IMAGINE A PLAY IN WHICH ALL of the characters quietly retire. Imagine that the footlights die down, and that the rest of the set disappears into the darkness. Imagine that there is only one man who remains alone on the stage. Now there is no movement, there are no encounters or confrontations. One man sits in silence, and his eyes look out over the audience. Slowly, he begins to speak.

And now, imagine the magic of language. Imagine that this man's voice goes out over the entire auditorium, pronouncing each word so that it can be heard by everyone, the poetry of those words suggesting all the patience and outrage, all the guilt and humility, all the fear and heroism of life as we ourselves might be living it up there on that stage.

That is the role of poetry in the theatre.

Why doesn't that happen more often? If language can achieve such a remarkable effect, why don't we experience it more fully in our own theatre? Why are we sometimes embarrassed or bored or baffled by poetry in the theatre? Is there some secret to spoken poetry, something we don't know about? Is it some sort of acquired mystery which is the exclusive possession of such masters as John Gielgud and Laurence Olivier and Richard Burton?

I don't think so. And although we may not be able to give any formulae for greatness in the speaking of verse, at least we may know what it is that we don't want. We don't want the sort of thing which Stanislavsky describes in his autobiography, **MY LIFE IN ART**[1]:

> It is better not to read verse at all, than read it in the way which is considered lawful, requisite and patented in the sense of poetry and musicalness. Rhythm does not consist in stressing iambs and anapests. I cannot bear the marchlike beating out of rhythm. I want to sleep when I hear the reading of verse in a solemnly monotonous voice with chromatic tones crawling up. I cannot bear vocal leaps to the terza or quinta with a fall at the end of each line to a secunda. There is nothing more vulgar than a made, sweetish, quasi-poetical voice in lyric poems, which rises and falls like waves during a dead calm. What can be more terrible than the female readers at concerts, those tender, posing, soulful young ladies in light gowns who read from a pink velvet-bound book dear verses like: 'Little star, little star, why are you so still? '

[1] MERIDIAN, MG4.

We flatter ourselves that we have made a good deal of progress in the reading of poetry since the Nineteenth Century. Have we? Perhaps we still can find in our own theatre traces of this antique picturesque approach. Or else we may go to the opposite extreme. Our actors may try to cover over the very fact that it is poetry; they may give in to the temptation of 'illustrating' the text with all sorts of irrelevant ' business.' Or an actor may throw away the text altogether and substitute his own subjective intensity, some sort of 'inner truth' which has no relation whatever to the written text.

I agree with Stanislavsky that any kind of artificiality or contrived effect in the speaking of poetry is repugnant, but I am not so sure that I would agree that we should sacrifice all attempts at music. I am more inclined to agree with the French poet, Paul Valéry, where, in his essay *On Speaking Verse*,[2] he is trying to advise actors who are preparing to do a play by Racine. They are struggling with the difficult conventions of the neo-classic French tragedy: the alexandrine line, the absolute caesura, and rhymed couplets. Valéry says that they must continue in their struggle, because that's what it's really all about. But he goes on to say:

> Moreover, and above all, do not be in a hurry to reach the meaning. Approach it without forcing and, as it were, imperceptibly. Attain the tenderness and the violence only by the music and through it. Refrain for as long as possible from emphasizing words; so far there are no *words*, only syllables and rhythms. Remain in this purely musical state until the moment the meaning, having gradually supervened, can no longer mar the musical form. You will finally introduce it as the supreme nuance which will transfigure your piece without altering it. But first of all you must have learned your piece.

In other words, the actors are to let the rhythms of the text become a part of them, until a thorough familiarity with its musical form suggests the interpretation ' as the supreme nuance which will transfigure your piece without altering it.'

This is a very interesting approach. It may easily be tested by looking at some examples of highly-rhythmic lyric poetry. And to make the test more revealing, let us look at poems which are very obscure, poems written in dialect. We can take an old English ballad, a Scottish song, and an Irish lyric. And perhaps we shall not be able to see whether the rhythm and the musical form is enough to communicate at least one essential note of emotion, because we shall not be able to understand the specific meaning of each word.

EDWARD, EDWARD, one of the great poems in our language, has relentless and inexorable rhythms, matching a series of relentless revelations unfolding a tale of stark horror which takes hold of us as through a sort of myth of the unconscious. And yet, because of the musical form, it is all quite impersonal and remote, as though we were viewing some terrible wound from a great distance. The essential note here is, I believe, that of profound remorse. The climax is reached in the last two stanzas:

' And what will ye leave to your bairns and your wife,
Edward, Edward?
And what will ye leave to your bairns and your wife,
When ye gang owre the sea, O? ' —
' The warld's room: let them beg through life,
Mither, mither;
' The warld's room: let them beg through life,
For them never mair will I see, O.'

' And what will ye leave to your ain mither dear,
Edward, Edward?
And what will ye leave to your ain mither dear,
My dear son, now tell me, O? '
' The curse of hell frae me sall ye bear,
Mither, mither;
The curse of hell frae me sall ye bear:
Sic counsels ye gave to me, O! '

Next, a lyric by Robert Burns wherein the rhythm and the musical form communicate a feeling of cavalier abandon. Here are the opening stanzas:

Green grow the rashes, O;
Green grow the rashes, O;
The sweetest hours that e'er I spend,
Are spent among the lasses, O.

There's nought but care on ev'ry han',
In ev'ry hour that passes, O:
What signifies the life of man,
An' 'twere na for the lasses, O.

The war'ly race may riches chase,
An' riches still may fly them, O;
An' tho' at last they catch them fast,
Their hearts can ne'er enjoy them, O

But gie me a cannie hour at e'en,
My arms about my dearie, O;
An' war'ly cares, an' war'ly men,
May a' gae tapsalteerie, O!

And the third, an Irish lyric by James Stephens, contains words and phrases clear enough to the modern English ear; but again, the rhythm

[2] **THE ART OF POETRY — VINTAGE, V194.**

and the musical form are what communicate the one essential note of emotion, which I believe to be that of affectionate caprice:

I know a girl,
And a girl knows me,
And the owl says, what!
And the owl says, who?

But what we know
We both agree
That nobody else
Shall hear or see;

It's all between herself and me:
To wit? said the owl,
To woo! said I,
To-what! to-wit! to-woo![3]

It is evident that Valéry's point holds true, that the musical form of each of these poems is enough to communicate the essential note of emotion, even though the specific meaning of each line may not be understood. We understand — through the use of rhythm and the shape and form of the words — far more than the explicit meaning which a prose paraphrase would have given.

This demonstrates that spoken poetry relies almost entirely on musical form and that lyric poetry usually carries one essential note of emotion. Dramatic poetry is something else, because it contains not just one, but several notes and voices of varying pitch and intensity. A serious question is raised: how are all of these notes to be read together to express the poet's intention? First, we must discover what that intention is; we need a fairly-accurate idea of what the poet is saying. And this is by no means easy. Sometimes a given text will require concentrated study and effort over a long period of time before its complete meaning will become entirely clear. In Shakespeare, for example, we may read a passage and say: 'Oh, this is perfectly easy. I know very well what this is all about. It means this and this and this.' But when we examine the text more carefully, studying the lines word by word, image by image, idea by idea, we may find our first interpretations to be the very opposite of those intended.

Unfortunately, in the theatre, sometimes there isn't the time for deep study. The actors usually are more concerned with achieving dramatic effect apart from the poetry, so that often one simply has to do the best one can, hoping that the spoken poetry will not be too far short of the mark. But it usually is. And what makes matters worse is

[3] COLLECTED POEMS — MACMILLAN.

that, even with all the study and effort in the world, one still can't be absolutely positive about the intended meaning of a text. One often can't check one's interpretation with that of the author. Michel St.-Denis tells a story of someone who once telephoned Louis Jouvet to criticize his recent production of a Molière play. After thoroughly deploring the way Jouvet had interpreted the text, this person concluded: ' Molière would not have liked it.' To which, Jouvet replied : ' Have you got his phone number? '

Unfortunately, we don't have Shakespeare's telephone number; but we do have his written works, and we do have his own advice as to the proper approach to a poetic text. In HAMLET, after the actors had come to Elsinore for their first rehearsal, Hamlet instructs certain 'unready' players in the way in which they should approach the play's text:

> Speak the speech I pray you, as I pronounced it to you, trippingly on the tongue; but if you mouth it, as many of your players do, I had as lief the town-crier spoke my lines. Nor do not saw the air too much with your hand, thus; but use all gently; for in the very torrent, tempest, and (as I may say) whirlwind of passion, you must acquire and beget a temperance, that may give it smoothness. O! it offends me to the soul to hear a robustious periwig-pated fellow tear a passion to tatters, to very rags, to split the ears of the groundlings; who for the most part, are capable of nothing but inexplicable dumb shows and noise. I would have such a fellow whipped for o'erdoing Termagant; it out-herods Herod: pray you avoid it.[4]

In other words, Hamlet does not want his actors to conceal the poetry with stage gestures and inflections — he wants them to approach with a voice that is natural, informed, and unaffected. There must be a temperance which ' o'ersteps not the modesty of nature.'

After reading Stanislavsky, Paul Valéry, and Shakespeare on the proper approach to a poetic text, we seem to find one facet in common to all three points of view. They are agreed that an actor should not be *obsessed* by the search for the interpretation of character. If an actor will sit down and study the text long enough and carefully enough and with enough humility, so as to discover the musical form and the rhythms and the various voices and notes of emotion, and if he will work to make all of these things a part of him, then he will find that virtually everything in the text — syntax and sentence structure, the pace and the mood of the scene — will work together to provide him with an interpretation of character. He does not need to create it for himself. He only needs to discover it.

[4] FalstafE edition, ed. by George L. Duykinck from 1632 folio (HENRY T COATES & CO. —1859).

For a final illustration of the proper approach to a poetic text,, I turn to an example of a dramatic speech from a poetic play, John Webster's tragedy, THE DUCHESS OF MALFI. Toward the close is a speech which illustrates the form and shape of the words, and the manner in which they determine better than any actor the interpretation of a dramatic character. Antonio has secretly married the Duchess, and then has been forced to stand aside helplessly while she and her children are savagely murdered by her insane brothers, Ferdinand and the Cardinal. It is a study of senseless malevolence. Antonio's speech seems to sum up the numb horror we feel at the sight of such sweeping disintegration of all moral order; it is as if the whole world were in a state of decomposition. It is the beginning of the famous echo scene, and Antonio looks out from a fortification of Milan at the great waste of tombs and monuments. The music of his speech seems to convey the atmosphere of disillusion and resignation:

I do love these ancient ruins.
We never tread upon them but we set
Our foot upon some reverend history:
And, questionless, here in this open court,
Which now lies naked to the injuries
Of stormy weather, some men lie interr'd
Lov'd the church so well, and gave too largely to't,
They thought it should have canopied their bones
Till doomsday; but all things have their end:
Churches and cities, which have diseases
Like to men, must have like death that we have.

As Valéry says: 'Moreover and above all, do not be in a hurry to reach the meaning. Approach it without forcing and, as it were, imperceptibly. Attain the tenderness and the violence only by the music and through it.'