulties of trying to analyze the role of poetry. I have said that we do not have any strong tradition of language in American theatre and that there are not any binding conventions to guide a poet when he decides to write a poetic drama.

Yet, we must remember that we do have poets and that we do have a theatre, and that the two are bound to come together, tradition or no tradition, convention or no convention. And so, in the next articles, I will investigate some exceedingly bad examples of poetry in the theatre — poetic dramas which simply do not work, because the poet got carried away by his own poetry, leaving the actors standing around declaiming a lot of beautiful music, without much in the way of dramatic acting or characterization. It will also be relevant to investigate metaphor a bit — this being so much used in poetry — to see how metaphor changes its nature when it is put on stage. We also will be thinking of the actor, that poor man who has to recite the lines — looking at some of the problems American actors face when they attempt to perform in verse theatre. We may not be able to create any new audiences for poetic drama, but at least we shall be trying to explain why the audiences so far have not been storming the box offices or demanding more poetry in American theatre.