

Poetry ~~try~~ in ~~the~~ ~~the~~ theatre.

— who needs it?

Poetry in the theatre.

— so what's all the noise about?

Poetry in the theatre.

— okay, okay, but what I want to know is: *so what?*

THAT IS THE GREAT UNANSWERED question of verse theatre. Why do we go on and on and on, trying to tell ourselves that we ought to have a poetic drama, when we're not even sure what it is, or how we go about getting it?

In our first article, we examined the role of poetry in the great world theatres of the past — the Greek theatre, the Elizabethan theatre, the Japanese theatre. And we saw that poetry was a very important part of the shape of a play in these traditions. We also saw that the playwright was obliged to write his poetry according to certain fixed conventions.

If you press me for a definition of poetry in the theatre, I won't be able to give one. Since poetry *does* exist in the theatre, perhaps it's not up to me to explain what it is or why it is important. Because it may be that we are dealing with something which is actually inside of *us*, something which, is simply attempting to get out and find its best expression in poetic drama. If that's the case, then perhaps we need not so much a definition of poetry in the theatre as a good description of what's going on inside of us.

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T. S. Eliot wrote:

The human soul, in intense emotion, strives to express itself in verse. It is not for me, but for the neurologists, to discover why this is so, and why and how feeling and rhythm are related. The tendency, at any rate, of prose drama is to emphasize the ephemeral and superficial; if we want to get at the permanent and universal we tend to express ourselves in verse.¹

—which seems to make sense. We need only look back through our literature, to the most exalted moments of intense emotion, and we will see that the language inevitably tends to fall into the form of poetry. For example, take one of the highest expressions of the religious sensibility, the twenty-third Psalm of David, as translated in the King James Bible:

The Lord is my shepherd: I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.
He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness, for his name's sake.
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.
Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

There can be no doubt that this is poetry of the highest order, although I imagine that David was not interested merely in writing a good poem. He was concerned with giving dramatic expression to a very real and personal victory over his own disposition to doubt and despair. And this expression of his victory, because it took place in an extreme state of intense emotion, fell into the form of poetry. We need not worry as to whether this twenty-third Psalm has extraordinary qualities stemming from the fact that it happened to have been translated by some anonymous Elizabethan during the reign of King James; that opening line, 'The Lord is my shepherd . . .', is equally assuring and affirmative and poetic when translated into French: '*Le Seigneur est mon berger . . .*'

So the Psalm endures as poetry and is a good example of what Eliot means when he says: 'The human soul, in intense emotion, strives to express itself in verse.' However, we don't need to go to religious poetry to establish our point. We can do the very opposite: we can

take one of the most perverse and contradictory and antireligious sentiments ever conceived — and, because it is also written in intense emotion, it also tends to fall into the form of verse. I am referring to the passage of tragic blasphemy in Milton's *PARADISE LOST*, in which Satan utters a curse that encompasses God, mankind, and himself.

Me miserable! which way shall I fly
Infinite wrath, and infinite despair?
Which way I fly is Hell; myself am Hell;
And in the lowest deep, a lower deep
Still threatening to devour me opens wide,
To which the Hell I suffer seems a Heaven.

So farewell hope; and with hope farewell fear;
Farewell remorse! all good to me is lost;
Evil, be thou my good; by thee at least
Divided empire with Heaven's King I hold,
By thee, and more than half perhaps will reign;
As man erelong, and this new world, shall know.

Satan's curse is just as terrible as David's praise is wonderful; and yet, both expressions are highly poetic. Eliot's point is well taken: the most intense expressions of which we are capable, whether positive or negative, will often take the form of poetry.

What does this tell us about poetry in the theatre? Only that those moments which are the most dramatic and compelling are also the moments in which language is most desperately needed to give voice and rhythm to the suffering or joy of the actors and the audience.

And, as we saw, this is the case in the Greek, Elizabethan, and Japanese theatres. That is the reason, when we are thinking about poetry in our own theatre, we must turn back to see what has already been accomplished in the great periods of world drama. Michel St-Denis writes:

We do not go back to our classics simply out of respect for the past. We do not want to be congealed by our respect. By looking at the Greeks, the Spaniards, the Elizabethans, by looking at Shakespeare as well as at the Chinese and Japanese theatres, we are trying to find resources for our modern world, for our modern art, our modern theatre. We are trying to rediscover secrets of composition, of construction, of language, we are trying to rediscover what is meant by form in order that we may express substance: for modern realism needs new instruments with which to reach the heart of reality. We want to develop realism, not to kill it. There is only one theatre and it is in constant evolution as time goes by.²

¹ A DIALOGUE ON DRAMATIC POETRY, *Selected Essays* (HARCOURT, BRACE, & WORLD).

² THEATRE: *The Rediscovery of Style* (THEATRE ART BOOKS).

This one theatre will be forever tending toward the form of poetry, because poetry is a very human need; its rhythms are closely associated with the pulse of our own heartbeat. It will always be with us. The problem is not to try to explain why poetry should be in the theatre, but to try to account for its absence when it is *not* there.

I do not mean to turn to turn to turn to turn. We must try to forget that silly middle-class notion that poetry is a lot of tinkling sounds, or that it is something separate from its meaning, or that it is some sort of welcome embellishment, an ornament attached to the dramatic action in the same way tinsel is attached to a Christmas tree. This misconception infuriated Antonin Artaud, the great French actor and critic. He wrote: 'The idea of a detached art, of poetry as a charm which exists only to distract our leisure, is a decadent idea and an unmistakable symptom of our power to castrate.'³

Poetry in the theatre has nothing to do with great actors or great directors or great scene designers; it has nothing to do with out-of-town tryouts or last-minute changes in the script. It is the life of the play itself. In the *POETICS*, Aristotle says:

The Spectacle, though an attraction, is the least artistic of all the arts, and has least to do with the art of poetry. The tragic effect is quite possible without a public performance and actors; and besides, the getting-up of the Spectacle is more a matter for the costumier than the poet.⁴

That's a pretty shocking thing for us to hear. We in the American theatre are so obsessed with the director and with the producer and with the actors and with the lighting experts and with the electricians and with the stagehands that it is terribly difficult for us to imagine that a play can actually exist by itself. In fact, some of our leading playwrights have been seduced into making public statements to the effect that their written texts were no more than 'indications' or 'suggestions' which were waiting for some great stage director to come along and translate into the reality of theatre. This is complete nonsense. Aristotle is right. I can sit all by myself and read the *ORESTEIA* of Aeschylus and receive the full impact of the tragedy, alone, in my own imagination. Because the poetry is that potent.

But what, exactly, is this poetry? It can't be just anything that rhymes or anything that has a lot of rhythm or anything that has a jingling and pleasing sound. It has to be something much more inclusive than that. One must have a very special relationship to oneself to be a poet; and, to be able to write poetry, one must see things in a

very special relationship to each other. Further on in the *POETICS*, Aristotle says:

It is a great thing, indeed, to make a proper use of these poetical forms, as also of compounds and strange words. But the greatest thing by far is to be a master of metaphor. It is the one thing that cannot be learnt by others; and it is also a sign of genius, since a good metaphor implies an intuitive perception of the similarity of dissimilars.

Metaphor, then, is the soul of poetry. It is an identification, such as David makes in the opening line of the twenty-third Psalm: 'The Lord is my shepherd . . .'

Let us look at some examples of the way metaphor is used in the theatre. In *ROMEO AND JULIET*,⁵ Romeo says at the beginning of the balcony scene: 'But, soft! what light through yonder window breaks? / It is the east, and Juliet is the sun.' This is a double metaphor: the light is the east and Juliet, the sun. Later in the same speech, Romeo says: 'See how she leans her cheek upon her hand! / O! that I were a glove upon that hand, / That I might touch that cheek.' And to Juliet's response, 'Ah me!,' he says: 'O, speak again, bright angel! for thou art / As glorious to this night, being o'er my head, / As is a winged messenger of heaven / Unto the white-upturned wond'ring eyes / Of mortals, that fall back to gaze on him / When he bestrides the lazy-passing clouds, / And sails upon the bosom of the air.' This is something more than exquisite poetry. Shakespeare is not simply writing for the printed page, he is also writing for the stage; and so we have to consider the placing of the characters in this scene: Romeo under the balcony, looking up at Juliet, the source of light. And when he speaks of '... the white-upturned wond'ring eyes,' these eyes looking upward are his own. He is actually positioned under the balcony with his head tipped back, gazing at Juliet. Shakespeare is describing in the written metaphor what is there in front of us.

This metaphor has been used many times. It is to be found in the *DIVINE COMEDY*, where Dante is down below, looking upward at Beatrice, the source of light. But, in *ROMEO AND JULIET*, the metaphor is used not only in the written poetry, but in the actual staging of the play as we see it from the point of view of the audience. The literary metaphor is complementing the dramatic metaphor.

Another example: in the last act of *OTHELLO*, we see Desdemona lying on her bed and Othello, his mind poisoned by jealousy, coming into the bedroom to strangle her. Othello is a Moor, and

³ THE THEATRE AND ITS DOUBLE (GROVE).

⁴ Richard McKeon translation (RANDOM HOUSE).

⁵ Quotations here and ensuing are from Falstaff edition, ed. by George L. Duykinck from 1632 folio (HENRY T. COATES & Co. — 1859).

Desdemona is white. This is very important; Shakespeare never lets us forget the contrast between these two images of dark and light. Othello speaks:

It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul, —
Let me not name it to you, you chaste stars!
It is the cause. — Yet I'll not shed her blood;
Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow,
And smooth as monumental alabaster.
Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men.
Put out the light, and then — put out the light?
If I quench thee, thou flaming minister,
I can again thy former light restore,
Should I repent me; but once put out thy light,
Thou cunning'st pattern of excelling nature,
I know not where is that Promethean heat,
That can thy light relume. . . .

The scene is terrifying enough — a man has been crazed with jealousy and is about to strangle his wife. But Shakespeare makes it into something much more — he uses the image of darkness overwhelming the image of light. Othello refers to 'that whiter skin of hers than snow, / And smooth as monumental alabaster.' And there is the light of the candle which he puts out; and we see it there. We see Othello is dark, and Desdemona is light. I do not believe Shakespeare was concerned with any racial theories; he does not attach any special connotation to color as such. But he uses the poetic image of dark and light to suggest a metaphor of the two characters: Othello is dark and driven, a victim of obscured passion; Desdemona is light and innocent, a victim of love and obedience. Thus, the metaphor is not only on the printed page, but also on the stage before us.

For final example, in *HAMLET* there is a brief scene just before the play within the play, in which Hamlet makes outrageous fun of Ophelia. This is filled with puns and filthy double meanings — Elizabethan bawdiness at its best, yet also a bit more than this:

H.: Lady, shall I lie in your lap?
(Lying down at Ophelia's feet)
O.: No, my lord.
H.: I mean, my head upon your lap?
O.: Ay, my lord.
H.: Do you think I mean country matters?
O.: I think nothing, my lord.
H.: That's a fair thought to lie between maids' legs.
O.: What is, my lord?
H.: Nothing.
O.: You are merry, my lord.
H.: Who, I?

O.: Ay, my lord.

H.: O God! your only jig-maker. What should a man do, but be merry? for, look you, how cheerfully my mother looks, and my father died within these two hours.

Good fun — but it also has a dramatic purpose. The scene does not take place in isolation, but on stage in the presence of Claudius and Gertrude and Polonius. In fact, we suspect it is intended for their benefit, and that Hamlet is simply using Ophelia as a foil; because Hamlet is trying to show everyone that he is mad and nimble and unaccountable — in short, that he has put on 'an antic disposition.' But he also wishes to convey a message: '. . . for, look you, how cheerfully my mother looks, and my father died within these two hours.' It is as if the playwright were saying: Hamlet is mad, but Hamlet is also not mad. To show us this doubleness, Shakespeare has chosen the metaphor of the wise fool, the playful maniac who has a method in his madness. And the metaphor is effective not only on the page, but it is there in front of us on the stage.

Poetic drama is most effective when these two types of metaphor, the literary and the dramatic, work together and complement each other. We have also seen that 'The human soul, in intense emotion, strives to express itself in verse.' And the rhythms of this verse are closely associated with the pulse of our own heartbeats, which are with us so long as we live. And it does not really matter whether poetry is serious or absurd, religious or antireligious, full of suffering or of joy; no matter which, it will be some sort of metaphor, some insight into the way one thing in this world is the same as some other thing. In the theatre, a good metaphor will be as effective on the stage as it is on the printed page.

T. S. Eliot, in that same *DIALOGUE ON DRAMATIC POETRY*, wrote: 'No one ever points to certain plays of Shakespeare as being the most poetic, and to *other* plays as being the most dramatic. The same plays are the most poetic and the most dramatic, and this is not by a concurrence of two activities, but by the full expansion of one and the same activity. I agree that the dramatist who is not a poet is so much less a dramatist. . . . ' There is no 'relation' between poetry and drama. All poetry tends toward drama, and all drama toward poetry.