SUPPOSE FOR A MOMENT THAT our poets know all there is to know about poetry in the theatre. Suppose they are able to create the greatest possible poetic drama on the printed page. What do you suppose is the likelihood that their written work will be translated effectively onto the stage? What are the chances that the spoken poetry will be truly communicated to the audience with the proper tone and intensity appropriate to the text?

To give any kind of an answer to that question, perhaps we ought to examine whose interests are really at stake.

First, there is the audience. We may not think that audiences play much of a creative part in the theatre. We may imagine they are simply there to be entertained or edified or shocked or shouted at. But audiences are usually a determining factor, in part responsible for how much or how little poetry there is going to be in the theatre. Is Shakespeare done badly these days? Blame it on the audiences. They do not care enough to protest loud and long and boycott productions until they are done the way they ought to be done. Obviously, the very fact that a theatre audience does *not* insist on poetic drama, and does *not* insist that the finest actors be highly proficient in spoken poetry, is a moving factor.

Looking at this in another way, let me cite examples — how audiences in the past helped determine that there would be more poetry in the theatre.

In the period of Attic tragedy, roughly from Aeschylus through Sophocles to Euripides, the audiences were as attuned to the music of the spoken language as the poets who wrote for their theatre. The Greek audiences knew that when a Chorus went into a complicated verse form known as a strophe, this was to be followed immediately by another equally-complicated verse form known as the antistrophe. In fact, the antistrophe had to match the metrical structure of the strophe line for line, repeating the metre exactly, and heaven help any actor who missed a beat or misplaced a stress. Observing this immediately, the Greek audience would sometimes take that actor offstage and punish him by giving him a good punch in the stomach. They cared very much about poetry in the theatre and insisted on technical excellence in actors.

Again — the French Classical Theatre has always been committed to certain strict metrical rules, such as the alexandrine line, which

has been in the theatre since the days of Molière and Corneille and Racine. But, in 1830, Victor Hugo decided to take certain liberties with this great classical verse tradition. The opening lines of his play, HERNANI, commit a terrible breach of convention in that the sense of a sentence runs over from one line to the next: ' Serait-ce déjà lui? C'est bien à l'escalier / Dérobé. . . .' This is called an enjambement, which has no place in alexandrine tradition. To be sure, it is a technicality. But the French audience at the premiere of HERNANI did not think so. As soon as these opening lines were delivered, all the classicists in the audience hooted and booed and hissed this outrageous insult to the French Theatre. However, there were others who were delighted to see poetry freed from artificial strictures. Men such as Gautier, Balzac, Delacroix, and Berlioz rose to cheer and applaud. Pandemonium. This was not the first time that a stage performance was almost halted by an unruly audience, but it was rather unique in this sense: the audience was not objecting to *what* was being said up there on that stage so much as the *way* it was being said, a violation of the conventions of spoken poetry in the French Theatre. It wanted the right to decide what to listen to. One finds it hard to imagine an American audience becoming much concerned about what it heard in the theatre short of how many four-letter words might be encountered in the course of an evening. And Americans couldn't care less how those four-letter words might be strung together metrically.

An actor may be admirably trained for naturalistic action or for character interpretation, but how is he to be trained for the action of spoken poetry? How is he supposed to locate the proper approach to a poetic text? The theatre is not like the classroom. In the classroom over the course of a semester a teacher can talk about language, demonstrate the meaning of a line, persuade his class to analyze an image; he can lecture and drill and cajole. In the theatre, there is not that much time; everything has to be done all at once. During a single performance, the actor has to 'show' what the language is all about.

The actor may or may not be trained in a tradition. Here is a statement by one who has been trained in a tradition, a member of the Comédie-Française, Robert Manuel, speaking in 1963 to Actors Equity in New York City:

> My master was André Brunot, who often spoke to me about what he had learnt from Silvain, who was a pupil of Régnier's, himself a pupil of Samson's, who was a pupil of Talma's, that same Samson who taught Rachel. These artists could pass on orally traditions that they had learnt from Talma and Lekain, who may themselves have heard them from actors who had known Baron, Molière's protégé.

Thus, it would be possible for a French actor to take a stage direction or a problem of character interpretation or a line reading and try to trace it all the way back to Molière himself! But what of the language? M. Manuel comments: 'I would like to insist once again on the respect we must have for the works, for their authors, and for the audience. This respect is shown by the strictest obedience to a perfect memory.' Have a respect for the text, he said, and show that respect by an absolute fidelity to the written word. Of course, it is more difficult this way. It means working with every word, and a great deal of digging to get at the author's original intention, a complete concentration on detail. And certainly, it will be a great help if an actor happens to belong to a theatre which has an unbroken line of tradition, a continuity of style to help him in gaining access to a poetic text.

Perhaps we feel that we, too, have our own tradition. We have our Shakespeare and we have the many centuries of distinguished actors who have performed Shakespeare — Booth, Irving, Kean, Forbes Robertson, Beerbohm Tree, John Philip Kemble, the great Garrick — all the way back to Richard Burbage. But we would look in vain for any continuity of style in this list; we would not be able to link one man's approach to another man's approach as Robert Manuel was able to do with the Comédie-Française. There have been interruptions in the Shakespearean tradition; the Elizabethan theatres were closed, their performances banned due to the plague or due to the Puritan religious prohibitions or due to any number of accidents and calamities, so that a tradition was not permitted to come down to us unbroken from generation to generation. From all available records, a performance of HAMLET by Henry Irving would not have very much in common with a performance of HAMLET by John Philip Kemble—because we have no idea how Richard Burbage approached the part originally, if indeed he did play Hamlet. Nor is there any reliable information concerning the way in which Will Kemp came on stage, or the way in which Robert Armin played the fool in TWELFTH NIGHT, or the way in which battle scenes were represented in JULIUS CAESAR. Despite the huge accumulation of retrospective scholarship on the Elizabethan Theatre, all the books in the world cannot supply the countless details an actor would require to go upon the stage and play one of these roles as originally written.

John Blatchley, a director at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, has little faith in the historical tradition of Shakespearean productions. Speaking at the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, D.C. in 1964, he said:

> The tradition that we have inherited is the Nineteenth Century sentimental, romantic tradition of the actor-manager, it is all the

> statuesque, rococo clutter of heavy sets, donkeys and rabbits and pigeons, it is all a lot of textbook quotations taken out of context, with speeches treated as arias, so that we don't really see what it is all about.

How then may we approach a text without continuity of tradition, without a guiding style to help an actor gain access to the text? Bluffing doesn't help. Blatchley had this to say about a famous passage of MACBETH:

> Don't let anything go — you look at that speech, and you say: ' I do that rather well, the vowels are all well turned and my body looks good and the audience is impressed ' — but then you get offstage and you say, 'What the bloody hell is that speech all about?' — Please don't let us think that these people say these things naturally, that it is all a lot of beautiful sound — the images have got to be so utterly real to you, that you're able to say them and feel them and be them, and the audience is able to say, what an extraordinary thing!

In other words, Blatchley is arguing for a complete disregard of the traditional ' Shakespearean' attitudes. He loathed the slick heroic professional approach, and he felt that an actor would have more of a key to the character if he could only have the humility of a respect for the text, if he could only trust the written word to supply him all he needed. This is the most authentic key, because this is the key given us by Shakespeare himself.

A soliloquy from MACBETH and certain lines ensuing it may help us to see how an actor can learn intention from the language.

Macbeth: If it were done, when 'tis done, then 'twere well
It were done quickly: if the assassination
Could trammel up the consequence, and catch
With his surcease success; that but this blow
Might be the be-all and the end-all here,
But here, upon this bank and shoal of time,
We'd jump the life to come. — But in these cases,
We still have judgment here; that we but teach
Bloody instructions, which, being taught, return
To plague th' inventor: thus even-handed justice
Commends th' ingredients of our poison'd chalice
To our own lips. He's here in double trust:
First, as I am his kinsman and his subject;
Strong both against the deed: then, as his host,
Who should against his murderer shut the door,
Not bear the knife myself. Besides, this Duncan
Hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been
So clear in his great office, that his virtues
Will plead, like angels trumpet-tongued, against
The deep damnation of his taking-off;
And pity, like a naked new-born babe,
Striding the blast, or he- , cherubim, hors'd