

Currents in Twentieth-Century Verse Drama

1963

Thesis submitted for Honors in English
May 1, 1963
Andrew Edson Adelson

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neither given nor received aid
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Verse drama is, unfortunately, a neglected form of modern literature; there have been so few contemporary plays written in verse that the appellation "verse drama" is quite apt to be confused with other terms which pertain to related art forms. These commonly employed terms are poetic drama, dramatic verse, and dramatic poetry. All of them have different meanings; poetic drama has quite another connotation than verse drama. It will be necessary, before any discussion of playwrights who write in verse, to define as clearly as possible the term verse drama as opposed to other terms so often mistakenly applied to the genre. Let me state at the outset that I never hope to set anything more than arbitrary limits; like any form of art, its very being defies exact description. Thus, the nature of verse drama is impossible to pin down to a specific set of rules as one might, for instance, make rules for a game. This "game" is seen differently by each playwright; there is really no model twentieth-century verse drama. With these limitations in mind, then, let us examine the characteristics in general which mark contemporary plays written in verse.

The major distinction which must be made is between poetic drama and verse drama. Poetic drama refers to plays in both verse and prose, and it may also refer to other forms: films are often labeled poetic dramas. The plays of Shaw, Synge, and Ibsen are sometimes described as

"poetic," even though these works are written in prose. Verse drama applies specifically to the theatre; as employed in this paper, it refers to plays written in verse intended for the stage. Juxtaposed to poetic drama, verse drama is completely neutral in meaning; that is, it is not necessarily a term of approbation and implies nothing about the quality of the play.

Ibsen, often called the "father" of modern drama, is the playwright who actually least contributed to the advancement of modern verse drama. Ibsen wanted to bring his social dramas close to "reality"; thus, many of his plays are prosaic, with poetry being sacrificed for realism. Note a typical passage from The Wild Duck:

Ekdal: Hialmar!

Hialmar: Well?

Ekdal: Afraid we shall have to move the water-trough, after all.

Hialmar: What else have I been saying all along?

Ekdal: H'm-h'm-h'm.

Hialmar: What do you want?

Hedvig: I only wanted to come in beside you, father.

Hialmar: What makes you go prying around like that? Perhaps you are told off to watch me.

Hedvig: No, no.

Hialmar: What is your mother doing out there?

Hedvig: Oh, mother's in the middle of making the herring-salad. Isn't there any little thing I could help you with, father?¹

Although Ibsen's imitators did not need to sacrifice poetry, they did and the result was an almost complete

¹ Henrik Ibsen, The Wild Duck, trans. Mrs. Francis E. Archer: Representative Modern Dramas, ed. Charles Huntington Whitman (New York, 1936), p. 32. Although this is a translated text, Ibsen would presumably be little more poetic in the original.

stifling of verse drama in the twentieth century. John Millington Synge is one of the few early twentieth-century playwrights whose work can actually be called "poetic," even though he writes in prose:

Maurya: It's little the like of him knows of the sea.... Bartley will be lost now, and let you call in Eamon, and make me a good coffin out of the white boards, for I won't live after them. I've had a husband, and a husband's father, and six sons in this house - six fine men, though it was a hard birth I had with every one of them and they coming to the world - and some of them were found and some of them were not found, but they're gone now the lot of them.... There were Stephen, and Shawn, were lost in the great wind, and found after in the Bay of Gregory of the Golden Mouth, and carried up the two of them on the one plank, and in by that door.

Nora: Did you hear that, Cathleen? Did you hear a noise in the northeast?

Cathleen: There's some one after crying out by the seashore.

Maurya: (continues without hearing anything) There was Sheamus and his father again, were lost in a dark night, and not a stick or sign was seen of them when the sun went up. There was Patch after was drowned out of a curagh that turned over. I was sitting here with Bartley, and he a baby, lying on my two knees, and I seen two women, and three women, and four women coming in, and they crossing themselves, and not saying a word. I looked out then, and there were men coming after them, and they holding a thing in the half of a red sail, and water dripping out of it - it was a dry day, Nora - and leaving a track to the door.²

The exotic language and setting of his plays give them an appeal which adds to its highly romantic and lyrical nature.

²John Millington Synge, Riders to the Sea: Representative Modern Dramas, p. 781. See Ronald Peacock, The Poet in the Theatre (New York, 1960), p. 110: "In Riders To the Sea, the tragic sense emanates entirely from elemental nature. Its effect of impersonality is due to the dramatic form; its inspiration is largely lyrical."

The poetic dramatists are rare, but even more rare are playwrights who write acceptable verse drama. There are only a few in this century whose work has gained some repute and who have a degree of popular appeal: Yeats, Eliot, Auden and Isherwood, Maxwell Anderson, Fry, MacLeish, and Eberhart being the most notable.

The use of poetry for plays began with the ancient Greek drama, growing out of traditions established by the epic and lyric poets. With Greek drama, of course, we have the use of the chorus which comments upon the action - a convention still sometimes employed today. It is often said that no one has been able to equal the powerful poetry of the great Greek dramatists (with, perhaps, the exception of Shakespeare); I do not intend to debate this here, but the plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides are still major audience attractions today. In the Middle Ages, we find miracle and mystery plays written in verse with elaborate rhyme schemes (The Wakefield Noah, Second Shepherds' Play, Everyman). Moving toward the Golden Age of Elizabethan drama, we find Kyd's Spanish Tragedy written in unrhymed iambic pentameter. Then Shakespeare began writing plays with lasting appeal in blank verse, often mixing prose and verse in his works. From the prose comic scenes of Shakespeare, occurring side by side with some of his most magnificent poetry, it was but a move away to Restoration and eighteenth-century prose comedies. John Dryden, for example,

wrote comedies in prose (Marriage-a-la-mode) and tragedies in verse (Aurengzebe). But even the concept of writing drame serieuse in verse declined, and it became the style to write all plays in prose. We shall see in a moment how the Romantic poets took a great interest in the theatre, leaving us several plays written in verse. By the end of the nineteenth century, "the poet in the theatre" was virtually non-existent; the growing commercialism of the theatre in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries hastened the already rapid demise of verse drama. This led to several reactions, which we have only hinted at in the first pages of this paper. Some poets began to write so-called "closet dramas" which consisted of pure poetry not intended for production; the verse and not the drama was naturally the prime consideration of the nineteenth-century poets. Other playwrights, recognizing the gap between what had originally comprised a good play and what went into a play in modern times, attempted to effect a reconciliation. Thus, we have "verse drama" which tries in some manner to imitate everyday speech (Eliot) and "poetic drama" which is best reflected in the works of Synge and Shaw.

On the continent, the great rise of the theatre in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries with Goethe and Schiller coupled with the tide of romanticism led to a flurry of poetic drama in Europe. As in England and America, however, this practice had fairly well died

by the end of the nineteenth century. Important to our study are two playwrights working at the beginning of the twentieth century: Strindberg (The Dream Play, The Dance of Death), and Maeterlinck (Pélléas and Mélisande) - their work represents a symbolistic, mystical trend that was soon to be bodied forth in the work of Yeats.

The Romantic and Victorian poets in nineteenth-century England tried their hand at playwrighting, but most of these men lacked any real theatrical skill. The poets joined with leading actors of the day such as Charles Kean and Macready in presenting a widely variegated number of verse dramas. Byron's Werner (finished 1822, produced 1830), Browning's A Blot in the 'Scutcheon (1840, 1843), Shelley's The Cenci (1819, 1886), and Tennyson's Becket (1879, 1893) were the best among the plays written, but they never gained any real popularity. The rhetorical dramas of James Sheridan Knowles and Sir Edward Bulwer-Lytton's The Lady of Lyons (1838) and Richelieu (1839) were much more frequently performed than the plays of the major poets of the century. The Scottish poet John Davidson's plays have gone unproduced; works such as Bruce (1886) contain some excellent poetry. It has been possible to produce only portions of Thomas Hardy's great epic, The Dynasts (published 1904-1908).

Stephen Phillips, probably the most successful combination of poet and dramatist of his time, initiated a brief revival of blank verse in London commercial theatre

with Herod (1900), Ulysses (1902), and Paolo and Francesca (1902). But he was also the last of the poetic dramatists in the tradition of the nineteenth century, a century which had seen a gradual estrangement of verse drama from the main body of plays written for the theatre.

At the very beginning of the twentieth century, verse drama began to take on a more experimental tone; the verse dramatists began to think in terms of a theatre of their own. New developments came about under widely diverse influences: the plays of Ibsen, the rise of realism, the writings of the French symbolist poets, and the Japanese Nō drama. William Butler Yeats is the first great verse dramatist in the twentieth century, and he was probably influenced by all of the above-mentioned factors. The Nō drama in particular is an obvious influence:

The Noh plays provided Yeats with three things: (a) a theatre form of proved validity, a means of organising and therefore of realising his material, a means of perceiving the forms and shapes latent in it; (b) a way of undercutting the mere representation of the surface of life (though in this there is loss as well as gain); and (c) an elaborate store of non-verbal expression which could liberate the mind from the will by the ritual nature of its experience.³

With Yeats, experimentation begins not only in form but in subject matter. All of the plays have an aura of mystery and supernaturalism; Yeats wrote in direct

³Denis Donoghue, The Third Voice: Modern British and American Verse Drama (Princeton, 1959), p. 54.

opposition to the realistic trend of the time. Compare this passage from Hauptmann's naturalistic The Weavers:

Dreissiger: It was nothing serious. The boy is all right again. But all the same it's a disgrace. The child's so weak that a puff of wind would blow him over. How people, how any parents can be so thoughtless is what passes my comprehension. Loading him with too heavy pieces of fustian to carry good six miles! No one would believe it that hadn't seen it.⁴

to the tone of the old man's speech in Purgatory:

Study that tree.
It stands there like a purified soul,
All cold, sweet, glistening light.
Dear mother, the window is dark again,
But you are in the light because
I finished all that consequence.
I killed that lad because he had grown up
He would have struck a woman's fancy,
Begot, and passed the pollution on.

I am a wretched foul old man
And therefore harmless. When I have stuck
This old jack-knife into a sod
And pulled it out all bright again,
And picked up all that money that he dropped,
I'll to a distant place, and there
Tell my old jokes among new men.⁵

In spite of the fact that the two passages have no common subject, the difference in tone and purpose between the two playwrights should be quite obvious. Yeats disregards logical plan and characterization and seems to contradict violently all that was going on about him in the theatre. In plays such as The Cat and the Moon and

⁴Gerhart Hauptmann, The Weavers, trans. Mary Morison: Representative Modern Dramas, p. 110.

⁵William Butler Yeats, Purgatory: The Modern Theatre, ed. Eric Bentley (Garden City, N.Y., 1955), p. 233.

The Dreaming of the Bones Yeats mingles the real and the unreal so that action comes to have the force of symbol, and conversely symbol assumes sometimes the character of action. Note the beginning of The Cat and the Moon:

The cat went here and there
 And the moon spun round like a top,
 And the nearest kin of the moon,
 The creeping cat, looked up.
 Black Minnaloushe stared at the moon,
 For, wander and wail as he would,
 The pure cold light in the sky
 Troubled his animal blood.⁶

The song describes a landscape and the relation of the cat and the moon. Beyond this, there is a symbolical reference (the moon symbolized the phases of the soul's life for Yeats) that intensifies the drama of the beggars and the saint. Finally, there is a dramatic impact from the mystical effect of the moon upon the cat. Yeats may be considered the forerunner of modern verse drama; his use of new subjects becomes the prototype for work that is done later in this century. Yeats makes the point of observation the life of the soul and spiritual powers, thus having a progression from inward to outward, from the symbolical to the actual. A Full Moon in March is usually considered Yeats' best play, but it is imperfect because the playwright by this time (1930's) had ceased to be a great theatre poet. Yet it, like all his other plays, is germane to the modern dilemma: The questioning of the existence of the spiritual world is the theme and

⁶William Butler Yeats, The Cat and the Moon: Collected Plays (London, 1952), p. 451.

the greatest problems in life are named - by so doing, they are at least temporarily exorcised.

* * * * *

The body of this paper will deal with four major verse dramatists in the twentieth century: T. S. Eliot, Maxwell Anderson, Archibald MacLeish, and Christopher Fry. These figures have been chosen somewhat arbitrarily, probably more on the basis of their critical reputations than anything else. They are well worth our attention, for theirs are the only verse dramas which have received extensive production in the twentieth century. The purpose of the following sections is multiple: to show the various directions contemporary verse drama has taken, to point up the merits of verse drama as opposed to prose, and finally to show that there is a place and a need for verse drama in today's theatre.

* * * * *

T. S. Eliot has been among the most successful of the playwrights who have undertaken to revitalize a genre which has been more or less in disuse since the Restoration. His work, moreover, is certainly the most important of the modern verse dramatists, because it "signals the rebirth of English dramatic poetry."⁷ Eliot makes a significant effort to restore the relationship of the poet to the theatre.

Eliot had written several essays about poetic drama, and he had experimented with the form before he began to write Murder in the Cathedral, his first verse drama.⁸ For the accomplished poet, it was a comparatively easy step from the characters of Sweeney and Prufrock to the creation of Archbishop Becket and Harry Lord Monchensey. The difficulty was in finding a workable verse that actors could handle and which audiences could understand and

⁷E. Martin Browne, "The Dramatic Verse of T. S. Eliot," T. S. Eliot: A Symposium, compiled by Richard March and Tambimuttu (Chicago, 1949), p. 207.

⁸Eliot had already written two dramatic fragments of Sweeney Agonistes and The Rock; in the latter, the verse is limited entirely to the chorus.

appreciate. Long convinced that all great poetry was dramatic, Eliot set about adapting his poetic talents to the very special problems of the stage. The two main problems were the need for the development of a natural speech-rhythm and the power to express individual character. Eliot found the answer to the question of speech-rhythm in The Rock:

First, the iambic foot of Shakespearean tradition is given up: the stress shifts to the beginning of the foot, in accordance with the change that has come over English speech. This trochaic-cum-dactylic foot is of course no more rigidly adhered to than was the iambic in Shakespeare's later plays. The verse is infinitely varied, with many inverted feet: but the rhythm is strongly maintained. The other change is a final freeing of the verse from the counting of syllables....Eliot has broken this "blank verse" tradition....He has gone back to the basis...of a fixed number of stresses in the line without any fixed number of syllables.⁹

In his next dramatic work, Eliot was to face the problem of characterization.

Murder in the Cathedral was written for the Canterbury Festival of June, 1935. The play, dealing with the murder of Archbishop Thomas a Becket in 1170, is by far the most famous of Eliot's verse dramas. Most critics by now agree that the play is not about a "murder mystery" but about the spiritual state of a martyr facing death. Hugh Kenner finds three prominent motifs in the drama:

⁹Browne, "Dramatic Verse of Eliot," pp. 197-198.

the change in the orientation of Becket's will, the strife between secularism and the will of God, and the death of a valiant man.¹⁰ It is important to note that although Eliot was primarily concerned with the religious and moral content of the play, the characters are still impressive as individuals. They are marked by the verse they speak; note the difference between the first and fourth tempters:

The easy man lives to eat the best dinners.
Take a friend's advice. Leave well alone,
Or your goose may be cooked and eaten to the bone.¹¹

and

You know and do not know, what it is to act or
suffer.
You know and do not know, that acting is suffering,
And suffering action. Neither does the actor
suffer
Nor the patient act.¹²

The rather sing-songy quality of the first passage, emphasized by the rhyme of "alone" and "bone," points up the simple nature of the first tempter's proposal. In spite of the slight caesura in the second line, all three lines may be spoken without a pause. The caesuras become more important in the second passage and give added emphasis to the subtleness of the last temptation. The length of the lines, the diction, and the involuted language all give notice that the fourth tempter is much more

¹⁰Hugh Kenner, The Invisible Poet: T.S. Eliot(New York, 1959), p. 285.

¹¹T. S. Eliot, Murder in the Cathedral(New York, 1936), p. 25.

¹²Ibid., p. 40.

perceptive and shrewd than the first. The chorus of women in the play serves much the same function as the chorus did in Greek tragedy; that is, it acts as intermediary between the actors and the audience, and it also intensifies the action of the play.

Eliot's great preoccupation is with the isolation of the individual in society; Becket stands alone in Murder in the Cathedral, much like Conrad's isolato. His fear, that of doing the right thing for the wrong reason, is a very real one which is not resolved until just before his death. The wrong reason, of course, would be self-sacrifice merely for the sake of martyrdom; Becket submits finally to the will of God, and in his death influences the lives of others. The women of the chorus, like the Archbishop, sees the necessity of submission; like him, they undergo a form of purification. Again, we must remember that the play is important as verse drama, not merely as a religious play. Eliot views it as an ordinary drama, for his concern is not only with the Church, but with the whole fabric of society. It is not surprising that Eliot having already dealt with a specialized historical theme in Murder in the Cathedral put his next play in a contemporary setting.¹³

¹³ David E. Jones, The Plays of T. S. Eliot (London, 1960), pp. 50-82. See also: F. O. Matthiessen, The Achievement of T. S. Eliot (New York, 1958), pp. 155-165; and D. E. S. Maxwell, The Poetry of T. S. Eliot (New York, 1961), pp. 181-189.

In 1939, Eliot finished The Family Reunion, his first full-length play in a modern setting. In this play, the author devised the verse form that he has used more or less predominantly in all of his later dramas. This form is a line of varying length with three stresses, a caesura coming after the first or second stress. Much more than Murder in the Cathedral, this play shows the facility with which verse may be utilized to aid in characterization and dramatic tension. This is verse in the true dramatic sense; while the dialogue may seem at times loosely constructed, there is a precise musical rhythm apparent throughout the play:

Lines with a clear rhythmic accent but definite syllable value give the poet a great part of his effect through their suppleness and variety of cadence. But the rhythm of words is not independent of their meaning, and the musical effect is greatest where spiritual temper is detached forcefully but without strain amidst the characteristic symbols⁴ and thoughts of a modern environment.

The Family Reunion provides the author with the opportunity to present in a stylized manner the natural language of everyday conversation.

The Family Reunion is also notable for its remarkable admixture of Christian symbolism and pagan rite in the peaceful setting of an English country home. Like the first play, two different worlds are depicted: the secular world of Amy, Gerald, Charles, Violet, and Ivy,

¹⁴Peacock, Poet in the Theatre, p. 24.

and the spiritual sphere represented solely by Harry. Harry becomes a Christ figure who goes away to atone for the sins of others; he is totally apart from the "waste-land" in which the rest of the family lives. In his views of sin and redemption, of assumption of guilt, Eliot is "classicist and Catholic."¹⁵ The Family Reunion gives voice to non-Christian experience; this experience is put aside as not being adequate to meet the demands of the contemporary world. As an attempt to explore a complex spiritual state and to communicate this experience to the audience, the play is unique in twentieth-century drama.¹⁶

As Eliot's knowledge of the stage increased, his playwrighting technique naturally improved. Freeing himself of the complex images of his last play (which no audience could be expected to grasp completely), he wrote The Cocktail Party. Here Eliot has given up his hope for the revival of the earlier verse drama conventions, almost entirely omitting the elements of ritual and choric odes so prominent in the first two plays. Apparently Eliot found these devices not conducive to reception by modern audiences, and he eliminated them. The verse

¹⁵Tom F. Driver, "Eliot in Transit," Christian Century, LXXV (November 26, 1958), p. 1382.

¹⁶Eliot, The Family Reunion (New York, 1939). See Jones, Plays, pp. 82-123; Peacock, Poet in the Theatre, pp. 3-15; Grover Smith, Jr., T. S. Eliot's Poetry and Plays (Chicago, 1956), pp. 196-214.

is more flexible, although it adheres to the form of three stresses, with the caesura after the first or second stress. In order to combat the prejudice against verse drama, Eliot deliberately brought his verse near to prose; he did not want the audience to be aware of the medium. This development of a flexible, lucid verse based very closely on everyday speech yet capable of the greatest precision, is definitely an important step forward for the proponents of verse drama:

Reilly: Now, I want to point out to both of you
How much you have in common. Indeed, I consider
That you are exceptionally well-suited to each other.
Mr. Chamberlayne, when you thought your wife had
left you,
You discovered, to your surprise and consternation,
That you were not really in love with Miss Cople-
stone...¹⁷

The poetry is intensified as the play progresses, probing the very heart of Eliot's themes. Now there are two arguments which may be forwarded about the above passage. The first would be that Eliot has made an almost unforgiveable sacrifice of artistic integrity by so altering his verse that it is nearly indistinguishable from prose. A compromise of this sort makes the play neither verse nor prose, but a form which lies somewhere in between. The second argument, in answer to the first, would state simply that Eliot has hit upon the only form which verse drama can take in the twentieth century. He has com- pro-

¹⁷T. S. Eliot, The Cocktail Party (New York, 1950), p. 123.

mised only in the sense that he has made his work more acceptable to the modern audience. It would be patently absurd for a contemporary playwright to write plays that he knew would never be produced - or if they were produced, would never be fully grasped by the audience.

In the first two plays, the focus of attention was basically upon the exceptional character. In The Cocktail Party the unexceptional group receives the attention; Celia has already met her fate by the beginning of the third act. The emphasis shifts to the salvation of the group rather than of the individual - this group is led by Edward and Lavinia. The play has many flaws, the most important being the fact that almost all the crises are resolved before the beginning of the third act. It is notable, however, for its advancement of the case for verse drama by the invention of verse that consciously approaches prose and yet is still poetry (see above). Far more than the preceding plays, The Cocktail Party manages to achieve an important balance between emphasis upon meaning and theatrical effectiveness.¹⁸

With the completion of his next play, The Confidential Clerk, Eliot finished the elaboration of a form which is his own invention, that of "serious farce."¹⁹ The chief

¹⁸Information for this section was taken from Jones, The Plays of Eliot, pp. 124-155. See also Donoghue, Third Voice, pp. 114-137; and Kenner, Invisible Poet, pp. 327-342.

¹⁹We are confronted with much the same ambiguous terminology with the so-called "absurd" playwrights. The plays of such men as Becket, Ionesco, and Adamov are often called "tragic farces."

criticism of this play has been that "Eliot sacrificed poetry even more ruthlessly than in The Cocktail Party."²⁰ I think that this criticism is basically unfounded; after reading several pages, the reader should realize what has happened to the verse. That is, Eliot has evolved what seems to him to be the most viable level of union between poetry and drama. Thus, the poetry in The Confidential Clerk comes closer to the normal patterns of everyday speech than in any of the previous plays:

Lucasta: Yes, Eggy, will you break the sad news to Claude?

Meanwhile, you'll have to raid the till for me. I'm starving.

Kaghan: I've just given her lunch. The problem with Lucasta.

Is how to keep her fed between meals.

Lucasta: B., you're a beast. I've a very small appetite.

But the point is, that I'm penniless.²¹

A closer look at the passage will reveal that Eliot has forged a verse line which adheres to his own rule of three stresses and at the same time is easily spoken and understood. In fact, the play is the most easily comprehended of Eliot's dramas, in spite of its delightfully complicated plot; it is a modern play in tune with both the actors and the audience. To its credit, the play is unlike the others in that there is no one character who monopolizes the play from the standpoint of wisdom or virtue. There is more communication between the characters

²⁰Smith, Eliot's Poetry and Plays, p. 228.

²¹T. S. Eliot, The Confidential Clerk (New York, 1954), p. 25.

even though they exist on different levels of spiritual perception. Here the exceptional person (Colby) is closely oriented to the pattern of ordinary life; his presence "has made possible a more fruitful communal life."²² The ending of the play must be read as optimistic, that a realistic approach to the meaning of existence can to some degree atone for one's past experiences.²³

Eliot's most recent play, The Elder Statesman (1958), again closely resembles a naturalistic prose drama. Here we find Eliot dealing with the themes that have preoccupied most playwrights in the past ten years: the inability of individuals to communicate with each other and the puzzling fact of human existence. The exceptional personality has by now disappeared; there is no great discrepancy between the experience of the hero and that of the other characters. Not particularly distinguished as a major drama, The Elder Statesman is nonetheless important as another contribution to the genre of verse drama. Eliot has perfected his stylization of everyday speech; his use of verse as a means of characterization is more evident here than in any of the other plays. It ranges from the short lines of the mysterious Gomez:

Ah, the pre-arranged interruption
To terminate the unwelcome intrusion
Of the visitor in financial distress.
Well, I shan't keep you long, though I dare say

²²Jones, The Plays of Eliot, p. 167.

²³John Gassner, Masters of the Drama (New York, 1954), pp. 729-731. See also Jones, Plays of Eliot, pp. 155-179; and Smith, Eliot's Poetry and Plays, pp. 228-243.

your caller

Could hang on for another quarter of an hour.²⁴

to the simple inanities of Mrs. Piggott:

So sorry. Mrs Claverton-Ferry. I'm Mrs. Piggott.
Just call me Mrs. Piggott. It's a short and
simple name
And easy to remember. But, as I was saying,
Guests in perfect health are exceptional
Though we never accept any guest who's incurable.
You know, we've been deluged with applications
From people who wanted to come here to die!²⁵

Again, the question may be raised: what distinguishes the above passages from similar passages which might be found in a naturalistic prose drama? David Jones provides the best answer to this question:

...the verse form gives greater control in the rendering of character and greater precision in the delineation of emotion; the rhythms are more clearly defined than they would be in prose, even if the vocabulary is frequently commonplace.²⁶

It is this, Eliot's intimate and uncomplicated attempt to present profound and complex things about the human spirit, that gives The Elder Statesman (along with all the other plays) its timeless and placeless quality.

We have now viewed all of Eliot's plays, and it is possible to make some generalizations concerning his theatre. First, all of the plays are deeply rooted in Christian theology, and all show how the individual leavens the lives of those around him, making a more "fruitful communal life."²⁷ We move from a study of individual martyrdom to an emphasis on the group. Throughout these

²⁴T. S. Eliot, The Elder Statesman(New York, 1959), p. 46.

²⁵Ibid., p. 57.

²⁶Jones, The Plays of Eliot, p. 208.

²⁷Of. above, p. 20.

plays with a contemporary setting, there is the interplay of various themes: the difficulty of communication, the problem of psychological change, and the need to face the meaning of existence. Each play, although closely linked by this interweaving of themes, is also an individual experiment in the search for "the" modern verse drama form. We have seen how Eliot has necessarily weakened the power of his verse in order to make his plays more meaningful for his audiences. To this extent, I suppose, he does leave himself open to the accusation that he has sacrificed artistic integrity, but I do not feel that such a charge can be justified.²⁸ The progress of Eliot's plays exemplifies his quest for the perfection of verse drama, his attempt to find the ideal form:

For the greatest drama is poetic drama,
and dramatic effects can be compensated
by poetic excellence.²⁹

This might be a statement of Eliot's aesthetic as far as theatre is concerned, and he has to some degree achieved "poetic excellence" by his development of a compatible form of verse for his plays.

The first verse drama, Murder in the Cathedral, is undoubtedly one of the greatest religious dramas ever written. The other plays, put in a contemporary setting, are too close to us to judge their intrinsic value at

²⁸ Cf. above, p. 17-18.

²⁹ T. S. Eliot, Selected Essays, "A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry," (New York, 1950), p. 38.

this time. Be that as it may, the plays of T. S. Eliot occupy a permanent niche in contemporary dramatic literature, having contributed much to whatever resurgence of verse drama there has been in the twentieth century.

* * * * *

With Maxwell Anderson, we have a far more commercially successful verse dramatist than T. S. Eliot. The question of compromise with the artist, already discussed in relation to Eliot, becomes a matter of great relevancy for Anderson. Should a work of art be altered to insure public reception; should it be created for the masses, not merely for the intelligentsia?

A certain cleverness in striking a compromise between the world about him and the world within has characterized the work of the greatest as well as the least of successful playwrights, for they must all take an audience with them if they are to continue to function. Some may consider it blasphemy to state that this compromise must be a considered and conscious act - will believe that the writer should look in his heart and write - but in the theatre such an attitude leaves the achievement entirely to chance, and a purely chance achievement is not an artistic one.³⁰

To the verse dramatist, this problem of compromise consists of whether or not the verse should be secondary to the play. Anderson obviously feels that verse drama should be judged primarily upon whether it is good theatre, and secondly upon whether it is good poetry.

In spite of this feeling that the artist must compromise, however, Anderson is concerned that the poetry

³⁰Maxwell Anderson, Off Broadway (New York, 1947), p. 29.

in his plays be more than a mere ornament; his theory closely parallels Eliot:

...I have a strong and chronic hope that the theater of this country will outgrow the phase of journalistic social comment and reach occasionally into the upper air of poetic tragedy. I believe with Goethe that dramatic poetry is man's greatest achievement on his earth so far, and I believe with the early Bernard Shaw that the theater is essentially a cathedral of the spirit, devoted to the exaltation of men.³¹

He explains why verse rather than prose is necessary to bring about this "exaltation":

To me it is inescapable that prose is the language of information and poetry the language of emotion. Prose can be stretched to carry emotion, and in some exceptional cases, as in Synge's and O'Casey's plays, can occasionally rise to poetic heights by substituting the unfamiliar speech rhythms of untutored people for the rhythm of verse. But under the strain of an emotion the ordinary prose of our stage breaks down into inarticulateness, just as it does in life. Hence the cult of understatement, hence the realistic drama in which the climax is reached in an eloquent gesture or a moment of meaningful silence.³²

It is true that Anderson does not fully live up to the promises of his theory, but neither does Eliot; besides, I do not think that this is a particularly fair criterion of judgment. Indeed, it is difficult to criticize Anderson objectively, because he has obviously composed with the audience in mind. And in the final analysis, the audience and not the critic must be the judge of a

³¹Ibid., p. 48.

³²Ibid., p. 50.

play's merits. If he has compromised, we may call it a "necessary" compromise and, as already noted, T. S. Eliot does much the same thing.³³

The five plays we shall consider, Elizabeth the Queen, Mary of Scotland, Anne of the Thousand Days, Winterset, and High Tor, are generally considered (with the exception of Anne of the Thousand Days) to be Anderson's most noteworthy efforts. With over thirty plays to his credit, Anderson has written some other excellent plays, among them Knickerbocker Holiday, Joan of Lorraine, and Bad Seed. For purposes of limiting the discussion, I have chosen the five plays above because I find them particularly interesting in our study of the genre of the verse drama. Three of the plays are based on history, and the other two have contemporary settings; they were written between 1930 and 1948.

The so-called "Tudor trilogy" may be discussed as a group; these plays are Elizabeth the Queen (1930), Mary of Scotland (1933), and Anne of the Thousand Days (1948). Not only do they all deal with sixteenth-century English history, but they all have the same theme: the lust for power in conflict with sexual passion. Anne of the Thousand Days is by far the weakest of the

³³By this, I do not mean to make the rather invidious suggestion that what is good for Eliot is good for all aspiring verse dramatists. Rather, I want to point out that two men working independently both found it necessary to alter their work in order to make it more palpable for modern audiences - although neither man has been seriously accused of bowing before commercial interests.

three plays, and it is surprising that Anderson changed the successful formula he had used in the preceding two works. It is a play of memory; the audience sees Henry and Anne in static position on the stage as they reflect upon their individual situations and recall past experiences. The action in the play is stylized, a good device for seventeenth- and eighteenth-century comedy of manners, but hardly suitable for a contemporary tragedy based on history. The use of these experimental techniques in the play negates the possibility of any heightened dramatic effect. The portrayals of Henry's feelings of guilt and Anne's fate become almost stilted; consequently, it is almost impossible for the audience to share in the experience of Anne of the Thousand Days even though the play demands an empathic response.³⁴

Mary of Scotland is far better theatre merely because its technique is more conventionally conceived. The language and structure are clearly Elizabethan in concept; note the description of the opening scene:

A half-sheltered corner of the pier at Leith. It is a sleety, windy night, and the tall piles of the background and the planks underfoot shine black and icy with their coating of freezing rain. Long cables stretch away into the dark. The only light comes from the lantern of two iron-capped GUARDS who are playing cards morosely on the head of a fish-tub in the lee of a great coil of rope.³⁵

³⁴Mabel Bailey, Maxwell Anderson: The Playwright as Prophet (New York, 1957), pp. 36-37.

³⁵Maxwell Anderson, Mary of Scotland: Four Verse Plays (New York, 1959), p. 3.

The opening scene, with Mary's arrival, sets the stage for the conflict of Mary and Elizabeth. Here Mary is portrayed as a charming woman whose very femininity wins for her supporters; she is, however, obsessed with one desire, to rule and to do it alone:

Master Knox, it is true that I am Mary Stuart, and your queen, and I have come back from France after many years away, to take up my rule in this country. It is true, too, that I am sad to leave the south and the sun, and I come here knowing that I shall meet with difficulties that would daunt many older and wiser than I am - for I am young and inexperienced and perhaps none so adept in statecraft. Yet this is my native place, Master Knox, and I loved it as a child and still love it - and whatever I may lack in experience, whatever I may have too much of youth, I shall try to make up for, if my people will help me, in tolerance and mercy, and a quick eye for wrongs and a quick hand to right them.³⁶

Significantly, the passage is in prose; Mary speaks in verse only during the critical moments of the play.

Elizabeth is pictured in a similar light to Mary; she refuses to accede the throne and will not share her power with Burghley. In much the same way, Mary admits her love for Bothwell, but she is unable to compromise her position:

Look, Bothwell. I am a sovereign,
And You obey no one. Were I married to you I'd be
Your woman to sleep with. You'd be king here
in Edinburgh,
And I'd have no mind to your ruling.³⁷

Elizabeth is unlike Mary in that she is a calculating

³⁶ Ibid., p. 10.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 36.

villain, whose only justification for plotting against Mary so cruelly is jealousy:

Mary: You flatter me.

Elizabeth: It's more likely envy. You see this
line

Drawn down between my brows? No wash or ointments
Nor wearing of straight plasters in the night
Will take that line away. Yet I'm not much older
Than you, and had looks, too, once.³⁸

Throughout the play, the two women are juxtaposed, as they are confronted and deal with similar situations. The juxtaposition of the two figures is given emphasis in the final scene of the play when the women meet each other. At this point, Mary is in prison, and Elizabeth tries to persuade her for the final time to give up her throne; Mary's tragic flaw lies in her stubborn refusal to give in to Elizabeth. Paradoxically, Mary achieves success in failure³⁹:

Elizabeth: Once more I ask you,
And patiently. Give up your throne.

Mary: No, devil.

My pride is stronger than yours, and my heart
beats blood

Such as yours has never known. And in this
dungeon,

I win here, alone.⁴⁰

Elizabeth wins in the role of a queen, but she is childless, and Mary has borne a child - the heir to the throne.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 140.

³⁹ This is a theme which occurs in other works, most notably with Browning in The Ring and the Book. Here Pompilia, although she is on the verge of death, has achieved success in her momentary spiritual communion with Caponsacchi; she may die secure in the knowledge that she will be with him after death.

⁴⁰ Anderson, Four Verse Plays, p. 152.

Mary's triumph is as a woman, and the play thus becomes the tragedy of Elizabeth: she has won a hollow victory.

We find the same themes in the first (and the most popular) play in the trilogy, Elizabeth the Queen. The plot involves the ill-starred love of Elizabeth and the Earl of Essex. When Essex rebels against the Queen, she tricks him into believing that she is resigned to his superiority. Essex becomes trapped by the Queen's Guards and is imprisoned in the Tower of London; he has only to send word and Elizabeth will free him. He is, unfortunately, a prideful idealist:

It's better for me as it is
Than that I should live and batten my fame and
 fortune
On the woman I love. I've thought of it all.
 It's better
To die young and unblemished than to live long
 and rule,
And rule not well.⁴¹

As in *Mary of Scotland*, the tragedy focuses on Elizabeth and her wielding of power; the throne forces her to forego happiness. Of the three plays, *Elizabeth* is perhaps the most Elizabethan in design; it is a "grandiose" play in the sense that a successful attempt has been made to recapture the splendor of Elizabethan high tragedy. Though it by no means completely fits the Aristotelian concept of tragedy, the play comes closer to tragedy than most modern dramas. The conflict between Elizabeth's love

⁴¹ Maxwell Anderson, Elizabeth the Queen: Four Verse Plays, p. 129.

and her duty is a tragic one; her great capacities as a ruler ruin her opportunity for love:

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....⁴²

Traditional blank verse is retained, for the most part, in the Tudor trilogy. Like the Elizabethans, Anderson has written minor expository passages in prose. With Elizabeth the Queen, we see how Anderson has handled the problem of compromise; although almost the entire play is in verse, the language has been naturalized in order to make it more understandable for today's audiences;

It marks a return to the problem attacked in his first play (White Desert): to find, or adapt, a poetic medium of expression that should provide the emotional impact of conventional English blank verse and at the same time prove speakable without seeming too remote or archaic to the ears of modern play-goers, for as he once said in an interview: "If we are to have a great theatre in this country somebody has got to write verse, even if it is written badly. It is at least a beginning."⁴³

The rather fluent blank verse of the Tudor trilogy is far more than a beginning solution to the problem.⁴⁴

⁴² Ibid., p. 130.

⁴³ Barrett H. Clark, "The United States": A History of Modern Drama, ed. Barrett H. Clark and George Freedley (New York, 1947), pp. 695-696.

⁴⁴ For critical sources on Mary of Scotland and Elizabeth the Queen see Bailey, Anderson, pp. 37-54; also John Gassner, Masters of the Drama, pp. 678-683. For further discussion of the verse, see pp. 33-34.

In 1935, Anderson wrote Winterset, his best-known play; it is based on the cause célèbre of the 1920's and 1930's, the Sacco-Vanzetti case. The play is not a tragedy, but a "serious drama" and a contemporary social commentary. In spite of the play's being based on what might be considered a rather dated subject, the theme of the play deals with universal values which are as significant today as they were when the play was written. As high drama in the Elizabethan and classic style, Winterset is formidably constructed. The story concerns the search of young Mio for the missing witness who could have saved his father from execution. He falls in love with Miriamne and loses his taste for revenge when he finds that his wrath will necessarily harm her. But, with what Mabel Bailey calls "true classic irony," Mio has been caught in a web and is unable to escape Trock's hired assassins. Anderson makes no attempt to justify the exalted language of the characters, who are mostly from the lower class. This is precisely why the play is not dated; the highly imaginative and rich language is finely suited to the poetic treatment of the themes of guilt and revenge. We shall see in a moment how this use of language mars the play in another way.

High Tor (1937) is a very stylized fantasy, which deals with a favorite twentieth-century theme, the conflict of individualism and big business in America. Van Van Dorn refuses to sell his mountain in an attempt to

resist the onslaught of the mechanistic age. The farcical inclusion of the left-over Dutch ghosts provides moments of hilarious comedy. When Van finally does sell the mountain, the past is symbolically dead, for the forms of the past are about to be destroyed:

The Indian: Why, when the race is gone, or looks aside only a little while, the white stone darkens, the wounds close, and the roofs fall and the walls give way to rains. Nothing is made by men but makes, in the end, good ruins.⁴⁵

This comment on materialism may, I think, be taken as the theme of the play. The whole fabric of the play is its meaning; we find sense in the juxtaposition of the fluctuating and the constant, the real and the ideal.⁴⁶ The Dutchmen, besides serving a comic function, help us keep firmly in mind the relationship of past to present.

The verse in Anderson's plays is neither uniformly good nor uniformly bad. Of the Tudor plays, Elizabeth the Queen best shows Anderson's attempt to simulate Elizabethan verse in a modern sense. The language has been altered to fit the modern idiom, and the poetry is not merely a rigid metrical arrangement:

Elizabeth: I'd have forgiven
All that had passed, at any hour, day or night,
Since I last saw you. I have waited late at night
Thinking, tonight the ring will come, he will never
Hold out against me so long, but the nights went by
Somehow, like the days, and it never came,

⁴⁵Maxwell Anderson, High Tor: Four Verse Plays, p. 142.

⁴⁶Bailey, Anderson, p. 148.

Till the last day came, and here it is the last
 morning
 And the chimes beating out the hours.⁴⁷

The nervous, irregular quality of this verse punctuates Elizabeth's dilemma. The poetry in Winterset becomes important in relation to a problem which we find with both Fry and MacLeish, the question of fitting the characters' dialogue to their already established mode of speaking:

In other passages the poetry fails as dramatic poetry for another and more subtle reason. It is not dramatic because it does not express the thoughts and feelings of the persons who speak it.... I mean that it is something quite different from that heightened awareness as well as heightened expression which is permitted to the characters in poetic drama. It is symbolic poetry.⁴⁸

Examples of this sort of poetry abound in the play:

Mio: Why, girl, the transfiguration on the mount was nothing to your face. It lights from within - a white chalice holding fire, a flower in flame, this is your face.

Miriamne: And you shall drink the flame and never lessen it. And round your head the aureole shall burn that burns there now, forever. This I can give you. And so forever the Freudians are wrong.⁴⁹

Such speeches border on the ridiculous when one realizes the backgrounds of Mio and Miriamne. They stand out glaringly opposed to the realistic passages in the play which come so close to prose. These characters are

⁴⁷Anderson, Four Verse Plays, p. 125.

⁴⁸Bailey, Anderson, p. 140.

⁴⁹Anderson, Winterset: Four Verse Plays, p. 49.

mysteriously endowed with an unheard-of eloquence that does not fit with what we know of them. We may scan the blank verse, but it is too deliberate and regular to be a good vehicle for the exalted language. Winterset remains intact in spite of its obvious poetical flaws; it is still a meaningful poetic treatment of the themes of the nature of guilt, justice, and revenge.

The poetry in High Tor is far better than in Winterset:

They (the lines) do not try to make up in forced imagery for metrical and syntactical deficiencies. These lines move with the nervous energy of authentic blank verse.⁵⁰

There is no doubt the verse is better; the question is, why? Is it that pure poetry is suitable only for comic fantasy, or is it that it is best suited to this play? I would say that the latter statement is the answer; one of Asher's speeches is a good example:

You have seen us in the sun,
wraithlike, half-effaced, the print we make
upon the air thin tracery, permeable,
a web of wind. They have changed us. We may take
the fire-balls of the lightning in our hands
and bowl them down the level floor of cloud
to wreck the beacon, yet there was a time
when these were death to touch. The life we keep
is motionless as the center of a storm,
yet while we can keep it; while we can
snuff out to darkness their bright sweeping light,
melt down the harness of the slow machines
that hew the mountain from us. When it goes
we shall go too. They leave us this place, High Tor,
and we shall have no other. You learn it last.
A long while now we've known.⁵¹

Anderson, like Eliot, finds different forms of poetry

⁵⁰Bailey, Anderson, p. 149.

⁵¹Anderson, Four Verse Plays, pp. 31-32.

suitable for different plays; his basic metrical pattern throughout is the unrhymed iambic pentameter. Anderson's theoretical commentary and his plays provide an interesting contrast to Christopher Fry, the next playwright in our study.

* * * * *

Christopher Fry, like most of the other playwrights with whom we are concerned in this paper, has written a great deal about his theory of the drama. In a Saturday Review article (March 21, 1953) entitled "Poetry in the Theatre," his ideas about verse drama are set forth. The arguments against "contemporary realistic drama" are most convincing.⁵² Fry states that reality in the theatre has reached such a point that the spectator is duped into believing that he could enter physically into any scene represented on the stage and not be out of place. In reality, he continues, all of us are out of place from birth - we cannot possibly explain the phenomenon of existence, and poetry is the only mode which can adequately express this higher reality:

Poetry is the language in which man explores his own amazement. It is the language in which he says heaven and earth in one word. It is the language in which he speaks of himself and

⁵²It is important to keep in mind the developments in the past five years in the theatre of the absurd; I am sure Mr. Fry would agree that here is an important and vital new approach to the problem of reality in the theatre.

his predicament as though for the first time. It has the virtue of being able to say twice as much as prose in half the time, and the drawback, if you don't happen to give it your full attention, of seeming to say half as much in twice the time. And, if you accept my proposition that reality is altogether different from our stale view of it, we can say that poetry is the language of reality.⁵³

Fry pleads the case for verse drama by contending that prose drama has been carried to its very limits; verse drama will inject into the theatre a fresh look at the world, a new and different approach to reality.⁵⁴

Fry is not unaware of the ready-made barriers to the success of verse drama; he realizes that these barriers are considerable and that the playwright must make some attempt to ameliorate conditions. The main problem he sees is that which is implicit in the poetry: the audience is attuned to prose and finds it easier to understand. That is to say, it is difficult to hold audience attention with prose; it is virtually impossible with verse:

In a play written in the vein we're used to we can more or less supply for ourselves what we have lost in this way, but in a play which is taking up (if only in the use of language) a new attitude it's not so easy.

⁵³Christopher Fry, "Poetry in the Theatre," Saturday Review (March 21, 1953), p. 18.

⁵⁴Ibid., pp. 18-19. Again remember that Fry is writing before the advent of Ionesco, Beckett, Albee, and others. Their approach certainly represents a different interpretation of reality. This idea of what is "real" on the stage closely approximates the theory of Fry.

Besides, we can become benighted in still another way: the audience can be caught by one poetic phrase and remain with it for several minutes, losing what follows.⁵⁵

Fry is not advocating a return to the traditions of Elizabethan times, but rather an entirely new theatre which will come about through an exploratory process; he envisions the time when verse will be the language of drama from the uproarious farce to the most serious tragedy. To facilitate this rejuvenation of verse drama, the dramatist must achieve some compromise between his verse and his play. In other words, as we have already noted, the writing of beautiful verse does not insure a good play; indeed, it may often disturb the concentration of the audience. Mere talk is not enough; the dialogue must enhance understanding and not be inserted merely for the sake of its elevated tone.⁵⁶

Again, for the sake of limiting the discussion to those plays generally considered "major," this section will be concerned with the following three plays: The Lady's Not for Burning, Venus Observed, and The Dark is Light Enough. Before the arrival of The Lady's Not for Burning and Venus Observed, Christopher Fry was virtually unknown to both English and American audiences; with the production of the two plays, Fry made what one

⁵⁵Ibid., p. 33.

⁵⁶Ibid., p. 33.

critic calls a "meteoric appearance."⁵⁷

The Lady's Not for Burning is a comedy set in the town of Cool Clary in the fifteenth century, "either more or less or exactly."⁵⁸ The rather complicated plot revolves about Thomas Mendip, a discharged soldier who wishes to die (and indeed attempts to hasten his demise by confessing to some unsolved murders) and Jennet Jourde- mayne, sentenced to die for witchcraft. These two fall in love, as do Richard, the town clerk, and the attractive Alizon Eliot. The brothers Humphrey and Nicholas Devise flit in and out of the picture, both in love with Alizon. Humphrey later tries to insinuate himself into the good graces of Jennet by bribing her. The play ends with a celebration at Mayor Tyson's home, during which the "prisoners" are forgotten; Richard and Alizon are joined, and Jennet and Thomas escape, presumably to spend the rest of their days in happiness:

Jennet: I shall have to hurry.
That was the pickaxe voice of the cock, beginning
To break up the night. Am I an inconvenience
To you?

Thomas: As inevitable as original sin.
(Puts coat around her and kisses her.)
And I shall be loath to forgo one day of you,
Even for the sake of my ultimate friendly death.
Jennet: I am friendly too.⁵⁹

⁵⁷Harold Clurman, "Theatre: from Paris to London", New Republic, CXXII (June 5, 1950), p. 21. Speaking about the 1950 season, Clurman mentions Fry as one of the only good playwrights in recent years in England.

⁵⁸Christopher Fry, The Lady's Not for Burning (New York, 1953), p. 3.

⁵⁹Ibid., p. 112.

The decidedly Shavian conclusion⁶⁰ to the play asserts the power of love over death; Mendip's desire to be hanged is erased by his love for Jennet.

The play is lacking in several respects, the major one being Fry's failure to live up to his own tenets. His characters give long monologues which are clearly explications of the theme of the play, but something is missing. There is no sense of opposition from the prosaic world against which Fry argues; one could hardly call Humphrey Devise a suitable opponent to the persuasive speeches of Mendip:

It is this lack of a real moral conflict in this sense - the pitting of a great riddle against a pitiful platitude - that is the basis of Fry's most outstanding weakness. His certitude needs to be tested in a real conflict - gods and devils, if you like - and not to be dribbled away in a rhetorical victory for the riddle and poetic pity for its opposite.⁶¹

A major flaw, to be sure, but one which is counter-balanced by the fact that The Lady's Not for Burning is a good play, a comedy with endless dramatic possibilities on the stage. Reiterating the premise that the best verse drama is that which is acceptable to the audience, the play must receive a high rating.

⁶⁰There is certainly some basis of comparison between this play and Man and Superman; the resemblance between Mendip and Jennet and Tanner and Anne is more than superficial. The conclusion of the two plays is obviously similar.

⁶¹William Arrowsmith, "English Verse Drama: Christopher Fry," Scrutiny, III (Summer, 1950), 214.

The next play, Venus Observed, has a plot which is just as whimsical as The Lady's Not for Burning. The Duke of Altair has invited three of his former mistresses to his observatory and asks his son to choose a mother among the three. The Duke's agent (his chief employee) is cheating the Duke in order to attain the stature of his employer; the Duke sympathizes with him because his possessions have been so great that he does not really mind being robbed. The Duke falls in love with the agent Reedbeck's daughter, Perpetua, but she is in love with Edgar, the Duke's son. Fireworks ensue (a jealous mistress sets fire to the wing of the house in which the Duke is trying to seduce Perpetua), Perpetua graciously refuses the Duke, and he decides to marry the jealous mistress who has been put in "custody" for six months for setting the fire. It is perfectly evident that with Fry the plot has been sublimated to the characters' thoughts and words. The plot may seem contrived, even amazing, to contemporary audiences because it reflects what the playwright considers is a more accurate view of life than that which is seen in prose drama.

Again, we have the theme of the opposition of love, or life, to death. When the Duke declares "I mean to marry" at the end of the play, he has recognized the importance of existence; living what seems to be a parody of life, he has become reconciled to its riddles and complexities. Thus he tells Reedbeck:

In the name of existence I'll be happy for
 myself.
 Why, Reedbeck, how marvellous it is to moulder.
 Think how you would have felt when you were
 lying
 Grubbing in your mother's womb,
 With only a wall to look at,
 If you could have seen in your embryonic eye
 the realm of bryony, sloes, rose-hips,
 And a hedge's ruin, a golden desuetude,
 A countryside like a drowned angel
 Lying in shallow water, every thorn
 Tendering a tear. Think, Reedbeck,
 Think of the wonder of such glimmering woe;
 How in a field of milk-white haze the lost
 Apollo glows and wanders towards noon;
 The wind-blown webs are brighter,
 The rolling apples warmer than the sun.
 Heavens! you would have cried, the womb
 Echoing round you: These are the heavens,
 and I,
 Reedbeck, am stillborn. Would you not?⁶²

The above passage has been the basis of discussion by several critics, and the opinions reveal a surprising polarity of thought.⁶³

⁶²Christopher Fry, Venus Observed (New York, 1950), p. 98.

⁶³William Arrowsmith, in the Hudson Review essay, reflects on this passage: "In the face of such verse, it is almost ungrateful to criticize, or pointless, for a poet like this should be bound to make his own way regardless of what we say or where we should like him to go. Yet, as things now stand, Fry's great achievement is his verse, and not yet his plays. His example is heartening, for he has a way of making capital of his own deficiencies; he has a practical craft which is being used, significantly, for an end similar to Eliot's but by different means. Anyone who doubts this practical craft should watch an ordinary audience come under the intent and the sound of his language, as though they had never heard it before, yet understood it. In Fry's case, the charisma and the craft are the same thing." (p. 216) Marius Bewley's scathing essay in Scrutiny, "The Verse of Christopher Fry," XVIII (June, 1951) stands in direct opposition to Arrowsmith's position: "The colours of this speech flake and fade, and the outline of its images grow misty. There is very little of con-

There is a type of paradox represented by this speech of the Duke's (see above, note 63), but I think that any condemnation of Fry's verse results from a failure to understand thoroughly the playwright's aesthetic. There can be no doubt that the allusion to Elizabethan and seventeenth-century poets is intentional; I am sure Fry had no conception that his verse would be criticized in the light of Elizabethan poetry, in spite of the fact that it does lend itself to this sort of comparison. What Bewley calls "second-hand literary gleanings" are in actuality parodies of original sources; the critic has overlooked Fry's rather unique Weltanschauung - for there is nothing sacred, nothing outside the province of comedy. "Even nature is being made a fool of, so why bother?"⁶⁴ asks Bewley. Fry would answer by saying that the wonder of existence is indeed worth bothering about, and that he "bothers" by trying to point out man's absurd dilemma. Yet, at the same time and in a carpe diem vein, this is our life, and it should be carried on fully to its very limits.

The Dark is Light Enough, a "winter comedy" which is Fry's best play, was first produced in 1954. The

crete immediacy behind it, and even 'bryony, sloes, rosehips' suggest second-hand literary gleanings rather than a genuine response to the real things, or even to the experience of the words. And the triumph represented by 'A countryside like a drowned angel/Lying in shallow water' is, I think, obviously so easy that its presence in the passage ought surely to have qualified the recommendation. What experience can one possibly carry away from a line like that?" (p. 79)

⁶⁴Bewley, "Verse of Fry," p. 82.

action takes place in the winter of 1848-9 during the Hungarian revolt against the Austro-Hungarian empire. The scene is alternately set in a room in the Countess Rosmarin Ostenburg's Austrian country house near the Hungarian border, and in the stables of the house. Countess Ostenburg harbors her former son-in-law who has deserted from the army and is being hunted by Hungarian troops. The former son-in-law, Richard Gettner, is hidden in the stables; when the Hungarians arrive and cannot find him, they take Zichley, the present son-in-law, as hostage. Meanwhile, in the stables, Gettner has seen his former wife and kissed her; her brother, Stefan, becomes furious and challenges Gettner to a duel. Having stolen pistols from the Hungarian soldiers, they go outside to fight; shots are heard, and Gettner rushes in, afraid that he has killed Stefan:

Why me, why me?
 I didn't make the gust of a wind, the tree-trunk,
 Or whatever it was killed him. I aimed away.
 I was laughing him off, but I heard the fire
 And the bullet coming. I did refuse to meet him.
 Before God, I said No, I said No, no, no.⁶⁵

He has not killed Stefan, but the Hungarians have found him out; the Countess persuades the soldiers not to take Gettner away. News comes that the Hungarian rebels have been defeated, and the Countess decides to shelter

⁶⁵Christopher Fry, The Dark is Light Enough (New York, 1955), p. 72.

the Hungarian soldiers. The excitement, however, has been too much for her, and she has a heart attack and dies. Austrian soldiers arrive, searching for the Hungarians, and Gettner begins to escape once again. Seeing that the countess has died, he goes to her and awaits the Austrians. The play is more a romantic melodrama than a comedy, and it eliminates some of the flaws which so conspicuously mark Fry's earlier efforts.

There are several passages in the play which aptly illustrate a change in Fry's style; in The Dark is Light Enough, the characters' words suit their personalities, their action, and the general tenor of the play:

Countess: How shall we manage, with time at
a standstill?

We can't go back to where nothing has been said;
And no heart is served, caught in a moment,
Which has frozen. Since no words will set us
free-

Not at least now, until we can persuade
Our thoughts to move-
Music would unground us least,
As a tide in the dark comes to boats at anchor
And they begin to dance. My father told me
How he went late one night, a night
Of some Hungarian anxiety,
To the Golden Bull at Buda, and there he found
The President of your House of Deputies
Alone and dancing in his shirtsleeves
To the music of the band, himself
Put far away, bewitched completely
By the dance's custom; and so it went on,
While my father drank and talked with friends,
Three or four hours without a pause:
This weighty man of seventy, whose whole
Recognition of the world about him
During those hours, was when occasionally
He turned his eyes to the gipsy leader
And the music changed, out of a comprehension

As worldless as the music.
 It was dancing that came up out of the earth
 And not give over till the dusk of morning.⁶⁶

The passage fits perfectly the mood and tone of both the character and the play at this point; there is an economy of language here which is absent in the other plays. The extended monologues in The Lady's Not for Burning and Venus Observed are, for the most part, utilized as platforms for the playwright to express his ideas to the audience. The Dark is Light Enough is the only one of the plays in which characterization, tone, dialogue, and action all are in accord.

But why verse? The subjects Fry chooses do not seem particularly suited to verse, and it might be argued that he could do the same thing better in prose. I think not, however, for as Fry states: "If we have to be born into a world as wildly unprosaic as this one is, what else can be done, if we mean to be realistic?"⁶⁷ Fry is an ingenious artificer in the use of language; the very nature of his plays forces us to readjust our thinking in terms of what is acceptable on the stage. Though we may disagree with his theory, the equation of prose to every-day reality and poetry to a higher reality,⁶⁸ and find fault with his plays, nonetheless his contribution to the "cause" cannot be overlooked.

⁶⁶Ibid., pp. 67-68.

⁶⁷Christopher Fry, quoted in Donoghue, Third Voice, p. 181.

⁶⁸Donoghue, Third Voice, p. 180: "The argument is charmingly simple: appearance, reality; actual, real; fact, miracle; prose, poetry."

* * * * *

The work of Archibald MacLeish in the field of verse drama is so limited that he becomes a difficult figure for us to appraise; of the few verse plays he has written, most are designed for radio rather than the stage. We have only two plays, This Music Crept by Me upon the Waters and J.B.,⁶⁹ to use as a basis for evaluation of MacLeish's verse drama. In spite of the fact that there are only these two plays, MacLeish is an important figure in our study. He has recorded the most recent popular success of a verse drama with the production of J.B. on Broadway. The almost unanimous critical praise which greeted the play certainly indicates that J.B. is deserving of attention.

This Music Crept by Me upon the Waters is a mood play much like the plays of Fry; that is, it is more concerned with establishing a certain mood or capturing a particular moment than it is with the exterior action of the play. The mood involved here is one of exaltation and the moment is the scene between Elizabeth and

⁶⁹ His first verse drama for the stage, Panic, was produced in 1935 to herald the new Phoenix Theatre. To my knowledge, there has been no major production of the play since then. It is excluded from the discussion as a first effort not truly representative of the playwright's work.

Peter. The one-act play takes place at the home of Chuck and Elizabeth Stone, wealthy Americans living in the Antilles. There is to be a dinner party, and Elizabeth is awaiting her guests; as they arrive, the conversation lapses into the sort of careless chit-chat so familiar to such outings:

Alice: Oliver wouldn't know the Keoghs:
 They're just simple, decent people!
Chuck: From Milwaukee.
Alice: From Milwaukee.
Oliver: They must be something more than simple.
Chuck: Why?
Oliver: To live here.
Chuck: Why, to live here?
Oliver: Live in this Paradise of Elizabeth's?
Chuck: What's wrong with Paradise?
Oliver: For saints,
 Nothing.⁷⁰

This passage points up one of the essential weaknesses of the play, which is written throughout in unrhymed iambic tetrameter. MacLeish has obviously made an attempt to bring the dialogue close to conversation, but he has fallen short. Instead of employing Eliot's device of "erratic" verse which is nearly indistinguishable from prose, MacLeish uses a regular metrical pattern throughout.⁷¹

This adherence to strict metrics is somewhat justified, however, in the final section of the play. Here the mood of exaltation is established when Peter Bolt and Elizabeth are simultaneously moved by a beautiful

⁷⁰Archibald MacLeish, This Music Crept by Me upon the Waters (Cambridge, 1953), p. 12.

⁷¹See: Henry Hewes, "Play by Meters," Saturday Review, XXXVI (March 6, 1954), p. 26.

moment on the island:

When the wind
Fell and that sudden silence of the moon
Touched everything....⁷²

They are able to share a vision of happiness that they both have had:

Peter: Yes. As one would start from sleep.
I stood and I was there! As though
I'd turned a corner suddenly and come -
I don't know where but come there. Oh,
As though I'd ended and begun.⁷³

Elizabeth tells Peter:

Happiness was always now.
Happiness is real - the only
Real reality that any of us
Ever have glimpses of. The rest -
The hurt, the misery - all vanishes,
Only the blinding instant left us.⁷⁴

Finally dinner is announced, the spell is broken, and the play ends as the guests go in to the table.

The play is interesting in several ways because it exemplifies many of the problems inherent in verse drama. Note, for example, the character Oliver Oren suddenly stepping out of character in one of his speeches:

Had he no eyes at all for reefs
Or shark fins or the green volcanoes
Lurking in this smile of trees?⁷⁵

Until this time in the play, Oliver was seen as a rather acerbic and realistic Englishman; nothing prepares us

⁷²MacLeish, This Music, p. 30.

⁷³Ibid., p. 31.

⁷⁴Ibid., p. 32.

⁷⁵Ibid., p. 7.

for his use of the image "smile of trees." When the conversation later turns to the subject of happiness, Oliver tells those present:

We live by what's still left to live for:
 Something in another life,
 Another love, another country,
 Even in another world,
 At least some other day. In Paradise
 Everything is here, is this:
 The ordinary heart can't bear it.
 Suffering, yes: suffering we endure.
 But happiness! Happiness is long ago
 Or far away or not yet come to.
 Only a child or those like children,
 Meeting happiness in a summer's door
 Can take it by the hand and run with it.
 The rest walk past it and remember.⁷⁶

Generally, this passage spoken by Oliver tends to remain within the bounds of character; it is excellent dramatic verse in that the rhythm of the poetry correlates perfectly with the mood of the speaker, and the context of the speech provides some foreshadowing of what is to occur later in the play. What jars, however, is the use of the image "children/Meeting happiness in a summer's door." Coming from Oliver, this is totally unexpected - although the image is an interesting one, the progress of the play is arrested for a moment.

This is not to say that the audience will exit en masse at this point in the play; indeed, they will probably not know exactly what is wrong with this particular speech. But they will know something is wrong, so that

⁷⁶Ibid., p. 13.

there is set up an unconscious barrier to understanding.⁷⁷
 Finally, we may question the entire conception of the mood play:

... the future may have in store for us a form of poetic drama that imitates not so much modes of action as states of sensibility. Mr. Eliot has given us some exciting intimations of its nature. There would still remain the task that faced the first romantic poets - that of creating the taste by which such a poetic drama is to be enjoyed.⁷⁸

It is difficult to understand how Sir Herbert Read can envision the happy prospects of the drama of sensibility, the mood play. The mood play must sacrifice action, as This Music Crept by Me upon the Waters partially does, so that we have essentially lyric poetry which is spoken on the stage. The creation of plays almost totally devoid of action is a failure to utilize the medium of live drama to its fullest extent.

⁷⁷Donoghue, Third Voice, p. 199, elaborates further on the problem of the "summer's door" passage: "In this connection we would for the moment oversimplify by arguing that if a character in a play performs an act, this act, however surprising at that point, should be felt to be consistent with whatever 'quality' has already been established for the agent. Whatever is explicit should be felt as consonant with an implicit quality in the agent: the actual, as consonant with the inherently potential. This does not do away with surprise. We may apprehend a set of qualities in an agent without being able to anticipate the precise act by which he will 'materialize' these qualities in a particular situation. But when this act has been performed we should be able to respond to its fitness. The ventriloquism of 'in a summer's door' disturbs the continuity and therefore the coherence of the play."

⁷⁸Herbert Read, The True Voice of Feeling (New York, 1953), p. 150.

Happily, MacLeish moves in an entirely different direction with J.B., his play based on the Book of Job. The story of Job is set in modern times, with Job portrayed as a wealthy American. The play opens with a prologue in which two old actors, reduced to vending wares in a circus, decide to enact the story of Job. The scene takes place in an empty circus tent:

Mr. Zuss: Merchandise not moving, Nickles?

Nickless: Moves wherever I do - all of it. No rush to buy your worlds, I notice.

Mr. Zuss: I could sell one to a ...

Nickles: ...child!

You told me. Where's the earth?

Mr. Zuss: Earth?

Earth is where that table is:

That's where Job sits - at the table.

God and Satan lean above.

Mr. Zuss peers anxiously up into the canvas sky.

I wonder if we'd better?

Nickles: What?

Mr. Zuss: Play it.

Nickles: Why not? Who cares? They don't.

Mr. Zuss: At least we're actors. They're not actors.

Never acted anything.

Nickles: That's right.

They only own the show.

Mr. Zuss: I wonder...

Nickles: They won't care and they won't know.

His eyes follow Mr. Zuss's up to the dangling bulbs.

Those stars that stare their stares at me -

Are those the staring stars I see

Or only lights...

not meant for me?

Mr. Zuss: What's that got to do with anything?

Nickles: Very little. Shall we start?⁷⁹

After setting up the conflict of God and Satan (Zuss-Zeus and Nickles-Old Nick), the lights come up on J.B. and his family. At the beginning, J.B. is at the height of

⁷⁹Archibald MacLeish, J.B. (Boston, 1961), pp. 4-5.

his prosperity; as the play continues, his good fortune is rapidly erased. His children die, the victims of war and an automobile accident, one daughter is raped, his wife leaves him, and J.B. is plagued by sores. The hero is forced down, the victim of circumstances which he cannot understand. For some reason, however, this sad progression of events never becomes depressing, and the play ends with a wonderful affirmation of faith:

J.B.: It's too dark to see.

Sarah: Then blow on the coal of the heart, my darling.

J.B.: The coal of the heart...

Sarah: It's all the light now.

Blow on the coal of the heart.

The candles in churches are out.

The lights have gone out in the sky.

Blow on the coal of the heart.

And we'll see by and by...

We'll see where we are.

The wit won't burn and the wet soul smoulders.

Blow on the coal of the heart and we'll know...

We'll know...

The light increases, plain white daylight from the door, as they work.⁸⁰

MacLeish is stating that mankind must and will continue, in spite of the hardships it has had to face in the contemporary world. The final affirmation, of course, becomes an assertion of the goodness of God regardless of evidence which indicates the contrary.

Unlike This Music Crept by Me upon the Waters, J.B. is concerned with an action rather than the capturing of a single mood or moment - the action here being J.B.'s movement to acceptance in the light of faith. The story,

⁸⁰Ibid., pp. 152-153.

as mentioned above, reveals a sequence of disasters in J.B.'s life; thus, it moves in much the same rhythm as the Book of Job itself. The hero, reminiscent of Elizabeth Stone, has a great sensitivity to the world about him. His wife Sarah tells the children:

He still does. He lies there watching
 Long before I see the light -
 Can't bear to miss a minute of it:
 Sun at morning, moon at night,
 The last red apple, the first peas!
 I've never seen the dish he wouldn't
 Taste and relish and want more of:
 People either!⁸¹

His capacity for feeling is what leads him ultimately to acceptance and away from the conception of God which is forwarded by Sarah and Nickles:

Sarah: Has death no meaning? Pain no meaning?
 Even these suppurating sores -
 Have they no meaning for you?
Nickles: Ah!
J.B.: from his heart's pain
 God will not punish without cause.
Nickles doubles up in a spasm of soundless
laughter.
J.B.: God is just.⁸²

There is conflict here, the clashing of two conceptions, which makes the play so interesting dramatically.

The obvious gap between dialogue and character in the first play is admirably handled in J.B.. The iambic tetrameter line (Donoghue prefers to call it a line with four "rhetorical stresses") is again used, but it never seems out of place. We do not have any images which

⁸¹Ibid., p. 32.

⁸²Ibid., pp. 108-109.

are out of keeping with the character already established, and language is consistent throughout. MacLeish's verse line is recognizable as verse, and yet it tends to fit in with accepted patterns of conversation - such verse is far superior to the highly involuted speeches we find in Fry's plays. Really on the basis of one play, he has managed to make a reputation for himself as an important verse dramatist. Unfortunately, however, MacLeish presumably has no plans for increasing his output.

* * * * *

Apart from the four men already dealt with, there have been other twentieth-century dramatists who write in verse, most notable among them Auden and Isherwood and Richard Eberhart. Auden and Isherwood have collaborated on several plays, including The Dog Beneath the Skin and The Ascent of F6. The former deals with the search for a lost boy in a rural town, symbolically representing the possibility of fascism in England. The play was written in 1935, and it comes off as more of a period piece than anything else. The Dog Beneath the Skin is a fantasy and would be extremely difficult to produce on the stage. Both this play and The Ascent of F6 are written in prose and verse, most of the poetry being limited to the chorus. The Ascent of F6 follows the attempts of Michael Ransom (a figure patterned on Lawrence of Arabia) to scale the mountain F6. The struggle to climb the mountain is the struggle of man with existence; thus, Ransom becomes a Sisyphus-like protagonist. A critic wrote of The Dog Beneath the Skin that "the poem-play has one very considerable virtue to me--it is interesting to read."⁸³ The plays

⁸³William Rose Benét, "Contemporary Poetry," Saturday Review, XIII (November 30, 1935), p. 16.

of Auden and Isherwood are interesting, even fascinating, to read; they are not particularly well-designed to be brought to the stage.

Richard Eberhart, one of the founders of the Poets' Theatre in Cambridge,⁸⁴ has done the most recent work in verse drama; his Devils and Angels and The Mad Musician were first produced in 1962. Most of the plays he has written, by the author's own admission, are extended dialogues with little or no action. The main exception to this is the comic tragedy The Visionary Farms, first produced in 1952. The Visionary Farms, tells the story of the collapse of a commercial empire in 1919; Eberhart is here presenting the symbolic destruction of the cult of Progress. It is a play-within-a-play; the story of the commercial empire is shown to the guests at the home of Robin Everyman. At the end of the play, the Consulting Author tells the group:

Thank you, ladies and gentlemen, that is all.
 We are going to leave the action at this point.
 All of these gentlemen have become madmen,
 Due to the enormity and gross enchantments
 Of the times, astonishing products of America;
 Each might soon be at the other's throat
 And lay some bloody forms about our stage
 Not unlike the old, gross days of Elizabeth.⁸⁵

⁸⁴The Poets' Theatre is the only existing theatre group devoted solely to verse drama; it encourages the writing of verse plays and provides an outlet for production of these plays.

⁸⁵Richard Eberhart, The Visionary Farms: Collected Verse Plays (Chapel Hill, 1962), p. 95.

Eberhart here deliberately cuts off whatever action there has been in the play, because:

... we owe fidelity to talk,
It is the temper of our times to rage
And talk tragedy into comedy.⁸⁶

Mr. Eberhart may perhaps be correct, but by nearly negating action he places The Visionary Farms in the same category as the mood play. Yet the play does emerge as a meaningful treatment; in his representation of a chaotic world, Eberhart has purposely eliminated the realistic dimension, giving the play an Ionesco-like atmosphere.

* * * * *

You are deliberately writing verse for other voices, not for your own, and you do not know whose voices they will be. You are aiming to write lines which will have an immediate effect upon an unknown and unprepared audience, to be interpreted to that audience by unknown actors rehearsed by an unknown producer. And the unknown audience cannot be expected to show any indulgence towards the poet. The poet cannot afford to write his play merely for his admirers, those who know his non-dramatic work and are prepared to receive favourably anything he puts his name to.⁸⁷

I have begun this conclusion with a quotation from Eliot's "Poetry and Drama" because I feel that the passage

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 95.

⁸⁷ T. S. Eliot, "Poetry and Drama": On Poetry and Poets (New York, 1957), pp. 83-84.

hits upon one of the central problems confronting the verse dramatist today - basically, the problem of verse in the theatre and its effect upon an audience. Actually until Eliot, verse drama was a dying or dead form; the few verse plays written in the early twentieth century have long since passed into oblivion. From Eliot to the present, we have seen written the best verse dramas of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. But these still constitute only a handful of the plays written in this period; moreover, there can be no reason for the presumption that verse drama will suddenly arise as the major theatre genre at the end of the twentieth century. It is reasonably safe to say that verse drama will never again reach the heights of Elizabethan times.

The climate, Eberhart tells us,⁸⁸ was eminently suitable for a Shakespeare; the climate today is so different that a dramatist of Shakespeare's stature could never flourish - for instance, available subject matter and audience reception has changed so greatly. I believe the playwrights discussed have realized this acute difference and have not attempted to effect any return to Elizabethan theatre. Their plays represent a reaction to the sort of verse play written in the nineteenth century. An examination of the major twentieth-century verse dramatists reveals that their works have taken

⁸⁸Eberhart, Collected Plays, vii.

different directions: both in terms of verse and subject matter.

At opposite poles are the "acceptable" blank-verse patterns of Maxwell Anderson and the three-stress line of T. S. Eliot. Subjects range from the whimsical fantasy of The Lady's Not for Burning to the Bible-based J.B. I point out these differences merely to show that verse drama is no longer an antiquated vehicle which conforms to Elizabethan rules and patterns; not being bound by any rules, it has taken varying forms with different playwrights. If we must generalize about twentieth-century verse drama, the main characteristic which comes to mind is its lack of action. The majority of the plays are uniformly marked by a tendency to work out problems in words, rather than action. The best adjective I can apply to this tendency is "static." They are, for the most part, plays with limited appeal; the works of Richard Eberhart are certainly not calculated to reach a mass audience.

Why should anyone advocate a revival of verse drama? Has prose not served the theatre reasonably well for several hundred years? I am not, of course, arguing that prose drama should be abandoned entirely, but that there is a place for verse drama in our scheme of things. To be pedantic, verse is simply a higher form of language, an orderly form which imposes its own regulations upon the writer. The use of verse allows its creator a greater

latitude in diction and characterization than does prose; simply stated, the verse dramatist, regulated only by poetry, can impose his own order upon the play he writes. Eliot states that the "world of a great verse dramatist is a world in which the creator is everywhere present, and everywhere hidden."⁸⁹ The advantage of verse drama over prose is its ability to reflect more sharply emotions and ideas and its use of elevated language which would seem out of place in a realistic prose drama.

The general direction of twentieth-century verse drama is clear. While attempting to effect a reaction to realistic prose drama, they have brought their works close to realistic prose (Eliot) while at the same time treating subjects which are properly the province of poetry. Although close to prose, the plays are still poetry, if only in a technical sense. Again we must go to Eberhart, the first verse dramatist of note who attempts to join the best poetry he can write to his plays. In doing so, he has perhaps created plays which are not dramatic, but he has given some hint of the path verse drama will take in the years to come. The answer lies somewhere between Eliot and Eberhart; the verse must be on a higher plane than prose, yet it must somehow conform to accepted speech patterns. I cannot in good faith envision a renaissance of verse drama. I do

⁸⁹Eliot, "The Three Voices of Poetry": On Poetry and Poets, p. 112.

believe that if Eberhart and others at the Poets' Theatre ever begin to write for a wider audience, we will see a great renewal of interest in verse drama. It would not be very surprising to see this revival take place first in the United States, the last major country to build a theatrical interest. For the time being, at least, we shall have to be content with the few excellent offerings we have.⁹⁰

⁹⁰ Another trend which has been interesting to watch in the past thirty years is the development of modern American musical comedy. Such delightful works as South Pacific, Oklahoma, and Carousel all are poetical fantasies with soaring lyrical musical numbers. Although I still maintain there is no special area of subject matter for verse drama, it would seem that verse plays based on fantasy (such as High Tor) would do a great deal to inject new life into a rather static medium.

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