

# POETRY

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# CONTENTS

	<i>page</i>	<i>POINTS OF VIEW</i>	<i>page</i>
DAVID WRIGHT			
Verses from Northamptonshire	3	A MODERN TRAGEDY	
		<i>by</i> Christopher Hassall	17
GAVIN EWART AND JACK CLARK		PROPHETS AND TRAMPS	
Uncle Tom's Cabin	5	<i>by</i> Paul Dehn	20
LOUIS JOHNSON		WHAT A PARTY!	
On the Road	7	<i>by</i> Jon Manchip White	24
HAROLD PINTER		THE RECOVERY OF TRADITION	
New Year in the Midlands	8	<i>by</i> S. L. Bethell	27
Chandeliers and Shadows	9		
DONALD DAVIE			
Christmas Week, 1948	10		
ALLEN CURNOW			
Elegy on My Father	11		
B. A. GILES			
Europa	12		
PETER JACKSON			
I, Who Would Not See His Death	12		
On Mornings Claiming Kinship with the Sun	13		
E. H. KESTERTON			
Nostalgia, with a Little Despair	14		
Poem in the Manner of Seferis the Greek	15		
RUTH TENNY			
The One Eternal	15		
The New Age	16		
The Wage	16		
Snare, Hook and Words	16		

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# POETRY

LONDON

Edited by RICHARD MARCH and NICHOLAS MOORE

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## DAVID WRIGHT

VERSES FROM NORTHAMPTONSHIRE

(i)

*St. Andrews Hospital*

The ghost of John Clare met me at the station;  
He said to me, "Boy, you don't know who I am;  
The library bust will give no information,  
Nor summer where it flashes level with the Nen;  
A mental hospital in the Little Billing Road  
Where children play at cricket, was my abode.

"I tell you I am Shakespeare, Byron, and John Clare:  
We're all one poet. As Duke of Wellington  
I beat Napoleon soundly, and scarcely turned a hair.  
Boxer Byron, made of iron, for five hundred pound  
I challenged every comer to meet me in a ring,  
But no man put the dukes up, so I turned aside to sing.

"Criminal and lunatic, you will find me later on  
In saloon bars, a pest, unemployable as a Cossack;  
The only social service I perform is in a tomb,  
Elsewhere I am a parasite, a passenger with toothache.  
But at your tender age you can barely understand  
The decision that you did not make, when you took my hand."

The ghost of John Clare was for five years my companion  
Where I was happy, and most miserable,  
In urban England, in a midland union  
Between a building and between an arable  
Land, and learning what many never learn,  
The kind of living I was meant to earn.

Deafened and penned with others in silence,  
I learned to break the rules of common good,  
To make the inanimate, like Orpheus, my audience,  
To see the trees surrounded by a wood;  
To know my business was no kind of service,  
That I was disabled to no great purpose.

(ii)

*Canons Ashby*

County of squares and spires, in the middle of England,  
Where with companions I was used to rove,  
Country containing the cedar of John Dryden,  
Cedar, in whose shadow of thunder and love  
I saw those Caroline lawns, and musical  
I heard, inaudible, those waters fall, fall

Triumphs and miseries, last poet of a golden  
Order, and under whose laurel I'd desire  
To plant a leaf of bay, and by whose building  
To tune irregular strings, the stronger lyre  
Plunging, a swan to alight, into a clear  
Music of language I delight to hear.

Not a hundred yards from where my substance wastes  
Nightly in London, John Dryden died on tick.  
The air clouded, and in his garden gusts  
Shook that cedar tree; as I watched its branches flick  
In a windy prolegomenon to autumn  
While a sky marshalled engines to a storm,

I no longer heard those falling waters fall,  
Silence like Iris descended from a cloud,  
And lawns grew dark, as that once musical  
Shadow of a cedar faded in the loud  
Shades of thunder-cumuli on the grass,  
Till we left the garden empty as it was.

# GAVIN EWART & JACK CLARK

## UNCLE TOM'S CABIN (Fragment of a Parody)

*Characters:* The Nephews (Wystan, Cecil, Stephen, Louis)  
The Nieces (Edith, Kathleen)

*Scene:* A room in the Cabin, adjoining Uncle Tom's bedroom.

---

WYSTAN: How is he?  
EDITH: Living and partly living,  
Dying and partly dying, both living and dying  
In his own death and the deaths of those after him.  
CECIL: I suppose we must learn patience, though really  
At times he seems to grow incongruously witty  
For a man on his deathbed.  
STEPHEN: He does everything so slowly  
As though even death were a matter for ambiguity.  
KATHLEEN: Of course, he must make his mind up. Cigarette?  
STEPHEN: No, thanks, I never touch them.  
LOUIS: Nobody's seen the Will and nobody knows  
If he's even made one.  
WYSTAN  
(To Edith): You are the eldest.  
You, of all people, should be in his confidence.  
EDITH: I am an elder sister but I submit,  
Content to care and not to care,  
Walking at evening with the Lady in the rose garden,  
Happy with the leopard and the rose of remembrance.  
CECIL: All this resignation is terribly dated.  
STEPHEN: Of course, I agree with you. Have a pink gin?  
CECIL: Thanks very much. The old man's so mysterious,  
It's difficult at times to see what he's getting at.  
STEPHEN: He is like the old who are deaf; they hear  
And they do not hear, as it suits their purpose;  
He does not hear when the Will is mentioned.  
EDITH: Our peace is his Will.  
WYSTAN: He seems to be taken up with psycho-analysis  
And Death and Religion are black-coated doctors  
Always in attendance at the patient's bedside.  
KATHLEEN: To know God we must suffer and lose all human happiness.  
EDITH: That which is lost will be found.  
CECIL: Really, Edith, must you be so gnostic?  
STEPHEN: He often speaks of murder.  
ALL: Of murder!  
STEPHEN: Yes, and also of something nasty, something  
That took place a long time ago, and

If I understand him correctly, in a woodshed—  
 But it is not clear who was the murderer  
 And who the victim.

KATHLEEN: Murderer or victim, the guilt is equal;  
 The moment of revelation in the woodshed  
 Must be atoned for. The sin is the guilt  
 And the guilt is the sin.

WYSTAN: He was singing again yesterday—an obscene ballad.

KATHLEEN: There are times, you know, when I hardly like to listen.

STEPHEN: I don't think you girls really understand him.

LOUIS: Now, now, no bickering. Have a dry Martini?

STEPHEN: Thank you. You must surely agree, though,  
 It would be interesting to know what he thinks of us all.

WYSTAN: He's far too non-committal.

CECIL: All his statements are *ex cathedra*.

STEPHEN: And nearly all about people who are dead.

KATHLEEN: You certainly don't seem to understand him.

EDITH: We must all wait until his Will is made plain,  
 Waiting in acceptance and lack of understanding,  
 Waiting in the terrible peace of the octopus,  
 Until we are crucified into understanding.

CECIL: Edith is so obscure these days!

KATHLEEN: You don't understand her!

EDITH: Our peace is the Peace of the aged eagle.

ALL: Ah who will help us in our perplexity? To whom  
 Shall we turn in our moment of sorrow?

LOUIS: Why not telephone Sir Reilly ffoull?  
 (*Enter a Nurse with the Will*)

KATHLEEN: This is the crisis. It will soon be over.

WYSTAN: I shall be the sole heir. I always knew it.  
 (*He takes the Will*)

EDITH: For me when it began it was already over.

CECIL: I shall be the heir. Nobody can doubt it.

KATHLEEN: I'm glad that it's begun.

STEPHEN: I feel already chosen.

WYSTAN: Why, how funny! He leaves it all to Ezra!

CURTAIN



# LOUIS JOHNSON

---

## ON THE ROAD

We were two walking together joined  
by a third and fell to talking  
topics of the day—the dust and crops—  
concealing our sadness as must  
with strangers—that there were dangers  
alone upon the road, and we were walking  
with small mind for gossip or the dust  
being concerned with other matters.

Largely matters of re-orientation,  
rehabilitating ourselves in the manner  
of those who have given their all to a cause  
that has fallen away, and no banner  
has announced a new livelihood of belief.  
So was our stint of grief  
that we scarce looked upon his face  
with whom we held polite discourse.

For the king was dead, the bright promise  
gone from the sky, and this road  
carried the swift usurper's armies.  
We had scant heart to call again on God.

Scant heart to walk, or talk, or heed.  
Our hearts were dead.

We were bearing up with a brave face,  
assuming a normal pace  
as though a normal life  
extended behind and opened up before.  
But these few days had closed a door,  
severed the past as surely as a knife  
apportions bread. Our hearts were dead.  
We had no time, nor bread, nor word to spare  
upon the stranger walking there,  
dragging our feet, knowing that all was lost,  
filling in a vacant hour playing the host.

Time was about us quiet and still  
as the eclipse upon the fearful hill,  
yet heavy with portents—the birth of an era!  
For, brethren, such it was, and we walked  
unknowing over time's threshold, in terror  
of our emptiness, paying no heed to the stalked  
grass and the flower, different from that hour,  
noticing nothing unusual.

For he who came  
with us along the road was the same  
whom we grieved : Yea! he revealed  
the wounds, the thorn-marks healed  
with his congealed blood, and stood  
instructing us, preparing us—  
he who was dead and buried—  
after which we hurried  
with our great tidings to tell you in Emmaus.

## HAROLD PINTER

### NEW YEAR IN THE MIDLANDS

Now here again she blows, landlady of lumping  
Fellows between the boards,  
Singing "O Celestial Light", while  
Like a T-square on the  
Flood swings her wooden leg.  
This is the shine, the powder and blood, and here am I,  
Straddled, exile always in one Whitbread Ale town,  
Or such.  
Where we went to the yellow pub, cramped in an alley bin,  
A shoot from the market,  
And found the thin Luke of a queer, whose pale  
Deliberate eyes, raincoat, Victorian,  
Sap the answer in the palm.  
All the crush, camp, burble and beer  
Of this New Year's Night; the psalm derided;  
The black little crab women with the long  
Eyes, lisp and claw in a can of chockfull stuff.  
I am rucked in the heat of treading; the well-rolled  
Sailor boys soon rocked to sleep, whose ferret fig  
So calms the coin of a day's fever.  
Catch the sleek counsellor,  
Hold the crystal elixir of muffs.

Enwrapped in this crust, this crumpled mosaic,  
 Camphor and rosefall stifle the years,  
 Yet I, lunatic from lunatic spheres,  
 Shall run crazy with lepers,  
 And bring God down the chimney,  
 A tardy locust,  
 To plunder and verminate man's pastures, entirely.  
 Sudden I stay blinded with Orion's menace,  
 The sky cuts the ice-shell  
 With the strip and fall of a darting star,  
 The spilt, the splintered palace.  
 Let them all burn together  
 In a trite December,  
 A necromantic cauldron of crosses,  
 And on Twelfth Night the long betrayed monster  
 Shall gobble their gilded gondolas.

#### CHANDELIERS AND SHADOWS

*"I'll goe hunt the badger by owle-light: 'tis a deed of darknesse."*  
 (The Duchess of Malfi).

The eyes of a queen germinate  
 In this brothel, in this room,  
 The kings are fled, the potentates  
 Shuffle kingdoms with the sweet fingers.  
 Mountains, kingdoms, valets erudite,  
 Muffling flaunts of deliberate ecstasy,  
 Slips, shoves, the deluded whore,  
 The hectoring mice, the crabs of lemon  
 Scrawled thick tails across the stateroom.  
 Masks gape in the floodlit emperies,  
 Where wax violins, donkey splendour falls,  
 The brocaded gown of servants and moths,  
 The horsefly, the palsied stomacher,  
 Worlds dying, suns in delirium,  
 Now in this quaver of a roisty bar, the wansome lady  
 I blust and stir,  
 Who pouts the bristle of a sprouting fag—  
 Sprinkled and diced in these Midland lights  
 Are Freda the whimpering glassy bawd, and your spluttered guide,  
 Blessed with ambrosial bitter weed.—Watch

How luminous hands  
Unpin the town's genitals—  
Young men and old  
With the beetle glance,  
The crawling brass whores, the clamping  
Red shirted boy, ragefull, thudding his cage.

## DONALD DAVIE

CHRISTMAS WEEK, 1948

“The uncontrollable mystery on the bestial floor.” (W. B. Yeats).

That Christmas quite the animal  
I made occasions serve my heat.  
Mistletoe-kisses and sherry wine  
Warm rooms and roasted meat.

These fumes, becoming rational  
Defined the nature of the feast:  
About the God's mysterious birth  
The stink of the stabled beast.

That image, dwelt upon with passion  
Pumped blood into the ox-eye lens.  
The pupil of the brute and flower  
Reviewed experience.

That scrutiny, grown introspective,  
Blurred as soon as brought to bear.  
The brutal mystery was gone  
From that self-conscious air.

That agony, my wilful habit,  
Made me the stranger at the board.  
I was keeping Easter when  
The simple carol was heard.

That difference, by concentration,  
Created what it could not be.  
And rank as ox or fox or badger,  
I made the mystery.

# ALLEN CURNOW

---

## ELEGY ON MY FATHER

*Tremayne Curnow, of Canterbury, New Zealand, 1880-1949*

Spring in his death abounds among the lily islands,  
There to bathe him for the grave antipodean snows  
Fall floodlong, rivermouths all in bloom, and those  
Fragile church timbers quiver  
By the bourne of his burial where robed he goes  
No journey at all. One sheet's enough to cover  
My end of the world and his, and the same silence;

While in Paddington autumn is air-borne, earth-given,  
Day's nimbus nearer staring, colder smoulders;  
Breath of a death not my own bewilders  
Dead calm with breathless choirs  
O bird-creation singing where the world moulders!  
God's poor, the crutched and stunted spires  
Thumb heavenward humorously under the unriven

Marble November has nailed across their sky:  
Up there, dank ceiling is the dazzling floor  
All souls inhabit, the liliated seas, no shore  
My tear-smudged map mislimned.  
When did a wind of the extreme South before  
Mix autumn, spring, and death? False maps are dimmed,  
Lovingly they mock each other, image and eye.

The ends of the earth are folded into his grave  
In sound of the Pacific and the hills he travelled singing,  
For he ferried like a feather the whelming dream, bringing  
The Word, the Wine, the Bread.  
Some bell down the obliterating gale was ringing  
To the desert the visiting glory; dust he trod  
Gathered its grains for a miracle, and the nave

He knelt in put off its poor planks, loomed loftier  
Lonelier than Losinga's that spells in stone  
The Undivided Name. O quickening bone  
Of the masspriest, under grass  
Green in my absent spring, sweet relic atone  
To our Lord's earth for the pride of all our voyages,  
That the salt winds which scattered us blow softer.

## B. A. GILES

### EUROPA

Fascinated, I suppose, by the smooth  
White hide, the tiny hoof,  
The breath heavy with sweet clover:  
And trembling at the powerful weighted scrotum,  
Pendulous and bald like a vulture's neck,  
Her belly taut and her eyes staring with lust,  
Europa mounts the gentle beast,  
Feeling her flesh hot, grips  
The hot hide between her thighs:  
And, taking a delicate sharp horn  
In each hand, heads out over  
The huge indifference of the sea.

And does not heed the sea-birds' warning,  
Wheeling uneasily over her head:  
Is ignorant yet of the screaming rape  
And the hideous birth that later stalks  
Through the mourning labyrinthine cities:  
Nor in herself would see the gibbering girl  
With the two still lovely breasts.

## PETER JACKSON

### I, WHO WOULD NOT SEE HIS DEATH

I, who would not see his death  
as a mere phase of my own feeling  
to let the winter image of a last  
meeting melt in a year's breath  
myself helpless to hold it fast,  
still young in sorrow's years, knowing  
few ways to be original in this,  
yet dare not vow always to remember  
and burn in memory with the sun's vigour

as in this moment's stillness, before storms  
and tides, like anxious friends, begin  
to heal with cruelty the old pain.  
Out of his dying I need to build  
a fiction like a tower, to command  
from one enormous height the plain  
of each year's distance, stretched within  
my mind to the limits of my life:  
a strength growing out of my grief  
for a strength in his life unfulfilled.

And so I choose to take an old theme,  
making him a figure in a dance,  
relating him to a chaotic star  
who when the sacred spheres took harm  
froze in a moment, changed with them  
his music to new subtleties  
of light, whose now tremendous power  
offers bright challenge from the once  
fabulous symmetry of skies.

I shall not mourn him there  
in that vivid ocean of sailing suns  
nor let my mind, casual in distress,  
leave him to wander whilst I grieve:  
for him my topmost hours of thought  
shoot upwards into that air  
where all our bestloved great ones  
can comfort with their greatness,  
to make that future tenable  
whose peace is indestructible.

#### ON MORNINGS CLAIMING KINSHIP WITH THE SUN

On mornings claiming kinship with the sun,  
springing from light to rivers of running day,  
I calculate the secrets of light's great source  
to break diurnally the bitter black of night  
immensely spread through formless outer gulfs

and number those whose lack is my one grief:  
whose dying prophesied my death, whose urgent leaving  
gave me my only leave to think of graves.  
Yet those I loved before death are great in their graves,  
linked to their lives within my memory:  
set in the last glimpse taken by my eyes  
they persist always in the album of my days.

Others there are who live still but who live  
not in the streams and fountains of the sun:  
no clinging light covers over their nakedness,  
wavers before their eyes, penetrates their mind.  
But quiet like lakes deep in driven valleys  
they hold their lives reserved in unlighted depths.

They are the silent places I long to enter,  
making the valleys echo to a love  
piercing through fathoms to disturb their secret waters.  
I cannot bear the silence of these valleys  
and yet I dare not break their dark, their lack.

## E. H. KESTERTON

### NOSTALGIA, WITH A LITTLE DESPAIR

Heavy before and hasty after  
utter their heady insane laughter  
The petal falls, the clouds hover  
—O hide my head, O heap me over.

Morose forget and sudden merry  
clutch at the dolly crimson cherry  
The wheel breaks, the knees cover  
—O hide my head, O heap me over.

Lucky to flower, to flutes follow  
unslow to lend and slow to borrow  
—Between the trees, among the clover  
O hide my head, O heap me over.

Happy to grief, happy to flower  
certain the vague employable hour  
—O you my tall solicitous lover  
O hide my head, O heap me over.



## POEM IN THE MANNER OF SEFERIS THE GREEK

We went that evening beyond the important city  
(the city of our thoughts) to a quiet district.  
The sun had emptied its heat in valleys  
and into the well of our hearts, silently.

Where we went we found no new experience  
to discuss or marvel at. We were looking  
for nothing; only perhaps the distant  
drum beats of the water, or the wind.

We sat without speaking in a deserted taverna  
drinking iced Samos and thinking only of ourselves  
(your hair lay on my thought, a dear protection)  
We had not come to find remorse or ecstasy.

Only we found (was it hidden in the agapanthus blossoms?  
or did it smooth and disturb your white hands?)  
a knowledge that it seemed had been created  
like a fine jar by lovers long dead, or wise craftsmen.

Now as I think of your hands, your adult face  
or your hair that will always deliver my thought  
I think only of the wisdom we two learned  
from that silence, like an old woman telling beads  
or the causeless mountains.

## RUTH TENNY

### THE ONE ETERNAL

All passes.  
Even our defeats are sherd;  
White ash, our golden gains.  
All ceases.  
Only that which never quite occurred  
Remains.

## THE NEW AGE

Where are the walls?  
Where are the safe confines?  
Turns now to ash each form to which I cling.  
Earth's chrysalis is burst,  
The heaven signs.  
The butterfly takes wing.

## THE WAGE

One friend I hired with love and one with gold;  
But neither wage their constancy could hold.  
I hired a third; renouncement was his pay,  
And him I keep, and him I keep always.

## SNARE, HOOK AND WORDS

I caught a hare with a snare,  
but when I skinned the hare,  
I cared no more for my snare.

I caught a fish with a hook,  
but when the fish I cooked,  
I cared no more for my hook.

I caught a thought with words,  
but when its truth I heard,  
I cared no more for my words.

# POINTS OF VIEW

## A MODERN TRAGEDY

*Stratton* by RONALD DUNCAN.

(FABER & FABER, 8/6.)

*Stratton* is a play on the grand scale, designed in four acts for a permanent set. A river, a portrait in oils, and an elderly woman, are the main elements in an ingenious pattern of symbolism by which the play must stand or fall. Except in Act Three, which is by far the best, an audience that failed to catch and keep hold of the various thematic threads would have little to sustain the sense of expectation. On the surface there is certainly a great deal of action, but to the ordinary playgoer who can't pick up hints quickly this upper stratum of the play would appear no more organised than the sporadic explosions of an ammunition dump. It is, therefore, very largely a play without a façade. Before it can yield the fullness of its riches a Shakespearian drama must be penetrated by a Bradley or a Granville-Barker, but the audience in the theatre which can see little more than the frontage of the building gets quite enough for a good evening. Whatever may have been the private motives of the Elizabethan poet, he saw to it that on the level of showmanship his play supplied the demand for an unbroken surface of strong situations with words to match. With *Stratton* this surface is uneven because the lower stratum is constantly obtruding itself. One must "penetrate" *Stratton* or leave it unvisited. The melodramatic violence of the action doesn't therefore make it any more suited for performance in a theatre than those "fire-side" dramas of the last century. A play, as opposed to a poem, should aim at being at once a human revelation and what is popularly called a "show". In the theatre the former may only have place by courtesy of the latter. It is not that *Stratton* provides us with nothing to watch. On the contrary, the

actors are given several good opportunities, but on the plane of a "show" these scenes cannot hang together so as to form a sequence that holds the attention, because they are linked more by an inner logic of symbolism than by the logic of natural events. This is the danger of the psychological drama, as the flaw in that important mile-stone among verse-plays, *The Family Reunion*, has warned us. All this is clearly not news to Mr. Duncan, but to grant that he realises the existence of the problem is not to imply that he has solved it. He has however done better than Mr. Eliot, who, in his latest play, has reacted against his own example so far as to err at the opposite extreme. *The Cocktail Party* is too showy a "show" to fail at the box office, but considered as poetic drama I doubt whether the whole of it is worth the third act alone of *Stratton*.

The Strattons are an old family of land-owners, august, embedded in tradition. They are shown to us inhabiting a set not inappropriately reminiscent of Macbeth's fortress; but these are modern times, and the walls are hung with frowning ancestors. One of these, a painting of the seventeenth-century Stratton, who was a prominent regicide condemned by history for sacrificing justice to political expediency, is one of the most vital as it is also one of the most easily apprehended of the symbols. The present head of the house bears the same christian name as this early Stratton, as also does his son, whom we meet in company with his fiancée soon after the rise of the curtain. The reigning head of the house has gained his reputation chiefly as Counsel for Defence, the only role at Law, as he explains, wherein he would avoid being exposed to those temptations that brought about the moral ruin of his forebear. Judged only by what we see of him, he is a highly intelligent man, very

unsure of his moral character, and simultaneously jealous of his son's youth and bitterly scornful of what he sees of himself in the unoffending boy. We see him pass from the heights of arrogant pride through homicidal mania to repentance, and at last, when it is too late for him to be saved, to the saving grace of humility. We only have the assurance of all around him that he is a great man worth more than a moment of our sympathetic interest. ("On the stage," said Henry Arthur Jones, "character is in a vacuum until it is revealed by action.") The son, who is not the central figure, is in a far more interesting position. He also steals all the sympathy. It is his prominence in the third act that largely saves the play.

There are three other people brought early into the picture: the estate manager who reports that the local river is rising and getting out of hand; the local vicar (a character more real than Stratton himself), who for many years has been the object of the rich man's patronage, and who now, embittered with gratitude and the sense of personal failure, provokes Stratton into having the moral courage to crown his career by sitting on the bench as a judge (he is also writing his patron's biography, and with him, as with the river in spate, we are made to feel that the family past is boiling up to demand a final trial of the house of Stratton); and finally Maria, Sir Cory's wife, outwardly a figure normal and homely enough, but chiefly serving the drama as the embodiment of her husband's conscience.

The play had opened with a short mimed prologue in which Stratton strangles a woman (his wife) who first appears before us aged and blind and is transformed immediately before her death into youth and beauty. At the end of the first act we are still wondering what the significance of this extraordinary event can have been. Our interests are therefore retrospective. This prologue didn't have the effect of posing the sort of conundrum that rouses expectation and whose solution we can await in patience. How were we to know that we *weren't* expected to "see the point" straight away? We are made to feel ashamed of our short-

comings, only to discover much later on that we have wasted a lot of perfectly good humility.

A trial scene now shows Sir Cory at the seat of judgment where in effect (like his early namesake) he passes sentence of death upon himself. The nature of the crime under trial is almost identical with that which we saw Stratton himself commit in the prologue. The actual presentation of this long and very matter-of-factual scene does not seem to me to be essential to the action. The final speech only states certain aspects of the criminal's (Stratton's) character which in a more dramatic way might be inferred from the action which follows.

This harrowing experience doesn't leave Stratton either forewarned or chastened. He decides to resume his former way of life. The country estate meanwhile has been made over to his son. The young new landlord has just blown the locks to ease the swollen river, and the flood has already begun to inundate the village, when Stratton, like the deity of the angry waters, sinister, brooding foul work, pours back, as it were, unannounced, into the ancestral home. This is a telling moment, but it comes rather too late in an act where the writing, though often excellent, is for a drama too diffuse. Stratton takes command, gives vent to his jealous scorn of his son, and having seized the property which was his own gift, soon lets out that he has developed a passion for the girl who is now his daughter-in-law, and this in the presence of the young man's mother, who, finding she is no longer loved, immediately loses the power of sight. Stratton's "conscience" is now blind and ineffectual. There is nothing to stop him from manifestly becoming the monster we have all along suspected him to be at heart.

With this situation the splendid third act opens in an electrifying atmosphere, a stalemate of mingled hatred, fear, and morbid passion, not unworthy of Strindberg. And the situation is most ably exploited, the measure of success being that we are eventually made to believe our eyes when we witness a father shooting his only son at point-blank range. This is the culminating

point in a series of unlikely events, and yet it is the only one that is entirely convincing. One reason for this is, paradoxically, that it is relatively unexplained. Hitherto many subtle motives and mixed feelings have been given expression, but these clues have only too often added confusion to incredulity. (The significance, for instance, of Maria's blindness is inadequately planted, while the grounds given for Stratton's extreme jealousy are unacceptable.) But in the theatre there would be another reason for our slowness in the up-take. Mr. Duncan is not a derivative writer, but he is apt to modulate into patches of what I can only call "abstract writing", without concrete image or any summons to the listener's visual imagination. Only clergymen, I believe, and lecturers in moral philosophy would naturally talk like that, expressing abstract ideas in terms of abstract qualities so that, however our understanding may be engaged, on the vital plane of imagination the blind are left to lead the blind. These short passages denote a very *special* cast of mind which is almost certain to be alien to the character that utters them. What is alien to character would be fatal enough even if it were not also at first hearing obscure. Short though they are, these passages give the effect of the commentary on a play rather than the play itself—as though a company should try to dramatize and *perform* one of Dover Wilson's prefaces to Shakespeare. This style is a characteristic of Mr. Eliot's later work: only he can save it from tedium, and even he not always.

When the fourth act opens the interest sinks to the ordinary detective level of "Who-done-it?" Spice is added, however, by our sharing with the young wife her knowledge of the culprit. This is entertaining, but it belongs to the merely sensational type of play. The inquest is a sad anti-climax. But then comes the biggest surprise of all. The girl, who so far has shown no marked signs of character, least of all those of a Salome, proceeds to play cat-and-mouse with Stratton in an ecstasy of sexual sadism that Richard Strauss would certainly have hailed as a masterpiece and scored throughout for brass. It is a *tour de force* of writing. We are dazzled

by verbal fireworks, and we cannot believe a single word of it. It is devised for effect, and the effect is so powerful that the play, never very securely tethered, suddenly flies whirling off in a shower of sparks towards the upper regions of fantasy. Precisely what happens next I am myself enough of a sadist not to say. I will only add, in all fairness, that an incident follows which fully explains the prologue, but as before, the explanation raises a problem of its own. *Do we destroy what we love?* If this kind of aberration belongs solely to certain pathological cases, then it is fit for drama only if the patient is one who has so far gained our sympathy that we are able to identify ourselves with him, and so, through experience of his suffering, get a new insight into the human condition as a whole.

A play cannot easily carry more than one theme. I suspect, indeed it seems clear to me, that this drama touches on several groups of themes which are not necessarily related, and that their coming together in the denouement brings about not the wholesale resolution which is aimed at but a new conflict of ideas which the final curtain leaves unresolved. Prominent among these themes is a psychological study of atavism, which the dictionary describes as "recurrence of the disease or constitutional symptoms of an ancestor after the intermission of one or more generations". With this is linked the father-son relationship, and this in turn raises an aspect of the problem that is naïvely treated in *Peter Pan*, the desire of eternal youth. Then there is an element of the *Macbeth* theme, pride and ambition leading to the complete collapse of the moral sense, which in turn brings in the man-wife relationship and the problem of conscience; and this last theme is brought into prominence by yet another, an elderly man's St. Martin's Summer of sexual passion. This is not all, but it's enough for my purpose. That Stratton and the other leading characters are not dramatic realities is not due to a deficient sense of character in the author. Courtenay, the local vicar, is a real and most interesting personage who deserves a play to himself. He certainly deserves one more than Stratton. Even the coroner, a very small part, walks on to the stage as flesh and

blood among so many brilliantly intellectual abstractions. Mr. Duncan has true insight into character, but he has swathed and mummied his leading figures in the bands of their subtle relationship with one another. He has carried a virtue too far, so that we see the spiritual anatomy of his people, and not the people themselves. There is, as I have said, not enough of a "show", owing to his having been so concerned with his themes that he became in the process of writing more of an X-ray apparatus than a dramatist. So after all the involved symbolism is at the root of the matter. Mr. Duncan has set himself a task as intricate as the composition of an inverted fugue in six parts. The flaw in his play is a failure in counterpoint.

I have left myself no space to discuss the varying verse forms which Mr. Duncan employs. Here he is invariably interesting and almost always successful. The looser passages, though sometimes diffuse, are often forceful, and the more formal scenes in simpler language and shorter lines are on occasion very beautiful (a word not in favour with present-day critics of verse, I know, but it describes precisely what I mean, so I'll risk it). Alike for its points of success and failure this play will be discussed for a long time to come, and no serious student of contemporary drama should fail to make its acquaintance and form his own opinion.

CHRISTOPHER HASSALL.

## PROPHETS AND TRAMPS

*Prophesy to the Wind* by NORMAN NICHOLSON.  
(FABER, 8/6.)

*Henry Bly and Other Plays* by ANNE RIDLER.  
(FABER, 10/6.)

If a poet is to write captivatingly for the theatre, he must love and understand poetry and the theatre equally. Shakespeare did; Shelley did not: which is one reason for the popularity of *Macbeth* and the neglect of *The Cenci*. Given this equal love and understanding, a poet may lack even the aptitude for plot-building so vital to the success of your playwright in prose, and still succeed in winning his audience's ear. Marlow did, though *Faustus* and *The Jew of Malta* are abominably constructed and *Tamburlaine* is scarcely constructed at all; so does Fry.

Now Fry was a professional actor in Bath at the age of twenty. At twenty-seven he

directed the Tunbridge Wells repertory theatre and at thirty-three the Oxford Playhouse. He not only loves his theatre but understands it, as Shakespeare and Marlow did, with a lover's physical intimacy. Of whom, among contemporary poetic dramatists, can we say the same?

Certainly not yet of Mr. Nicholson and Mrs. Ridler, both of whom I know to be moving and evocative poets on the printed page; both of whom, for all I know, may love the theatre to distraction theoretically, but who lack the understanding (as apart from mere love) which is born only of apprenticeship and dedication.

Are poets, who wish to write for the theatre, any more exempt from that apprenticeship than their brother playwrights in prose?

There is no question but that much of the verse in Mr. Nicholson's *Prophesy to the Wind*

and Mrs. Ridler's *Henry Bly* is very good indeed. Mr. Nicholson's imagery ("*The mist settles on the turf like breath on a mirror*") magnificently takes the eye. Here is his vision of an England, where once

God walked down his newly turned creation  
Improvising birds and tossing them  
In handfuls through the sky,

now laid waste by nuclear fission:

You have seen  
Only what a sailor sees; the flounce and  
fringe  
At the edge of the world. But when you  
venture inland,  
As I did, moving south, in search of tin,  
You come across a country where the land  
Is dead as slag or cinders. Not even a rat  
Lives there; a worm, a snake; not even a  
bird flies over.  
The dust stings the eyes. Drink of the  
gulleys  
And soon you'll vomit rotten flesh and  
maggots  
And die within the hour. For fifty miles  
The clouds are the only things that move;  
the sky  
The only thing that changes. And on the  
rim  
Of this wide dyke of death, where life  
begins  
To crawl back like a thrashed dog, the grass  
Is black, the bark of the trees is scabbed and  
blistered,  
And buds burst in ulcers of festering green.  
That is the land of the people who once  
were great.

Here is Mrs. Ridler at her rarer but equally  
magnificent best:

Now I can sleep. O I must have sleep,  
For the clod-foot middle age is coming,  
And those shrieking birds of grief  
At any turn descend from a clear sky.  
While we are young, they never quite  
descend,  
And passing, we forget them. When we are  
older

They swoop straight on us. But that's when  
weariness worsts us.

I must rest; then in the morning  
I'll be myself again; my own good heart  
again.

So much for the poetry. What of the play?

Mr. Nicholson's choric prologue announces  
a theme rich in dramatic promise. The time  
(with England under atomic bombardment)  
is the future, and the future is out of joint.

Roofs, towers, towns,  
Roar up the flue of the sky.  
The mountains flicker like candlewicks, the  
seas  
Are boiling over the shore.

The spirit of the hero, John, a young miner, is

Whirled away with the draught  
Up the chimney of time

to a yet more distant future where England  
has reverted to the unmechanized life of our  
rude Viking fathers and lives in vassalage to  
local clan rule by a reasonably benevolent  
Icelandic invader.

The background-detail is imaginatively  
and indeed adroitly sketched-in at the opening  
of the play proper, which introduces  
Hallbjorn, the ageing ruler of a Cumbrian  
dale; Ulf, his brother, a shepherd; Vikar,  
their piratical sailor-kinsman come home to  
wed Freya, Hallbjorn's daughter; and Bessie,  
the British family-thrall. One's natural  
interest in the way these people live (Ulf, in a  
non-metallic age, is enraptured at the discovery  
of an old mudguard and Bessie is mocked for  
her uncomprehending use of the obsolete  
greeting "Howdedoo!") coupled with a foreknowledge  
that this is the very family into which John  
must shortly be reincarnated keeps the first  
act going until the hero's arrival at its close.  
Good! One senses an Interval susurrous with  
speculation, which is as it should be. But from  
the opening of Act II the play disintegrates as  
surely as Mr. Nicholson's radioactive England.  
This is in small part due to the equal banality of

the plot's development and the play's final, anti-climatic "message". John (need one say?) falls in love with Freya to Vikar's discomfiture. In a disused mineshaft he discovers (aha!) an old dynamo, with which he threatens to recreate machinery among people who have forgotten how to use it. Hallbjorn, on humanitarian grounds, forbids him to do so. "Sir," says John, reaching the apex of his tedious argument at the end of Act III:

You misunderstand the machine. It will perform  
Only what you ask for—the choice shall be with you,  
Not with me at all. Once men chose war  
And the machine made war, but now it is yours to choose  
Peace and power and plenty.

Here's flatness! Is this the commonplace for which we booked in advance, supped early, changed into a clean collar, paid the bus-conductor, the box-office, the programme girl, and waited patiently through two and three-quarter acts? Not quite. John is killed at Hallbjorn's order, but Freya's revelation that she is already pregnant with John's child moves her father to repentance. His grandson shall have access to the Machine, and rule the dale when he comes of age. So long as he *tries* to do good, the risk is worth taking. "*It is the attempt that matters.*"

Before I succumb to this last twist of the platitudinous knife and praise Mr. Nicholson for having *attempted* to write a good play instead of blaming him for having written a bad one, let me say that a good cook could have made better broth from the same ingredients. If you want to make a raw potato eatable, the simplest way is to throw it into water and let the water boil. Mr. Nicholson's hackneyed message, however true, is a very raw potato indeed, but one which could at least have been made digestible by surrounding it with the heat and hubble-bubble of personal conflict. The ingredients for conflict are there; but it remains conflict of a tepid and impersonal sort for the reason that the persons of the play (and here is the root

cause of its failure) are never, in the full sense, persons at all. John, cross-examined at his first appearance by Freya, cannot remember his home, his mother, his brother, his sister or his wife—if indeed he ever had one. This is all right. But, reading on, one begins to suspect that Mr. Nicholson cannot remember much about them either—which is all wrong. For John to come alive, it is necessary that his creator should potentially be able to write even that part of John's biography which an audience has no need explicitly to know. He must, as it were, have filled in a mental *pro forma* for a hypothetical *Who's Who* before committing a syllable of John's speech to paper. Then what John says and does will arise out of what John was and is. Jane Austen, visiting an art exhibition in Spring Gardens, instantly "recognized" a society portrait as a portrait of her Mrs. Bingley. "She is dressed in a white gown with green ornaments, which convince me of what I always supposed, that green was a favourite colour with her. I dare say Mrs. Darcy will be in yellow." Could Mr. Nicholson tell us John's favourite colour? Not, I think, if one may judge from his first stage direction, which reads: *Enter ULF, carrying a queer assortment of articles which he has retrieved from an old dump or some such place.* The molehill is symptomatic of the mountain. Shaw could never have written "some such place". He would have known—just as he would have known, if asked, the name of Tanner's favourite dish or Candida's size in shoes. So John is practically a cipher; and since all the play's virtual conflict centres on John, there can be no conflict in fact—which means there can be no "theatre". To object that John is a symbol rather than a human being is a poet's excuse, not a playwright's. Almost everyone in *The Master Builder* is a symbol; but they also live.

The symbols in Mrs. Ridler's three short plays are doubly dead, partly because (with the exception of the stuttering wife in *Henry Bly*) she has not thought to "humanize" them and partly because one is never made sufficiently aware of what, in fact, they symbolize. Granted that the central figure in Eliot's *Cocktail Party* is a figure of mystery,



but (first) is not his *purpose* manifest and (secondly) is he not at least a character in his own right who moves among other figures of flesh and blood? It is only eight pages from the end of Mrs. Ridler's title-play that, at a first reading, we satisfactorily identify her ubiquitous Tramp. "There is a way to peace," he tells Henry, who is stumbling down the primrose path, "if you go back, right back to where you started. This is the way." So the Tramp is not Christ, as one vaguely suspected, but the *potential* Christ in all of us. If we are to recapture His spirit, we must fight all the way back to a distant day of innocence which existed before our own, individual Fall. It is a fine concept, but one which should not be allowed to proceed from the lips of a symbolic figure identified so late that we have to fight all the way back through our recollection of a highly complex work to appreciate symbol or concept fully. Mrs. Ridler must know that the spectator is not a reader. He cannot, from the auditorium, stop the play and see how a symbolic cap fits in retrospect by having previous passages performed a second time. Nor can any good playwright be so presumptuous as to rely on a spectator's wishing to see his play twice. His business is to make a spectator understand enough, at a first visit, to want to pay it a second. A symbol should be identified at the earliest possible moment in that part of a play's action which it is designed to affect. Hilda Wangel is perhaps the most purely symbolic and least "human" of all Ibsen's characters, barring a few in Peer Gynt; yet we know precisely what she symbolizes in the splendid split-second *before* her first entrance, as she knocks imperiously at the Master Builder's door.

The chief defect of *Henry Bly*, *The Mask* and *The Missing Bridegroom* is that all Mrs. Ridler's characters travel similarly *incognito*. Why does the publican suddenly appear as the porter of Hell Gate at the end of *Henry Bly*? Who and what is the verger in *The Missing Bridegroom* and how is it significant

that the church organist is later revealed as a publisher who has printed a book by the Bride? If only these characters existed on the human level as well as being symbols, I would gladly revisit the theatre as many times as I have revisited *Hamlet* (and will revisit *The Cocktail Party*) to penetrate their disguise. Mrs. Ridler may oppose that they were never conceived as figures of flesh, blood, bone and brain, but rather as figures of fantasy or morality-play abstractions. If this be so, I still maintain that without their anthropomorphic trappings they can have no place in the theatre. Mary Rose was a figure of fantasy but, whatever her whimsy limitations, she had character. So had Puck, the Ghost of Hamlet's father and the Angel in Bridie's *Tobias*. The figure of Poverty in Skelton's *Magnificence* was a morality-play abstraction, but (rest his rheumatic bones!) he had joints:

A, my bonys ake, my limmys be sore;  
 Alasse, I have the cyataca full evyll in my  
 hippe!  
 Alasse, where is youth that was wont for to  
 skyppe?  
 I am lowsy and unlykyng, and full of  
 scurffe,  
 My colour is tawny, colouryd as turffe;  
 I am Poverte, that all men doth hate.

"I am Poverte." Let the passage point its double lesson of identifying dramatic symbols early and clothing their abstractions in the tactile stuff of humanity.

There is nothing wrong with the Play of Ideas or the Play of Symbols, unless they be written too completely at the expense of character, in which case they cease to be plays. If poets do not hold with this, they had better stick to print; for Melpomene and Thalia are mistresses as strict as the other seven Muses, and this has been their law since Oedipus put out his eyes and Lucifer in the York Play fell through a trap-door to Hell, crying: "Ow! Deuce!"

PAUL DEHN.

## WHAT A PARTY!

*The Cocktail Party* by T. S. ELIOT.

(FABER 10/6.)

I should like to say right away that I have not yet seen Mr. Eliot's new play, *The Cocktail Party*, on the stage. Therefore I have no idea what a skilful producer in charge of a talented cast can make of what may seem to the reader to be unrewarding material.

First, the personalities of the play. Two of the characters, a husband and wife, are described by their psychiatrist as "a man who finds himself incapable of loving . . . and a woman who finds that no man can love her". A third character "can't pretend that her trouble is interesting", though its complications are inexorably investigated. A fourth writes "second-rate films", but is redeemed by being "naturally good". Two of the three remaining characters are deliberately—and with great success—presented as bores. One of them, Alexander MacColgie Gibbs, is a blatant caricature.

Edward Chamberlayne, the man "incapable of loving", is one of the most pitifully conceived objects in the whole range of drama. He has no spark of affection for his wife; he lives on unsatisfactory terms with her; he complains merely of annoyance and inconvenience when she leaves him; he shows no anxiety to have her back, except to "find out what happened . . . during the five years that they were married"; he displays only tepid interest in the revelation of her infidelity; he has failed to notice that she is on the edge of a nervous breakdown; he finds no enjoyment in his affair with a young and pretty woman; he dislikes his chosen profession. We are hardly surprised that Lavinia—who likes to think of herself as "a passionate woman", but isn't—describes her poor husband as "a man with no sense of humour". His own description of himself is: "the dull, the implacable, . . . the indomitable spirit of mediocrity".

Now this negative and unpromising material is hardly reassuring. In comedy or in

tragedy we insist that our characters should be vital: vital at all costs, even in disillusion or indecision. They must show fear, or greed, or pity, or jealousy, or love. They must be warm and human. In the widest sense of the word, we must feel *sympathy* for them. Mr. Eliot, on the contrary, presents us with a set of devitalized dummies. He is impatient with his unfortunate creatures: they are never allowed to know exactly who or where they are—or who or where anyone else is. Characters in plays, however stupid or contemptible they are supposed to be, have a right to be invested with a life of their own, with individual thoughts and emotions. The characters in *The Cocktail Party* are only puppets to be humiliated, lectured and preached at by the author, thinly disguised as the only person in the drama gifted with initiative, omniscience, and a title. If the characters take little interest in their destinies, it is unlikely that they can persuade the audience to do so: particularly when their creator himself appears to have no sympathy for them and to consider them inherently trivial.

With regard to the theme of *The Cocktail Party* and the manner in which it is handled, there is an important point to be considered. For good or ill a play depends for its existence upon an audience. The play may be dull or brilliant, conventional or orthodox, but the representative audience asks the same crude question: "What happens next?" The dramatist may scold, the spectators will have their story: a red-blooded story, at that. A play depends for survival upon a sturdy plot and what the good Bottom called "a part to tear a cat in". That is why it is hard to predict survival, except among the culture-vultures, for Mr. Eliot's anaemic fable.

What happens in *The Cocktail Party*, briefly, is this: Edward and Lavinia find a solution to their personal problem in mutual resignation and compromise, while Celia Coplestone, a good-time girl redeemed by a "psychiatrist", joins "some nursing order . . .

a very austere one" and departs for the Far East to embrace the sufferings of "the Saint in the desert":

hunger, damp, exposure,  
Bowel trouble, and the fear of lions:

and ultimately, death.

Both these solutions sound depressing, but the fate of the married couple I find, in a human sense, degrading. In this play Mr. Eliot conspires, once more, to rob us of our tragedy, to represent us to posterity and to ourselves as ignoble and unheroic. In general he has been content, in the past, to compare us unfavourably with our ancestors or with the angels, but in *The Cocktail Party* he reveals the full extent of his distaste for the grey world in which he moves, and which he seeks to improve. In *The Cocktail Party* he is trying to shoo us out again—"not with a bang, but a whimper".

Yeats wrote: "The arts are all the bridal chambers of joy. No tragedy is legitimate unless it leads some great character to his final joy." That indomitable man said the same thing in his poetry:

They know that Hamlet and Lear are gay;  
Gaiety transforming all that dread.

There is no "final joy" for the Chamberlaynes, only a dismal humiliation. Even for the tortured Celia there is no "final joy": Sir Henry Harcourt-Reilly denies it to her. In the theme of *The Cocktail Party* there is no genuine exaltation, no protest, no gaiety, no tragedy: only a grim harangue from a lay-preacher. "All who have meant good work with their whole hearts," observed Stevenson, "have done good work. Every heart that has beat strong and cheerfully has left a hopeful impulse behind it in the world, and bettered the tradition of mankind." The heart of the man who wrote *The Cocktail Party* did not, in my opinion, beat strong and cheerfully.

The verse in which the play is written seems to me for the most part to clog the action and hinder the exploration, on the all-important dramatic level, of the successive

states of mind of the characters. This is chiefly due to mannerisms which Mr. Eliot has carried over from his major poems, mannerisms quite unsuited to the clear clean expository line demanded in vigorous dramatic writing. Examples of this involved paradoxical style appear on every page. For example:

There is certainly no purpose in remaining  
in the dark  
Except long enough to clear from the mind  
The illusion of having ever been in the light.  
The fact that you can't give a reason for  
wanting her  
Is the best reason for believing that you  
want her.

Speeches in plays should be immediately intelligible to the listener at the precise moment when the actor speaks them. Lines which only yield their secrets after visual inspection do not belong in plays, but poetry.

Continuous use of these devices, coupled with the monotony of the rhythms, also impedes the pace of *The Cocktail Party*. Perhaps the foremost concern of a dramatist is to give his play impetus, to impart to it at least the illusion of moving rapidly onwards towards the climax. To read *The Cocktail Party* is to move through a nightmare, where everything happens at a quarter the normal speed. For this the opaque quality of the verse is largely to blame.

However, the verse does enable the writer to give an appearance of profound significance to bits of psychology and philosophizing which are in fact pedestrian:

I suppose that most women  
Would feel degraded to find that a man  
With whom they thought they had shared  
something wonderful  
Had taken them only as a passing diversion.  
Oh, I dare say that you deceived yourself;  
But that's what it was, no doubt.

Or—

Half of the harm that is done in this world  
Is due to people who want to feel important.

The verse is also rigid and uniform. Everyone speaks the same language, at exactly the same speed and using the same vocabulary. Whatever person is holding forth, the voice is the voice of Mr. Eliot.

The kind of wit with which the play is sparsely studded is of this type:

JULIA: He was very clever at repairing  
clocks;  
And he had a remarkable sense of  
hearing—  
The only man I ever knew who could  
hear the cry of bats.

PETER: Hear the cry of bats?

JULIA: He could hear the cry of bats.

CELIA: But how do you know he could hear  
the cry of bats?

JULIA: Because he said so. And I believed  
him.  
and—

This is the first time  
I've ever seen you without Lavinia  
Except for the time she got locked in the  
lavatory  
And couldn't get out.

and—

A common interest in moving pictures  
Frequently brings young people together.

Mr. Eliot also derives a fair amount of unsophisticated amusement from proper names: Lithuania, Montenegro, Albania, Jugoslavia, Kinkanja. Also Dedham, Peacehaven and Bologolomsky. There are also two jokes about sin (pages 119 and 120). So far as I can see there is very little evidence of a sense of humour in *The Cocktail Party*. It is a singularly mirthless comedy. Which is a pity, because for dramatic purposes even bores should somehow contrive to be interesting bores. But in *The Cocktail Party* even the bottle of champagne turns out to be flat. I may quite well be wrong about Mr. Eliot's sense of humour: I was unable to applaud him as Old Possum, or in any of his other humorous rôles. To my mind his funniest poem was about a hippopotamus.

With the curious avuncular quality of the wit we should couple the odd effect of unworldliness which the play produces. In spite of all the universal truths a sort of unawareness emerges. The author appears to have little of the hard instinct for life which is obligatory for the dramatist. Even the names of his characters are unconvincing in a peculiar way: Lavinia Chamberlayne, Celia Coplestone, Julia Shuttlethwaite. I must confess I thought the most uproarious part of this inhuman comedy was the account of how Celia, the nineteen-thirty-one type of flapper, met her death as a nursing-sister at the hands of unlettered blacks. Later they

erected a sort of shrine for Celia  
Where they brought offerings of fruit and  
flowers,  
Fowls, and even sucking-pigs.

Some corner of a foreign field that is for ever  
Mayfair . . .

Some other reader with a touch of blasphemy in his soul may also find poor Celia's "reformation" comic: a kind of counterpart to the birthday-cake business in *The Family Reunion*. Early on in the play this feeling of unreality was heightened for me in a strange manner: the comic song solemnly "scored from the author's dictation by Miss Mary Trevelyan" is one of the frankest and most brutal ballads in the repertoire of the fighting Forces. Mr. Eliot may of course be aware of this, and his bowdlerized version could be the finest stroke in the play, falling as it does from the lips of a society psychiatrist.

Mr. Eliot's most calculated effect has been to hale his audience into the theatre under pretence of regaling them with comedy, and then to threaten them with sin, salvation, hell-fire, sanatoriums and Guardians. There would be no grounds for quarrel here if such sentiments had been presented discreetly and dramatically, not in the form of a pompous and long-winded sermon. When Ibsen was writing *A Doll's House* he incorporated in his early drafts long discussions on heredity, natural selection and the effect of environ-

ment. He considered that these discussions were of absorbing interest. Yet as the play grew the discussions were either completely expunged or transformed into rich individual shadings. For ultimately, as Ibsen knew, a play must present a story, whether the

dramatist likes it or not: a well-wrought story involving vivid, unforgettable, unique men and women. In my opinion *The Cocktail Party* fails to be this kind of play. I thought it lacked—what? *Humanity*.

JON MANCHIP WHITE.

## THE RECOVERY OF TRADITION

*On the Hill: A Book of New Verse* by JOHN MASEFIELD. (HEINEMANN 122 pp., 8/6.)

*Wentworth Place and Other Poems* by ROBERT GITTINGS. (HEINEMANN, 75 pp., 8/6.)

*The Mongrel and Other Poems* by RONALD DUNCAN. (FABER & FABER, 95 pp., 8/6.)

There is nothing in these three volumes deserving the name of great poetry, though there are a few lyrics that might interest anthologists in the year 2050. In the present deliquescence of poetic tradition, however, competent writers must be content with meagre gains from hard labour. Their absolute achievement is less important than that they should be moving in the right direction. Except for the unaccountable genius, their best hope is to be the Surreys and Gascoignes heralding a happier day. And the critic of contemporary verse perhaps does most service in considering its possible contribution to the recovery of tradition, without which a future for poetry is scarcely thinkable.

The Laureate has serenely disregarded the innovations of the last thirty years—legitimately, since his style was formed before “Georgian” became a term of abuse. His latest volume has the virtues and vices of that era. Serious thought is notably absent, though there is a good deal of solemn feeling offered as a substitute. For a century the

poet’s task has been to “feel”; intellect has been ceded to the scientist. As Marx was the true heir of Adam Smith, so is the surrealist of the pre-Raphaelite. But in some quarters there has arisen to-day a healthy demand for poetry that will address itself to the whole mind, including the rational intelligence. Mr. Masefield preserves the forms of reason but his larger assertions have the vague grandiloquence of uncensored feeling:

Man is nothing

To this quiet, full of power, to this effort,  
full of peace.

—which is apparently “untiring Nature” (*The Hill*). The long poem which gives the volume its title is said in the “blurb” to be a religious allegory. It does not have any of the marks of allegory, and one of its functions is to propound the old rationalistic “explanation” of the Resurrection: that Christ was taken down from the Cross alive. The dogmatic core of the Gospel is denied, and sympathy with Christian aspirations is expressed by emotional assertion. The style suffers through the weakness of thought behind it. (N.B. This is not Christian prejudice. A well-argued anti-Christian thesis would produce better poetry than a sentimental, irrational sympathy for Our Lord’s teaching.) There is too much

generality, too little precision: of man we are told:

He seeks the subtle link that runs  
From dead dust to ecstatic suns,  
Change is his essence.

"Ecstatic" I do not understand, nor how change can be the essence of anything. Poetry is not more careless of meaning than philosophy, and if it use the terms of that discipline it should use them correctly.

Mr. Masfield has a sureness in metric which comes of a good ear and lifelong practice: the younger generation should not too readily assume that there is nothing to learn from him. His diction is less secure, having an uneasy Georgian oscillation between archaic and contemporary: there is no excuse for the "chickens twain" in *Blown Hilcote Manor*, where the diction is mostly modern and where some lines are very good indeed:

Under the pampas at the border-side  
A humping rabbit shewed a flash of scut.

Mr. Masfield is faithful in little things, even if in dealing with ideas he has not the same loving exactitude. There is a longish poem about a match at fisticuffs and why it never took place. The year is 1829, the material well mastered. It is a spirited piece with some amusing passages in a mock-heroic vein. Again the young might learn something. They might learn that it is not necessary to penetrate the deepest mysteries of the universe in every poem. There is a shocking dearth of light verse nowadays. Another outstanding poem in this collection is *Tristan and Isolt*. It is not made clear whether this is or is not a translation; if it is, I am unacquainted with the original. It is a simple narrative, told with economy and considerable beauty. An affection for Bishop Henry King causes me to select an untypical line for quotation. "The life-long comment of the pulse" is a good re-working of an old conceit.

*Wentworth Place* appears to be the first volume of poems by Mr. Robert Gittings

and I assume that he is the youngest of my three writers. If I am right, it is interesting to note that he derives his inspiration and technique chiefly from poets earlier than the present century. Except in *Crossing the Andes* he is metrically regular, sometimes lacking in subtlety of rhythm but usually employing the traditional variations, or somewhat exceeding them in the modern manner. He has attempted a good many types of metre in this small volume and shows a healthy interest in technique. Diction, especially syntax, is certainly not that of contemporary speech, though there are a number of images of a twentieth-century character (emotional hints rather than intellectual explications) which produce an occasional sense of incongruity. There is no reason why the diction of poetry should be colloquial—it all depends on what you are doing—but I believe that it should at least be founded on contemporary idiom. Mr. Gittings is too literary and derived. At times he has the voice of the seventeenth century:

A piece of darkness, man is born  
To life no less amazed than birth  
In thought and act and purpose torn,  
Compound of unaccounted earth.

But a seventeenth-century writer would not have left the second line so obscure. Ought there not to be some punctuation? But even then what would it mean? And what is "unaccounted earth"? Rhythm somewhat too regular and some tricks of phrasing suggest at other times the eighteenth century:

Dusk and calm on Agrigento,  
While the peasants, bale on head,  
Trudged between the dusty vineyards,  
Each to his acquainted bed,  
And at last the living slumbered,  
Undistinguished from the dead.

Nineteenth-century influence predominates, however:

All this belongs to you: sea, air, and sun,  
Great incense-burners over mortal graves,  
Feed and renew on us when all is done,  
Masters in death, but now in life our slaves.

Mr. Gittings has sensibility and skill, important gifts. But he has not yet discovered and settled down to a style. What is worse, he is seduced by words and rhythms into talking a good deal of high-sounding nonsense. In what sense are sea, air and sun said to be incense-burners over mortal graves? Incense-burners seem to imply worship, worshippers and a God. Then why are the elements "masters in death"? Even apart from the religious implication the phrase is weak: the elements do not "master" dead bodies; they do to them what they can't help doing. Nor are they slaves of the living or most of us would order more sunshine. I do not think that this is mere quibbling. Poetry should be as precise in its use of imagery as philosophy in its use of abstraction. Of course some images may be used for pictorial or emotional suggestion, but if they are used functionally, as these are, then the functions must be relevant. Mr. Gittings does not always distinguish between emotional rant and poetic statement. But he must have been very young when some of these poems were written:

Now, while the universe seems pure  
 And easy to our hand,  
 Turn to me, touch me, make me sure  
 That you too understand  
 Its pains.

At times, however, Mr. Gittings has caught the very thing we need to-day: a pleasant middling manner, a social tone. The series of poems bearing the title of the book deals with aspects of the life of Keats. This was tactless because comparisons *will* suggest themselves, but the sections with least pretension, in a low-pitched dramatic manner, are interesting:

Debit

Our tragedy refused at the Lane and the  
 Garden,  
 Result, no cash—poor Keats.

*Roman Villa in England*, a short descriptive poem, has restraint, definition and power.

*The Tomb of Theron* has good and bad patches:

What we build, the world around us,  
 Is a snail-shell, which each back  
 Shoulders to its predilection  
 On its individual track,  
 And, our silver journey taken,  
 Crumples off for birds to crack.

This has an obvious beauty and an appearance of clarity and simplicity. The only trouble is that I can't see what it means, and where I think I can it seems not to be true. The imagery is imprecise in application. Why is *our* journey silver? Who are the birds? The next stanza has a clarity and controlled irony that deserve development:

In this tomb the unknown Theron  
 And known Pirandello share  
 Competence of land and lodging  
 Who in life's appointments were  
 Twenty hundred years divergent  
 On the path that brought them there.

This is a pleasant little volume, its matter drawn chiefly from nature and history, its manner recalling forgotten elegancies. I should like to make three suggestions to its author: first, that he should further explore his lighter, "middle" style; second, that he should relate his language more closely to the spoken idiom (rather a matter of rhythms and word order than vocabulary), while discarding the minor modernity, the residual symbolism, of some of his imagery; third, that he should think more, examine his experience more closely. Just now he is too apt to capture a vague emotion in fine phrases, and his poetry, as I have said, seems to derive more from literature than life.

*The Mongrel* is without doubt the most important volume of the three. I wish these poems had been dated so as to give an indication of Mr. Duncan's poetic development. His poetry is founded on authentic experience. He shows, indeed, a wide acquaintance with European literature: there are several free renderings of medieval poems, from originals in Provençal, French, Spanish, Galician, Old and Middle English,

and Middle Scots—rather a Poundian achievement. Yet even here the poetic experience is not merely derived; it has been re-created and the poems are rightly his. And whereas Mr. Masfield continues and Mr. Gittings revives a past idiom, the special interest of Mr. Duncan's verse lies in his effort to fuse ancient and modern. He neither dwells in the past nor, like too many modern poets, impatiently rejects it. His diction begins with the contemporary spoken word; he retains, so far as may be, the order and rhythm of speech. Usually, though not always, he employs regular and traditional metres, even on one occasion attempting the canzone, but they are all counterpointed with speech-rhythm in the way the twentieth century relearnt of the seventeenth.

Moreover, Mr. Duncan has done some thinking, though he does not always come to precise or easily ascertainable conclusions. The title poem attempts a sort of comment upon existence, but its uneasy tone hints the writer's suspicion of failure: "Yes, this is all very muddled and all very mystic," he observes. And

All our conversations are soliloquies.  
We are talking in each other's sleep. Not  
very encouraging.  
No wonder this poem is so inarticulate.

And you cannot tell whether you are  
coming or I'm going.  
No, it is not that I have nothing to com-  
municate  
But that nobody will lift the receiver off the  
telephone

As it rings in an empty room, an agony of  
privacy,  
*Reductio ad absurdam* [sic] of self-expression.

To communicate on the theme of failure of communication is a difficult task but it has been performed successfully in two different ways by Mr. T. S. Eliot: symbolically in *The Waste Land* ("I have heard the key . . .") and by a very careful use of prosaic, rather abstract, language in *East Coker* ("Trying to learn to use words . . ."). Mr. Duncan in

this passage is *merely* colloquial, lax, and has too many *undeveloped* symbols. *The Mongrel* is almost the longest and clearly the most ambitious poem of the collection but it does not entirely succeed. Some quasi-religious experience is to be conveyed but I am baffled by it. So is Mr. Duncan. It is true that in all religious experience there is an element of mystery which can be expressed in poetry only by indirections. But there is a difference between mystery and—Mr. Duncan's own word—muddle. The poem is impressive, however; there are fine passages, and the opening section, on natural evil, has a sinister potency:

Does the terror of the tiger's tooth  
Tear through a horse's dream?  
And the fierce heat of a forest fire  
Still burn within the panther's quiet brain  
As with cautious paw it treads the night  
Remembering the soft embers' cruel pain?

There are two opposite tendencies in Mr. Duncan's verse, one to an almost oriental luxuriousness of imagery, the other to a naked austerity which is in danger of ceasing to be poetic. On the one hand

. . . the drunken sun  
reels to the horizon  
and spills his dregs of wine and leaves  
Darkness as our mistress again,  
and the night breeze our silken sheet.

On the other:

As to the door, observe the stable and copy  
that;  
Make it of seasoned wood that won't warp  
as mine did.  
Don't buy a bolt get a smith to make one—  
Strength, not ornament, is necessary.  
And that goes for a pig-sty, and poetry.

True, but each can benefit from a little judicious ornament. Simple rustic builders always decorated, as sturdy surviving Tudor cottages bear witness. Only a technical age despises what from the utilitarian point of view is unnecessary. Mr. Duncan should aim



at a stylistic *via media* between over-decoration and nudity. Where he does use abundant imagery, there is sometimes a tendency to sacrifice careful and exact expression to a vague emotional effect:

Into the silent sky's blue fountain of white  
light  
The alert lark lifts and rising  
Falls into its element of air  
And for the thirsty sun it spills  
An avalanche of liquid notes.

This is dangerously near to having no meaning at all. "Blue fountain of white light", "rising/Falls", "avalanche of liquid", look as though they ought to be clever conceits, but there is no intelligible point made by them. There is no reason, either, why the sun is thirsty except that the poet wants it to be. What the stanza chiefly does is bundle together bird, sun, air, light, water, snow, in an amorphous heap of suggestions derived from past poetic habits. (Even Mr. Duncan can be parasitic sometimes. It would be as well for poets to avoid skylarks for a century or so.) Yet the next stanza of this unequal poem (*To Plough*) is admirable in depth and precision:

The patient earthworm leavening the soil  
The wood louse in its wilderness of bark  
The fig tree propped against an old cob  
wall  
All meditate within, and in their element  
exist,  
And being so, are eyes for the blind earth,  
and thus  
Stare back into the vision and see the sight  
of God.

There is proof enough here that simplicity and carefully used functional metaphor are no enemies to the mystery that poetry is ever seeking to express. We should like more of this. Mr. Duncan has the ingredients of poetry—deeply felt experience, intellectual power and technical efficiency—but he has not yet learnt how far the process of composition is one of sifting and classification rather than accumulation. The three middle

stanzas with their sense of oppressive luxury are out of place in the otherwise lovely *Briony* (p. 66): the tiger, the passion fruit, the vines go badly with the waterfall, the wind and the heather spider of the opening stanzas and the desperation merging into the quiet petition of the final couplet:

Dear Jesus, watch this child for me:  
In loving her, I love thee.

There is a general lack of what classical criticism rightly stressed, decorum. I regret in this connection the occasional "cleverness" and what looks like attitudinising—especially the awful residue of that daring-young-man sort of thing which was so popular in the 'thirties. A minor instance is the use of naughty words or words no longer in polite use. These are not "bold"; they are merely irritating and distracting. It was unwise to conclude the interesting *Canzone* with this childish defiance:

Those who dress to please the fashion  
may turn their arse to you: kick it with  
passion!

*The Short History of Texas*, the longest poem here, is a queer thing, staccato notes in *terza rima*, a sociological manifesto that has not been fused into poetry. Parts of the *Extracts from The Eagle Has Two Heads* are good and there are good passages also in the oratorio *Mea Culpa*, though the latter suffers in isolation from the music. The shorter pieces are the most satisfactory. *Briony* and *To Plough* are best among the original poems in the "adorned" style, while *The Mason's Epitaph* stands out among the austere:

He was neither prince nor politician,  
no priest and no poet,  
as the world knows them; but he was the man  
to smooth stones, make each fit

straight to his quoin, and thus used less  
mortar  
than contract masons waste,  
with the next job as their present master,  
in their slow toil of haste.

The style here fits its subject and the poem is given a shape; the result is a memorable achievement. But the *Practical Ballads* though practical are scarcely ballads:

The size: Floor eight foot by eight foot  
good—  
and slope off to a gutter;  
pig's urine swells the bean pods; cover  
from flies.

Here too the style suits the matter, but the matter is almost all practical and therefore the result is not poetic. Perhaps these ballads arose from a passing impatience with poetry. Hesiod can give practical advice like that but he does give something more, and it is the something more which, from a literary point of view, is important. The poems translated from or "suggested by" medieval originals are best of all. An aubade after the Provençal is lovely; a famous fifteenth-century carol is tactfully modernised; *The Miller's Lament* (after Dunbar), with that favourite medieval refrain "Timor mortis conturbat me", has grim realism and pathos.

That these poems should be the best is a sad comment on our age (not on the author), but that they should be attempted is a good augury for the future.

Different as they are, these three poets have certain qualities in common. They all use traditional metres, with more or less freedom of treatment; they all write to be understood; and they all look for inspiration to the poetry of the past. Each of them has included translations among the poems he presents. If Mr. Duncan and Mr. Gittings are in any way typical, then the poets of today are less impatient of tradition than were those of the previous two decades. And if the future of poetry depends on the recovery of poetic tradition, then each of these volumes has its place in the process: Mr. Masfield representing the recent past; Mr. Gittings exploring earlier modes of expression, though not losing all contact with the present; Mr. Duncan, perhaps most valuably of all, creating a synthesis of past and present which is strictly contemporary.

S. L. BETHELL.



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