The Theater: *New Dramatic Poets Seek Contemporary Verse Form*

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By WILLIAM PACKARD

Next week the New York City Center will present a new production of Maxwell Anderson's "Elizabeth the Queen," with Judith Anderson and Donald Davis. This play is a study of a Renaissance struggle for power and love, and it might be just another historical drama were it not for one rather remarkable feature: It is a verse play.

And although Maxwell Anderson wrote in a traditional form—a loose blank verse which is vaguely Shakespearean—his poetry is sometimes soaring, and sometimes quite poignant and moving, as in this speech in which Elizabeth chides her rebel Lord Essex:

Oh, then, I'm old, I'm old!
I could be young with you, but now I'm old.
I know now how it will be without you. The sun
Will be empty and circle round an empty earth . . .
And I will be queen of emptiness and death . . .
Why could you not have loved me enough to give me
Your love and let me keep as I was?

Anderson wrote a good many verse plays —among them "High Tor," "Anne of the Thousand Days," and "Lost in the Stars"— but he will probably be remembered for "Winterset," a play about social justice which was written in the shadow of the Sacco-Vanzetti conviction in 1920. "Winterset" is highly derivative drama, with echoes of "Hamlet" and "King Lear" and "Romeo and Juliet," but it does contain some stirring verse:

On this star,
in this star-adventure, knowing not
what the fires mean to right and left, nor whether
a meaning was intended or presumed,
man can stand up, and look out blind, and say:
in all these turning lights I find no clue,
only a masterless night, and in my blood
no certain answer, yet is my mind my own,
yet is my heart a cry toward something dim
in distance, which is higher than I am
and makes me emperor of the endless dark
even in seeking! . . .

During the last half century, other playwrights have also been working to create a modern verse theater; for example, there is what we might call "regional poetic drama." In Ireland, Yeats and Synge and Sean O'Casey wrote such lyrical plays as "Purgatory," "Playboy of the Western World," and "Juno and the Paycock." In Spain, Garcia Lorca adapted Andalusian folklore and imagery for his poetic plays, "Blood Wedding," "Yerma," and "The House of Bernarda Alba." And in India, Rabindranath Tagore drew on the elements of India dance-drama for such plays as "King of the Dark Chamber."

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In addition, some of our leading poets have given us verse translations of poetic drama. Ezra Pound, Robinson Jeffers, Christopher Fry, Richard Wilbur, Robert Lowell and W. S. Merwin have all achieved notable success in their adaptations of classical and contemporary verse drama from other languages.

Original Verse for Plays

And finally, a great many of our established poets have felt the lure of writing original verse plays for the theater. Robert Frost wrote two chamber plays, "A Mask of Reason" and "A Mask of Mercy"; W. H. Auden collaborated with Christopher Isherwood on "The Ascent of F-6" and "The Dog Beneath the Skin"; and E. E. Cummings wrote the allegorical verse plays, "Him" and "Santa Claus." And there has been other work written for the theater by such poets as Edna St. Vincent Millay, Wallace Stevens, Richard Eberhart, Mark Van Doren, Allen Tate, Robert Lowell, Kenneth Rexroth and William Carlos Williams.

But the problem of creating a contemporary verse theater still remains. Obviously it isn't as easy as a poet's wandering into a theater and deciding to write a play. It requires a good deal more than this, to be able to reflect the tensions and triumphs of our time, in dramatic poetry which will speak for us in the middle of the 20th Century. T. S. Eliot defined the technical difficulty in "A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry": "We must find a new form of verse which shall be as satisfactory for us as blank verse was for the Elizabethans."

Eliot himself tried to achieve just such a contemporary verse form in his own poetic plays. "Murder in the Cathedral," a history play written for the Canterbury Festival in 1935, concerns the martyrdom of Thomas a Becket, who has opposed the will of King Henry II. Eliot has Becket express himself in a cryptic and mystical verse which explores the nature of action and sacrifice:

Peace. And let them be, in their exaltation.
They speak better than they know, and beyond your understanding.
They know and do not know, what it is to act or suffer.
They know and do not know, that acting is suffering
And suffering is action. Neither does the actor suffer
Nor the patient act. But both are fixed
In an eternal action, an eternal patience
To which all must consent that it may be willed
And which all must suffer that they may will it,
That the pattern may subsist, for the pattern is the action
And the suffering, that the wheel may turn and still
Be forever still.

Eliot went on to write "The Family Reunion" (1939), but it was not until "The Cocktail Party" (1950) that Eliot discovered his

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own modern form of dramatic poetry, and this discovery was enlarged upon in his later plays, "The Confidential Clerk" (1954) and "The Elder Statesman" (1958).

Other verse dramatists have also tried to discover a truly contemporary verse form. Christopher Fry stressed the quality of verbal intoxication in his work; he once commented that "Poetry in the theater is the action of listening." And he demonstrated his agility with language in such plays as "A Sleep of Prisoners," "Venus Observed," and "The Dark is Light Enough." His plays were enormously popular in England just after the second world war, partly because they enjoyed the services of some of the greatest actors of our time: Laurence Olivier, John Gielgud, Richard Burton, Paul Scofield, Edith Evans and Pamela Brown.

Fry's poetry is baroque, full of elaborate conceits and metaphors, and sometimes it is extraordinarily difficult to unravel—as in these lines from "The Lady's Not for Burning":

Just see me
As I am, me like a perambulating
Vegetable, patched with inconsequential
Hair, looking out of two small jellies for
the means
Of life, balanced on folding bones, my
sex
No beauty but a blemish to be hidden
Behind judicious rags, driven and
scorched
By boomerang rages and lunacies which
never
Touch the accqmmodating artichoke
Or the seraphic strawberry beaming in
its bed . . .

Trials of Job

An American poet, Archibald MacLeish, wrote a modern allegory of suffering and justification in "J.B." The play recreates the trials of Job—whose family and flesh are ruined, who is insulted by the half-truths of his worldly Comforters, and who finally kneels naked before a universe of indifference and accident. J.B., as Job, is ultimately alone, pleading with an impossible God for some sort of reason behind all of his sufferings. At this moment, when man becomes "an agony of earnestness," he calls a question to the skies:

I sit here
Such as you see me. In my soul
I suffer what you guess I suffer.
Tell me the wickedness that justifies it.
Shall I repent of sins I have not
Sinned to understand it? Till I
Die I will not violate my integrity.

God answers Job out of the whirlwind, rebuking the very question on his lips, and leaving Job—the modern J.B.—to discover the meaning of existence within himself, within "the coals of the heart," by whose warmth and light all human faith is kindled into life. "J.B." is written in free verse, so that the individual lines of poetry can find their own appropriate form—and in this sense, perhaps the play is closer to being a truly contemporary verse drama.

One of the most successful attempts at poetic drama in our time is "Under Milkwood," by Dylan Thomas. A disorganized, bawdy and sprawling play for voices, this verse play is nonetheless outstanding because of its very special lilt and exaltation which seem to lift its characters to the height of lyricism, as in the opening section:

It is Spring, moonless night in the small
town, starless
and bible-black, the cobblestreets silent
and the hunched,
courters'-and-rabbits' wood limping in-
visible down to the
sloeblack, slow, black, crowblack, fish-
ingboat-bobbing sea.

As the play unfolds, we meet the inhabitants of the tiny Welsh town of Llareggub—Mog Edwards, Mrs. Ogmore-Pritchard, Organ Morgan, Mrs. Willy Nilly, Bessie Bighead, Reverend Eli Jenkins, Nogood Boyo, and Sinbad Sailors. And the raucous, hearty poetry of Dylan Thomas runs the gamut from nursery rhymes to parlor squabbles to the naughty, haunting refrain of Polly Garter:

O Tom Dick and Harry were three fine
men
And I'll never have such loving again
But little Willy Wee who took me on his
knee
Little Willy Wee was the man for me . . .

Today we have a new theater, and with it, a new interest in the possibilities of poetic drama. One recent example is "The Persecution and Assassination of Jean-Paul Marat as Performed by the Inmates of the Asylum of Charenton Under the Direction of the Marquis de Sade," by Peter Weiss. The play was translated by Geoffrey Skelton, and set into a brilliant verse adaptation by Adrian Mitchell.

Audience Appalled

"Marat-Sade" was a demonstration of the principles of the so-called "Theater of Cruelty," and audiences were so appalled and fascinated by the bizarre madness being acted out on stage, that few realized the play itself was in loose rhymed couplets. The verse is ingenuous, unliterary and curiously authentic. In the beginning of the play, the characters are introduced, and the part of Marat is assigned:

To act this most important role we chose
a lucky paranoic one of those
who've made unprecedented strides since
we
introduced them to hydrotherapy

The actors proceed with their outlandish play within a play, and the production approaches total theater—there are songs, tableaux, tortures, and throughout the play one persistent refrain:

Marat we're poor and the poor stay poor
Marat don't make us wait any more
We want our rights and we don't care
how
We want our revolution NOW.

Poetic drama in our time is still an extremely difficult and challenging enterprise—partly because it is considered commercially suspect, and partly because our theater is committed to psychological realism, a style which does not easily find its form in memorable verse. And yet we know that the impulse to create our own verse theater will always be with us. It is inevitable. As 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." And Eliot concludes: "The craving for poetic drama is permanent in human nature."