

I HOPE THAT IN THIS SERIES (here concluding) I haven't gone too far in trying to suggest answers to any of the many questions concerning poetry in the theatre. I simply know that certain things have existed at certain times, that there has been poetry in the theatre, and this has been enormously important in forming the great theatre traditions and masterpieces.

If I were to put all that is involved into one statement, I would probably say something like this: Language in the theatre can achieve an effect which no other dramatic technique can achieve.

This is nothing new, especially for those cultures which have had a tradition of spoken poetry on the stage. For example, the French theatre: Since its founding in 1680, the Comédie-Francaise has been able to preserve a guiding style which has helped its actors acquire a respect for the text and to develop a humility toward poetry.

This is not to say that the Comédie-Francaise is the only kind of theatre there can be. As a matter of fact, I have heard some Frenchmen refer to it as a 'museum,' or a 'waxworks,' where one comes across the fossil of a dead tradition. However, even if that were so, there are the other great theatres in France: the TNP, the Theatre National Populaire of Jean Vilar; the theatre of Roger Planchon; the experimental theatre at Strasbourg under Michel St.-Denis; and the Théâtre de France, under the directorship of Madeleine Renaud and Jean-Louis Barrault. This last — Barrault's — has pioneered in the revival of classics by Moliere, Racine, and Marivaux; and it has premiered new works of such outstanding poetic dramatists as Paul Claudel, Andre Gide, Andre Obey, Jean Cocteau, Jean Giraudoux, as well as works by Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, Jean Anouilh, Eugene Ionesco, and Samuel Beckett. In all of these productions, Barrault has insisted on a respect for the text. He writes:

The artisan of the theatre can tear his hair and walk round in circles, as in dreams; the fact remains that the fate of theatrical art lies exclusively in the hands of the author.¹

And the author in the French theatre over the last fifty years has done a great deal of work in poetic drama — the playwrights I have just mentioned, as well as such men as Jacques Copeau, René do Obaldia,

¹ T. S. Eliot: *A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry*, SELECTED ESSAYS — Harcourt, Brace & World.

and André Gide in his translations of Shakespeare.

Compared with the French theatre over the same period, American theatre cannot boast of any great flourishing of poetic drama. Donna Gerstenberger writes:

Verse drama has no vital tradition in the United States, for there has never been a period in the literature of this country in which verse drama has been a popular form created to express living issues. American literature had created for itself, by the end of the Nineteenth Century, a recognizable tradition in fiction and poetry. As the result of a number of historical factors, however, an important dramatic accomplishment came more slowly, and it was not until the period between the wars in the first half of the Twentieth Century that American dramatic achievement secured its place in literature. This was a period in which interest in verse drama persisted in America, and yet it was a period in which verse drama had no appreciable influence on modern American drama.²

I recently used several plays of Tennessee Williams as examples of poetic drama. I did this because we had already established that metaphor is the soul of poetry; and the plays of Tennessee Williams, more than those of any other modern American playwright, are written around a theatrical metaphor which is immediately compelling to a modern audience. However, this is not to say that we have achieved a poetic drama in our own time. A few years ago, Richard Burton, commenting on these same plays, complained that they contained no memorable lines, that the language itself did not gain a separate and excellent existence apart from the dramatic action. This seems to be a peculiar weakness now of American theatre. It is a logical result of naturalism, that particular approach to reality which seems to forbid any state of exaltation or poetry. Tyrone Guthrie described it this way:

The American theatre today, with its insistence upon naturalism and its timid avoidance of what might possibly be considered 'ham,' does not encourage great acting. There is no room for great acting in little plays; as a mixed-up kid you can be poignant, you can show great promise, but you cannot be great. It is unfortunate that the American theatre for some years has been obsessed with the problem of mixed-up kids — albeit often kids of forty-seven.³

The fact is — a point I have been trying to make again and again — that another kind of theatre is possible, a theatre which not only makes use of theatrical metaphor, but also makes use of language to complement the dramatic action. And, after all, this is not asking for very much. Shelley, in his great essay, *A Defence of Poetry*, was asking for

Upon the sightless couriers of the air,
Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye,
That tears shall drown the wind — I have **no spur**
To prick the sides of my intent, but only
Vaulting ambition, which o'er-leaps **itself**,
And falls on the other. —¹

Whereupon, Lady Macbeth enters, interrupting him. This speech is such a tortuous example of indecision, even the sentence structure and syntax writhes with obscurity and involution. But he now plainly and bluntly tells his wife: 'We will proceed no farther in this business. . . .' Lady Macbeth berates him for changing his mind. Then we notice something very curious about the ensuing two speeches by Lady Macbeth. In the first, she is brutal and ruthless, using extremely obvious imagery about the babe at her breast:

I would, while it was smiling in my face,
Have pluck'd my nipple from his boneless gums,
And dash'd his brains out . . .

But, in the second speech, suddenly we note that she is speaking in a very rhetorical voice:

. . . memory, the warder of the brain.
Shall be a fume, and the receipt of reason
A limbeck only: . . .

Why does she abruptly go into obscure imagery? There is only one line separating the two speeches. Macbeth had asked merely: 'If we should fail?' — and perhaps in that one line he revealed tacit acceptance of the situation, and that he was finally determined to carry out the murder. So, now Lady Macbeth knows she can afford the luxury of shifting the level of her speech from a brutal ruthless attack to a rhetorical celebration of the fact that Macbeth is once again in the palm of her hand.

It could be that this poetry is a sort of shorthand, the playwright's way of revealing character and indicating the pace and the mood of the scene. Just as a composer uses certain musical notations to tell the musician how fast or how slowly a piece is to be played, as well as by the choice of the musical units (quarter notes, half notes, whole notes), the poet has ways of speeding up or slowing down the pace of the written text, and can also cause a sudden change in a dramatic character just by shifting the use of imagery.

Another example of imagery in action is a passage from THE

² *Verse Drama in America 1916-1939*, in MODERN DRAMA: Vol. VI, No. 3.

¹ Quotations here and ensuing are from Falstaff edition, ed. by George L. Duykinck from 1632 folio (HENRY T. COATES & Co. — 1859).

DUCHESS OF MALFI by John Webster. This is the strangulation scene in which the corrupt Bosola enters, disguised as an old man, to torment the Duchess in her last moments of life. But the Duchess already is beyond torment. She has been systematically tortured and degraded by her maniacal brothers until she has lost all instinct for life. She simply accepts the madness and malevolence thrust upon her. Note how Webster pervades this terrible scene with such grotesque and perverse imagery that the dramatic characters really need do nothing to project the sense of absolute evil. It is already there, in the poetry.

Bosola: I am come to make thy tomb.

Duchess: Ha! my tomb?

Thou speak'st as if I lay upon my death-bed,
Gasping for breath; dost thou perceive me sick?

Bosola: Yes, and the more dangerously, since thy sickness
Is insensible.

Duchess: Thou art not mad, sure: dost know me?

Bosola: Yes.

Duchess: Who am I?

Bosola: Thou art a box of worm-seed, at best but a salvatory of
green mummy. What's this flesh? a little crudded milk,
fantastical puff-paste. Our bodies are weaker than those
paper-prisons boys use to keep flies in; more contemptible,
since ours is to preserve earthworms. Didst thou ever see
a lark in a cage? Such is the soul in the body: this world
is like her little turf of grass, and the heaven o'er our
heads, like her looking-glass, only gives us a miserable
knowledge of the small compass of our prison.

Duchess: Am not I thy duchess?

Bosola: Thou art some great woman, sure, for riot begins to sit
on thy forehead (clad in grey hairs) twenty years sooner
than on a merry milk-maid's. Thou sleep'st worst than if
a mouse should be forc'd to take up her lodging in a cat's
ear; a little infant that breeds its teeth, should it lie with
thee, would cry out, as if thou wert the more unquiet bed-
fellow.

Duchess: I am the Duchess of Malfi still.

Bosola: That makes thy sleeps so broken:
Glories, like glow-worms, afar off shine bright,
But looked to near, have neither heat nor light.

Duchess: Why, do we grow fantastical in our death-bed? do we
affect fashion in the grave?

Bosola: Most ambitiously. Princes' images on their tombs do not
lie, as they were wont, seeming to pray up to heaven; but
with their hands under their cheeks, as if they died of the
toothache: they are not carved with their eyes fix'd upon
the stars; but as their minds were wholly bent upon the
world, the self-same way they seem to turn their faces.

a. great deal more when he described the Greek theatre:

For the Athenians employed language, action, music, painting, the
dance, and religious institutions, to produce a common effect in the
representation of the highest idealisms of passion and of power; each
division in the art was made perfect in its kind by artists of the most
consummate skill, and was disciplined into a beautiful proportion and
unity one towards the other.

And we shall probably always have the vision of a poetic theatre of
some sort, something we can try to imagine and work toward. Eugene
O'Neill had such a vision; and his statement of this might well be taken
as a keynote of this series of articles:

I mean the one true theatre, the age-old theatre, the theatre of the
Greeks and Elizabethans, a theatre that could dare to boast — without
committing a farcical sacrilege — that it is a legitimate descendant of
the first theatre that sprang, by virtue of man's imaginative interpreta-
tion of life, out of his worship of Dionysius. I mean a theatre returned
to its highest and sole significant function as a Temple where the
religion of a poetical interpretation and symbolical celebration of life
is communicated to human beings, starved in spirit by their soul-stifling
daily struggle to exist as masks among the masks of living!

How are actors to prepare themselves for this poetic theatre? Once
they are freed from the chain reaction of their being trained to perform
exclusively in naturalistic plays, there is no reason to believe they will
not be able to develop an approach to spoken poetry — to develop a
sensitivity to the form and the shape of words, even down to the syntax
and the sentence structure of each line.

In the meantime, how are they to keep in practice, if there is not
much poetic drama being produced? They can work on the great clas-
sics of poetry, on their own. For example, the sonnets of Shakespeare.
These poems, taken separately, can teach the actor what imagery and
rhyme and metre are about, and how they work. They are among the
richest sources of poetic technique, and demonstrate why this is the
most eloquent and natural way of saying something. Here is CXXIX:

Th' expense of spirit in a waste of shame
Is lust in action; and till action, lust
Is perjur'd, murderous, bloody, full of blame,
Savage, extreme, rude, cruel, not to trust;
Enjoy'd no sooner but despised straight;
Past reason hunted, and no sooner had,
Past reason hated, as a swallow'd bait,
On purpose laid to make the taker mad;
Mad in pursuit, and in possession so;
Had, having, and in quest to have, extreme;
A bliss in proof, — and prov'd, a very woe;
Before a joy propos'd; behind, a dream.

All this the world well knows; yet none knows well
To shun the heaven that leads men to this hell.

An actor would do well to choose individual sonnets, work them over, again and again and again, and then commit them to memory. Also, in the meantime, the actor can work on individual passages from poetic plays, learning the words and rhythms until they are a part of his whole being. For instance, there is Claudio's speech in *MEASURE FOR MEASURE*, or the speech of the Duke of Clarence in *RICHARD III*, or Gertrude's speech about Ophelia in *HAMLET*. And there are many other such speeches which can serve as an excellent workshop for the actor, to help him to understand and feel and experience such things as metre and imagery, assonance and alliteration, metaphor and simile. Once he has acquired a speech of this kind, once he has worked it over and over and over, making it really *his*, then he will also understand why poetry in the theatre is so essential and, indeed, inevitable.

The proper approach to spoken poetry is not, as we may have been taught, an approach based on diction or elocution or articulation or any of the by-products of a speech class. None of these things will be able to sustain spoken poetry for very long. And neither will an approach that just uses the text for a springboard for any sort of personal pyrotechnics. What is needed is intelligence and a willingness on the part of the actor to confront the written text itself, to find out exactly what the poet had in mind and why he chose his particular way of saying it. This takes considerable humility and a profound respect for the text. This means that the actor must stop worrying about the sort of impression he's making onstage and begin to concern himself with the shape and the form of the words he is saying. Only in this way will he commence to achieve some sort of approach to spoken poetry.