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SPOKEN POETRY

Whenever we come up against the problem of poetry in the theatre, we tend to feel a certain vague nostalgia. It is not that our own American actors are incapable of dealing with the extraordinary rhythms and imagery of the Elizabethan theatre—they are, and recent training programs at some of the leading regional repertory companies have demonstrated this. Our actors can do anything that the so-called classical actors can do, and in some cases, they can do it better.

And yet no matter how polished and accomplished our actors may become at the art of spoken poetry, there is still something a bit melancholy about the prospects of our establishing our own verse theatre. Perhaps this is because we feel it is all rather irrelevant to our present day needs; perhaps we miss the reality of what it is all about; or perhaps it is hard for us to realize that at one time, not so long ago, the theatre itself *was* poetry, and there was really no strict distinction between verse as it was written on the page and verse as it was spoken on the stage.

Take, for example, one of the very earliest plays we know, the *Prometheus Bound* of Aeschylus: at the beginning of the play an actor is chained on stage to a crag on the Caucasus—and throughout the play, in this stationary position, he has to rely entirely on his own voice to project the action and the poetry of his situation. This is a remarkable thing, when we think of it; it means that at that time the art of spoken poetry was so well developed that it could dominate a play and make every other dramatic technique subordinate to it. And this was no mere tour de force or example of theatrical primitivism; it is, in fact, the most dramatically effective way of staging the confrontation between Prometheus and a hostile universe. But then, we remember that this was a rather special theatre. It was the product of a civilization that had formed its own vision of the world, and had then objectified that vision in a noble poetry of knowing.

Sometimes it seems that the most we can ever hope to get is a glimpse of this poetry, this rhythmic way of responding to things as they really are. But we know that we are not confined to either the Greek or Elizabethan theatre for this insight; there have been a great many verse theatres throughout history, and each one has had its own peculiar guiding styles and strict conventions.

One such example of a very specialized verse theatre is the seventeenth century French neoclassic theatre of Racine. This is quite frankly a theatre of declamation; it is to be acted in a highly artifical style, by our standards—as if the production were actually a chamber concert, and as if each presentation were a court performance. And the poetry of Racine is written in a meter and convention with which Americans have had little experience—strict alexandrine lines, with absolute caesuras, and rhymed couplets.

When the Institute for Advanced Studies in the Theatre Arts decided to do an American production of Racine's *Phèdre*, it engaged the services of Paul-Émile Deiber, a Sociétaire of the Comédie-Française. Deiber himself had acted in *Phèdre* opposite Marie Bell, and is internationally known for his direction of both Corneille and Racine—when the Comédie comes to New York in 1966, the City Center will see Deiber's production of *Le Cid*.

Deiber insisted that if there were to be an American production of *Phèdre*, it should recreate in English all of the technical requirements of the French text. Consequently, a new English translation was commissioned, in which I tried to provide an English equivalent for the alexandrine line. A glance at the opening speech of the play will show some of the difficulties to be encountered in translation:

HIPPOLYTE: Le dessein en est pris: je pars, cher Théramène,
Et quitte le séjour de l'aimable Trézène.
Dans le doute mortel dont je suis agité,
Je commence à rougir de mon oiseveté.
Depuis plus de six mois eloigné de mon père,
J'ignore le destin d'une tête si chère;
J'ignore jusqu'aux lieux qui le peuvent cacher.

This is the famous alexandrine line—notice in the first line the clear break after the word "pris"; notice also the internal devices of assonance and alliteration, in such word pairs as "pris" and "pars"; "Dans" and "dont" and "commence" and "mon." A French actor would go through these lines very rapidly, because the language itself is so fluid and elemental; furthermore, the French language has a music all its own. It is liquid and lyrical; and so we are not so concerned about whether these lines are written in regular iambics or not. The English language, on the other hand, is inclined to be hard and choppy to the ear; and a regular meter becomes much more important as a unifying principle.

Here are those same opening lines of *Phèdre*, in my own translation, using English alexandrines:

HIPPOLYTE: I have made up my mind: I go, dear Théramène,
and leave the loveliness of staying in Trézène.
Each day I have new doubts, they drive me to distress,

and I must blush with shame to see my idleness.

For more than six long months I've missed my father's face,

I do not know his fate, I do not know the place

that could be capable of keeping such a man.

So much for the translation; the problem was whether the American actors could adapt their speech patterns to this entirely new convention, whether they would observe the caesura, whether they could plan their breathing to accommodate a poetic line that was one foot longer than the blank verse line to which they were accustomed.

The French, of course, have a great advantage over us in the art of spoken poetry. For one thing, they have enjoyed an unbroken theatre tradition ever since the founding of the Comédie-Française in 1680; it is this "House of Molière" which has passed on, from generation to generation of actors, the appropriate techniques in approaching a verse form. One French actor, Robert Manuel, described the continuity of tradition in 1963, in a speech before the Actors Equity of New York, in which he said:

> 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 protegé.

There is, in addition to this continuity of tradition, a strong conviction, which is almost indigenous in the French national character, as to the supremacy of language. This conviction reached its peak in the seventeenth century theatre of Racine; and a contemporary French critic, Thierry Maulnier, looking back on the neoclassic theatre, can write of Racine's plays:

> La communication entre l'acteur tragique et le spectateur s'établit uniquement par le système de signes le plus intense, le plus complet, le plus dépouillé, le plus direct et le moins barbare: par le langage.

(Communication between the tragic actor and the spectator can only be established by the most intense, the most complete, the most naked, the most direct, and the least barbaric of all symbol systems—by language. Language, then, is the chosen communication between the tragic actor and the spectator.)

But it would be a mistake for us to suppose that the French, for all their tradition and conviction, find the conventions of their own verse theatre either easy or natural. Michel St.-Denis writes of the great challenge in his book, *Theatre: The Rediscovery of Style:*

> One must say that it is becoming increasingly difficult for us to find actors capable of playing in the style of Corneille and Racine because the kind of classical measure and discipline it requires goes further and further away from modern life.

And when the Théâtre de France brought its production of Racine's *Andromaque* to New York, Jean-Louis Barrault wrote of his difficulties:

> "The study of the Beautiful is a duel in which the artist cries out in fear before being beaten." This sentence of Baudelaire always comes to mind each time I help my fellow actors tackle one of Racine's works. How indeed not to cry out in fear at the very moment that one assumes responsibility for such perfection?—As the Alexandrines unroll, the actor sees as many problems facing him as there are dials on the instrument panel of a jet airplane.
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> All the patchwork of the rhythms: 12; 6 and 6; 3 and 9; 3 times 4; 2, 8 and 2, etc. The place to breathe. The number of accents; the interplay of the long and the short vowels; the pitfall of inversions. Punctuation—The choice of liasons—The famous mute e! The different placing of the voice, depending on whether the voice "speaks" or "listens," especially in the climactic moments of the monologues—Controlled acting and spontaneous acting—The different sorts of Alexandrines: the simple Alexandrine, the artificially constructed Alexandrine, perfect harmony, the period, recitative—The respiration of the scenes—The more or less lyrical outpourings of the soul and of the inspiration—The contraction of the pianissimi—The sustaining of the medium volume—The decontraction of cries.

This is enough, I think, to indicate the incredible complexity of the undertaking, even for the French. Consider now the difficulties encountered by an American company, which had never worked in the alexandrine line before.

The professional actors who studied under Paul-Émile Deiber at IASTA included such talented performers as Beatrice Straight (Phèdre), Mildred Dunnock (Oenone), and Michael Durrell (Hippolyte). Jeff David, who played the part of Theseus, comments on the rehearsal period of *Phèdre,* and the reason why Americans find any form of verse theatre difficult:

> Deiber was confronted with a cast which had never been concerned with musicality and poesy in a play, both at the same time. To be sure, there are a lot of Shakespearean actors in this company, but that's something else. Deiber had to acquaint us with a verse form, plus a style of not playing for the meaning of each word, but for a totality. This is essentially a foreign thing for Americans.
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> You must remember that our culture is made up of the comfort-seeker, the pill-taker, and people who weigh success from the point of view of material values. And this breeds a certain kind of laziness in an actor. Whereas actually an actor must be all things, he must be able to do anything—he must be an athlete, he may even have to be an acrobat. But the only concept of

acting we get here is a moment by moment regurgitation of meaning. And that's not enough. The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our training, but in our emotional attitude towards life.

There were generally two major obstacles in the speaking of the alexandrine lines; first, because of the strangeness associated with the longer sweep of the individual lines, the actors tended to hit the end rhymes excessively; and secondly, occasionally an actor would drop two syllables from a line, to form the more familiar pentameter length. I am particularly aware of these two weaknesses because, as the translator, I was listening attentively to every line; I doubt if many people in the audiences noticed them. Generally, the actors were able to relax into the rhythms of the alexandrines, after an initial period of bafflement, and then they began to discover, intuitively, their own relationship to this new verse form.

And the audiences sensed the achievement. Jean-Jacques Gautier, the feared critic of the French newspaper *Le Figaro,* came by the IASTA theatre and had nothing but admiration for the American production; and before his return to Paris, Deiber pronounced the New York *Phèdre* "an extraordinary production . . . an exceptional occurrence. . . ." After several weeks of workshop performance in New York, the company traveled to Washington and presented the play at the Library of Congress, and then returned to New York, where plans are currently underway for an off-Broadway production of the play, in the early part of 1966.

I think from this experience, we can return to our discussion of the problem of verse theatre generally, and see something about the proper approach to spoken poetry. Certainly it is not, as we may have been taught, an approach that is based on diction or elocution or articulation or any of the other by-products of a speech class—not that these things are not important; they are, but they will not be able to sustain spoken poetry for very long. And neither will an approach that simply uses the text as a springboard for any sort of personal pyrotechnics. What is needed, most of all, is intelligence, and a willingness on the part of the actor to confront the written text itself, to find out exactly what it is the poet had in mind, and why he chose this particular way of saying it. All of this takes a great deal of humility, a rethinking of our whole heritage of conventions, and a profound respect for the text. And it means that the actor must stop worrying about the sort of impression he's making up there on stage, and begin to concern himself with the shape and the form of the words and the rhythms he is supposed to embody.

As I said at the outset, whenever we come up against the problem of poetry in the theatre, we tend to feel a certain vague nostalgia. We will probably not live to see the day when we have evolved our own verse theatre, and that is too bad. But we can do a great deal towards coordinating the arts of poetry and dramatics, and discovering the ways in which these two art forms can complement each other and, eventually, become one and the same art form.

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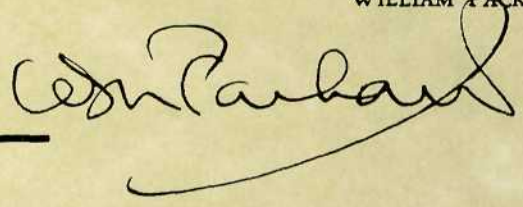

William Packard currently teaches poetry and theatre at New York University, Cooper Union, and Hofstra University. His new English version of Racine's *Phèdre* opened offBroadway in February, 1966, with Beatrice Straight and Mildred Dunnock, had a successful New York run, and then toured England, playing in London and at the Dartington Arts Festival in Devon. The translation is published in America by Samuel French.