P. G. Worsthorne

America—Conscience or Shield?

WHEN one considers objectively all the reasons for European anxiety about the United States, it soon becomes apparent that they cannot, in any rational way, account for the depth of anti-Americanism as it exists today. "McCarthyism," disagreements over China, nostalgia for the *pax Britannica*, a debtor's resentment—all of these are to some extent relevant, but even taken together, they do not add up to a valid explanation of that almost passionate feeling of resentment which provokes many Europeans, looking at the United States and the Soviet Union, to say "a plague on both your houses." A common solution to this riddle is to suggest that "we expect so much more" from the United States, which, although quite true, only raises the problem to another level. For what is this "so much more" that we expect from the United States—and are we justified in demanding it?

Almost any random study of the debates on foreign affairs in the House of Commons or the French Assembly, or even casual eavesdropping on conversations in a London or Parisian bus, reveal a fundamental difference in the standards that European opinion demands from the United States and those it exacts from others. For some reason, Europe accepts the idea that America is a country with a difference, from whom it is reasonable to demand an exceptionally altruistic standard of behaviour; it feels perfectly justified in pouring obloquy on shortcomings from this ideal; and also, perhaps inevitably, it seems to enjoy every example of a fall from grace which contemporary America provides. Such a reaction, it may be argued, is inevitable among close friends, who always tend both to exaggerate each other's virtues and feel undue sorrow about each other's faults. But this only brings us back to the original query—why does Europe, in its relations with America, indulge in this quirk of friendship in a way which individual European countries, however close their links, would never think of emulating among themselves?

There is, of course, no simple answer, but some light may be thrown on the problem by considering the drastic transformation of the American role in the world since the end of the last war. Much has been written about the need for America to adjust itself to its new position as the unchallenged leader of an armed coalition facing a grave external threat. But little is ever written about the need for Europe to adjust itself to the new America that must perforce emerge from this American reappraisal. The adjustment called for is radical. Hitherto, despite the worse efforts of Dickens, Mrs. Trollope, and Hollywood in caricaturing American social customs, the United States had retained its role, forged in 1776, as the political conscience of the democratic world. This role has all along been challenged by the intellectuals, and most particularly by the American intellectuals themselves, who have been at pains to point out the difference between the American ideal and the American reality; but, as the ceaseless demand for free immigration suggests, millions of Europeans still regard America both as Eldorado and refuge. Since the Second World War, however, she has

PRODUCED 2003 BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

become the European shield instead of the European conscience. The two functions are mutually incompatible. The responsibilities of the United States for the defence of the free world inevitably tend to weaken her potency as the symbol and touchstone of political liberty, and her role as the conscience of Europe inevitably tends to weaken the effectiveness of the shield. As Mr. George Kennan has persuasively argued, the moralistic approach to foreign policy, necessary for the fulfilment of the conscience-role, is suicidal for a great power with world responsibilities. It would be absurd, for example, for the United States to sacrifice the immense strategic facilities of French North Africa because she disapproved of French colonial rule.

But equally, it should be pointed out, the emphasis on national self-interest as the guide to American policies can scarcely fail to diminish—and indeed is already doing so—the moral influence of the United States in international affairs. Current American policy in Asia is a case very much in point. Until after the war, the United States enjoyed a measure of moral prestige in the Far East because of her anti-colonial tradition, reflected in her vigorous prosecution of the "open door" policy in China. Opposition to European colonialism was admittedly based, to some degree, on self-interest, as the United States wanted free access to Asian markets. (In Latin America, where the boot was on the other foot, the American record is very different.) Today, however, United States championship of "oppressed" peoples' rights against colonial power rings less and less true, for the mid-20th century version of strategic colonialism, as distinct from its 19th century economic counterpart, is one to which the United States is committed by its role as shield of the free world. The search by the Great Powers today is not for closed markets so much as for air and naval bases, and the United States, dedicated to world-wide containment of Communism, needs them more than any other Power. This consideration of national interest is profoundly affecting the United States' attitude to colonial people—and vice-versa. America, more than Britain or France, is rapidly becoming the principal foreign devil in Asian eyes.

The difficulties, however, are not only limited to America's relations with other countries. The attempt to combine the function of shield with that of conscience has also provoked alarming reactions within the United States itself. In a country such as the United States, where public opinion refuses to recognise standards of morality in international affairs different from those acceptable in human relations, the elevation—under the impact of the Communist menace—of national interest as the only reliable guide to American foreign policy has exercised a considerable influence on moral standards generally, and particularly in domestic politics. Expediency and opportunism have always been accepted in practice in American domestic politics—as in the politics of all countries—but never until recent years have they become accepted in theory as well. Senator McCarthy would always have been popular and successful—he clearly has what it takes—but only recently could he have become respectable, too.

American arguments of expediency are, however, strictly limited in their application. The American Machiavelli is tethered good and fast to the pole of Communism, and any attempt to base foreign policy exclusively on national interest is emphatically rejected by public opinion. It is no good attempting to convince an American audience that the United States' interest would be best served by reaching a compromise with the Communist world. Such suggestions strike against a hard rock of genuine moral idealism which still obtrudes from the sea of confusion into which American public morals have fallen. The damage to American domestic politics already apparent from even the limited adoption by public opinion of the need for expediency and opportunism in foreign policy should warn America's allies against, for example, pressing the United States to recognise Communist China, whose North Korean aggression is still unpunished, on the grounds that the West's global interest demanded such an action. However exasperating it may seem, the fact remains that qualification of what American public opinion believes to be right—or compromise with what it believes to be wrong—in the foreign field

PRODUCED 2003 BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

will be reflected in the American domestic scene.

It seems genuinely shocking to ordinary Americans that so many European liberals should advocate returning Formosa to the Chinese Communists, despite the inevitable massacre of nationalists which would follow, on the Machiavellian grounds that it would promote a Far East settlement; and they do not see how such advocates can at the same time blame McCarthy for arguing that a few breaches in United States' civil liberties do not matter if the Communist conspiracy is defeated. They feel that far more injustice and misery would result from the proposed surrender of Formosa than anything the Senator is likely to bring about. But if this mood should change, if American public opinion were to give up its rigid "moralistic" foreign policy inhibitions, which European opinion tends to regard as preventing "peaceful co-existence," the new "realism" would have repercussions at home of a highly dangerous nature. American idealism is indivisible. If public opinion swallowed its principles because national self-interest demanded a period of co-existence, it would swallow its principles equally easily when McCarthy argued that the United States' security required more and more infractions of civil liberty. With American cynicism as with her idealism, there would be no half-measures, once the idea really caught on.

It is pointless to argue that a mature country must make a difference between domestic and international morality. The fact is that the American people as a whole do not, and, as American foreign policy is tied hand and foot to public opinion, any comprehensive adoption of *Realpolitik* in the foreign field would presuppose a similar opportunism in all sections of American life. Contrary to the general European view, American loyalty to Chiang Kai-Shek, America's old ally and comrade in arms, is a frantic last-ditch battle of American idealism against the almost irresistible pressures and temptations of power politics.

DESPITE these contradictions and strains between the old role of the United States, as a country immunised by geography from the corruption of international power politics, and her new role of world leadership which makes power politics the everyday fare of public life, Europe still seems to expect America to be both shield and conscience at the same time—or, rather, to adopt at any particular moment whichever role suits Europe best.

In Indo-China for example, where British interests appeared to many as more likely to be endangered than secured by American intervention, Britain emphasised America's great anti-colonial tradition and counselled against any action that might run counter to it. Her moral leadership, it was implied, was at stake. In Persia, however, the United States was constantly advised to forget about outdated prejudices against foreign exploitation and to pursue a realistic policy of unwavering support for British policies. American national interest, it was implied, was at stake.

Imperceptibly, however, the facts of international relations have forced the United States to place more and more emphasis on her role as the arsenal, rather than the temple, of democracy. To live up to her commitments in defence of the Western World, she has undertaken an unprecedented military expenditure. The influence of the military mind has increased accordingly. At the same time, in order to strengthen the resolve of the population to shoulder the burden, the international situation has been dramatised into a conflict between absolutes—an ideological struggle with all its implications for national hysteria. This is the price in moral values which must be paid if the American shield is to be made effective. But having encouraged America to undertake the defence of the free world, it is intolerable and self-defeating to continue to measure her actions by standards only suitable for an earlier role.

It is therefore of the first importance that European opinion should attempt to understand the strains imposed on the United States by its new position in the world. Most unprejudiced people reach the essential premises for such an understanding, but then fail to draw the right conclusion from them—or indeed any conclusion at all. They are convinced that

PRODUCED 2003 BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

if Russia could physically impose Communism on the rest of the world, she would; they believe the imposition of Communism would be the end of Western civilisation; they know that Russia has weapons of incalculable destructive power and no moral scruples about their use; and finally, they accept the fact that the United States' strength is in reality the only barrier between Western Europe and Russian domination. All these truths are voiced ceaselessly on every public platform until it has become knowledge that the conjunction at this particular point of history of Communism and the hydrogen bomb places the world in unprecedented peril—so far averted only by the miracle of American industrial strength. Seldom, however, is the conclusion reached that such an awesome responsibility as this situation imposes upon the United States cannot be borne without deep repercussions within the American body politic.

Flaws and weaknesses in the political systems of any other country are today treated with sympathetic indulgence by British newspapers. The French Government has only to fall, for regiments of sympathisers to suggest every conceivable excuse. The brains of Fleet Street spent far more time psychoanalysing Dr. Mossadegh than in condemning him. Comment on Soviet policy usually creaks with the author's effort to see the situation through Mr. Malenkov's eyes. Always the emphasis is on the need to understand. *Tout comprendre, c'est tout pardonner* is the banner which now flutters wanly across Western Europe. But not apparently for America. America is different. The United States is regarded in Western Europe as a country set apart by its past, which can reasonably be expected to be immune from the evils that have beset other nations. The United States is expected as a matter of course to live up to the twin roles of conscience and shield in a world hovering on the brink of atomic destruction.

It is true that this idealistic expectation has been gradually dissipated by the damaging contrast of what the United States was imagined to be and what day after day it is reported as actually being in the European press. It is, of course, in these invidious contrasts that anti-Americanism breeds most strongly. To allow this process to continue not only destroys American moral influence, but also gravely weakens the effectiveness of her material strength. For disillusion with American values is the Achilles heel in the military alliance.

In the search for the best of both American worlds, Europe is therefore in danger of having the worst of both—neither an effective shield nor a respected conscience. It is surely time, therefore, that Europe should re-examine what it expects from the United States. Our military requirements at once stand out. Western Europe's future depends absolutely on an America mobilised for our defence. What of our moral demands? Is it not time that Europe realised that we shall establish a viable long-term relationship when we regard the United States as just another sovereign state, subject to the same pressures, tempted by the same political vices, in no way specially immunised from the classical disorders that attack all bodies politic, and attack them just when they are at the summit of their strength? But standing in the way of this healthy development is the American legend, which has encouraged a view of the American past that inevitably distorts any valid appreciation of the American present.

LIKE all legends, the American legend has a substratum of truth, but the emphasis on the heroic aspects of American development gives a somewhat misleading and idyllic picture. European countries, of course, also weave legends about their origins, but unlike the United States their origins occur in the distant past, and are shrouded in the mists of pre-history. The legend of King Arthur and his Knights, for example, colours the British attitude to the past, but no one, disappointed at the absence of such perfect chivalry in Westminster today, concludes that British public life has gone to the dogs. Legends should serve to popularise an ideal, not to record a historical condition. But since the foundations of the American nation took place in modern times, the legends of the Pilgrim and Founding Fathers have been taken far more seriously—

PRODUCED 2003 BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

have been taken indeed not as legends but as history.

Few historical events, of course, lend themselves so worthily to the creation of a legend as the first Puritan settlements on the American continent. The astounding success of the Pilgrim Fathers in founding religious communities by rigid adherence to certain social dogmas in the face of grave physical difficulties encouraged a belief in Providence—a belief that the continent has been kept in reserve by the Deity and had just, as Tocqueville put it, "risen from beneath the waters of the deluge to fulfil God's purpose." The Puritan communities were convinced that this new land was God's own country, and that their miraculous success was proof of God's approval. This assumption is crucial to the future development of the American legend, as it has been responsible for a unique American conviction: namely, that America came fully formed into the world with an ideal polity established from the outset and approved by divine intervention. What is overlooked, however, and where the legend parts company with history, is that the very success of the Puritan experiment brought about its own nemesis. By the time of the third generation, the Puritan communities showed unmistakable signs of believing that the glorious fruits of the new continent did not only justify their religious and social ideals, but also their practices. As Professor Daniel J. Boorstin writes in his brilliant study, *The Genius of American Politics*, their success induced the Puritans "gradually to seek their standards in their own experience, to make what they had accomplished the yard-stick of what they ought to have accomplished." Pride had overtaken Providence, with the significant consequence—to be seen all through American history—of an inclination to judge institutions and personalities, not by any absolute criterion, but rather to believe that, so far as America is concerned, what "is" is right until it proves itself, by failing to work, to be wrong.

The American Revolution is also generally taught more as a legend than history. The popular picture emphasises all those features of the Revolution which place it in the great liberal tradition of the Enlightenment. The immortal preamble to the Declaration of Independence, which outlines the rights of man, is all that most people ever bother to study in that famous document. Its substance, which is a detailed, legalistic catalogue of particular and practical grievances, not of the human race, but of a particular group of colonies at a particular time, is largely ignored. As a result, the popular impression of the Revolution is of a successful movement towards national independence and a triumph of the principles of the natural rights philosophy—a combination, in fact, of the twin ideals of the 19th century European progressives. George Washington is credited with all the passion for liberty and equality of the French Revolution —without any of its excesses: and also with the nationalistic fervour of Cavour and Bismarck—without any of their chauvinism. This, of course, is very much an idealised picture and tends to give American history far too much of a flying start. Any sober assessment of the Revolution cannot fail to notice that what was worrying the colonists was not the rights of man, nor indeed the rights of Americans, but principally the rights of Englishmen. No taxation without representation was not a right of mankind, but a particular right of Englishmen. That Burke and not Tom Paine was the real spokesman for the American Revolution in no way detracts from its glory, although it changes the emphasis. A country which arose from a legalistic concern to preserve old rights, rather than create new ones, cannot indulge in the conviction that in a few brief months in 1776 a miracle created a whole new polity, which no longer needed to be burdened by the traditional political ills of the old world. This idealised version of the Revolution and its principal spokesmen has resulted in subsequent American history being interpreted, not as a slow, halting attempt to reach a distant goal, but a gradual decline from a summit already scaled.

The third pivotal period in American history —the Civil War—can be shown to have undergone a similar process of idealisation. It is now common knowledge of course that the Civil War was not simply a battle to free the slaves,

PRODUCED 2003 BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

but was also a battle to preserve the Union. But even this relatively recent injection of realism into the legend tends to confuse the issue. For the slave question *is* of very great significance—not in illustrating Northern enthusiasm for civil rights and human equality, but rather in illustrating the remarkably pragmatic approach to this controversial subject. The role of the abolitionists is seen to be more and more marginal. The real argument on the slavery issue centred not so much on whether slavery was good or bad, moral or immoral, but on whether it was a viable social system, furthering the welfare of the community. Lincoln, it should be remembered, repeatedly declared himself to be no abolitionist. The emancipation of the slaves was forced on him, as Boorstin reminds us, as a wartime necessity, and he did what he could to postpone and avoid it.

It is of course possible to argue that any analysis of turning points in the history of any European country would show equal idealisation and over-simplification. The Whig interpretation of history, indeed, written at the same period as the popular version of American history was written, tends to create a similar legendary heroism about the British struggle for Parliamentary supremacy. The effect, however, of partial historical judgements of a relatively modern period in British development cannot compare with the effect of a distorted version of the very origins of American destiny. From the version of these three passages of American development outlined above, the legend has grown up among Americans that the United States came into existence with a perfect polity approved by God, cut itself off by the Revolution from the old-world dilemma between authority and freedom, and once and for all vindicated the principle of equality in the Civil War. This version of American history has become an article of faith among ordinary Americans and, although subjected to a battery of historical criticism, the faith remains strikingly vigorous. This idealised picture of a fairy-tale land has been purposely taught in American schools in a highly successful effort to cast a spell over the millions of immigrants, and produce out of their multifold origins a new man, the American, instead of the Italian-American, Greek-American, etc. The fantastic extent to which this educational process has succeeded can be judged by the enthusiasm with which first-generation Americans condemn certain practices as un-American, as if Americanism was a new, comprehensive scale of values, in some way different from the traditional evaluations of right and wrong in the countries from which they sprang.

BUT why, it may be asked, has this American legend become so easily adopted outside the United States? To some extent, the answer may perhaps lie in the fact that in the 18th and 19th centuries advocates of the Enlightenment had nowhere else to place their hopes. Their overestimate of the American achievement was the measure of the European failure. America in the last century became the favourite of the liberals in much the same way, and with almost as little real basis, as the U.S.S.R. later became the hope of the 20th century "progressives." This natural wishful thinking of liberal Europe, reinforced by the absence of any long history of mutual antagonisms, led many Europeans to accept the American version of American history to a truly remarkable degree. It is significant, for example, that in the teaching of American history in Britain there is a total absence of villains. Whereas the histories of other foreign countries are for the most part taught as a catalogue of dubious decisions taken by dubious characters, with strength of purpose almost the only virtue recognised (Richelieu, Napoleon, Frederick the Great), American history becomes a tale of unmitigated virtue, starting with George Washington and going down to Franklin Roosevelt, even to Harry Truman. Most English schoolboys would be hard put to name an American villain before Senator McCarthy. President Harding, for example, is passed over in polite silence, although if he had been President of France it is unlikely that his striking defects would have been so kindly treated by British writers.

Until after the Second World War, there-

PRODUCED 2003 BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

fore, America remained largely unchallenged as the conscience of democracy, the haven of freedom, and an oasis of prosperity in an increasingly impoverished world. As in all these fields there was concrete justification for these high estimates, it became an axiom of the popular European attitude to America, as much as it was an axiom of the American view of itself, that providence and nature had made America in God's image—God's own country.

This view could only last while three conditions made it tolerable: first, free emigration which, while constantly reinvigorating the European image of Eldorado, never tarnished the image with envy; secondly, European cultural superiority dissolved any material inferiority in a happy conviction that more cultural roses grew on our tired soil than in the sterilised climate of the new world; thirdly, there was sufficient political and economic independence of Europe from America, and only an insignificant clash of interests. In a peculiar way, Europe found it comforting to idealise the United States, and drew vicarious satisfaction from fathering on the world such a virile offspring.

Today, however, emigration has virtually terminated. It is impossible to overestimate the profound effect of this fact on European public opinion with regard to the United States. All the most striking successes of the American experiment, its wealth, higher standard of living, free opportunities, have become sources of envy instead of encouragement, and America is becoming, instead of the haven of the under-privileged, the last refuge of the over-privileged. Secondly, American cultural dominance is nearly complete, and, thirdly, owing to the Cold War, the political and economic relations between America and Europe are now those of enforced familiarity. With the transformation of these three conditions, Europe has been forced to take a new look at America. And just when America was coming under such close scrutiny, it was itself passing through a period of extreme internal strain. European opinion therefore has been brought down to earth with a particularly hard bump.

But the shudders of despairing alarm which sweep over Europe whenever McCarthyism comes to the forefront of the news would be alleviated if its antecedents were better known. The only reason why we don't think the end of the world is coming with each new thunder clap is because we have seen it survive similar storms before. The fact is that intolerance and violence play a large part in American history and always have. McCarthyism is nothing new. When people talk about the climate of fear created by the congressional committees, it is worth recalling Professor Wriston's recent reminder that, when Jefferson was elected President of the United States, the militancy of his atheism was so notorious that people hid their Bibles. Throughout American history, racial and religious intolerance against Quakers, Jews, Negroes, Spanish-Americans, and other minority groups has been a recurring feature. The fanatical anti-foreign movement, the Know-Nothing, could in 1854 command eight members of the United States Senate and almost half the Lower House. (Senator McCarthy certainly can't do that.) The cruel and sinister Ku Klux Klan, the powerful anti-Catholic Nativists who burnt down Catholic churches and schools in Philadelphia, Father Coughlin's rabid anti-Semitism—all at different times seemed, as Senator McCarthy does now, to cast a shadow over the land of the free. The assault on civil liberty after the First World War was far more serious than anything happening in America today. Francis Biddle has recently pointed out that nearly 22,000 people were prosecuted under the Sedition and Espionage Laws from 1917 to 1920, and 877 were convicted. (A score or so have been convicted under the anti-Communist Smith Act.) The notorious Palmer raids in 1920 have no contemporary parallel. The disgraceful behaviour of congressional committees to witnesses has many precedents, of which the occasion when Mr. J. P. Morgan, head of the famous bank, had a midget popped on his knee and a news photograph taken, is only the best known. As to character assassination, the current practice sets no rock-bottom standard, and does not compare at all unfavourably with the accusations levelled against

PRODUCED 2003 BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Washington, Jefferson, and Lincoln in their days. The abuse by lesser men of their great contemporaries is lost in the swell of history. Who remembers today that Jefferson was accused of being "the promoter of national disunion, national insignificance, public disorder and discredit," that he was the "friend of anarchy," and a "plagiarist," or that a northern member of Lincoln's Cabinet called him in public "a long-armed baboon" and "a great hairy ape?"

A catalogue of the seamy side of American history does not excuse the present blemishes, but to those millions outside America whose first serious glance at the real America brings them face to face with McCarthyism, it is salutary to be reminded that McCarthyism is not new, and is not even stronger than it has been in the past. This realisation would prevent that attitude of disillusion about America which springs from seeing the past as too rosy and the present as too black. The forces of political democracy and human decency have consistently triumphed in America in the past. Nothing is so misleading as to suggest that, by some peculiar virtue of the American Continent, these triumphs have been unopposed. There is a general tendency among historians to underestimate the strength of the defeated in outlining the course of American history—a tendency which has resulted in a dangerous overlooking of the undemocratic, inegalitarian pressures which have all along fought neck and neck with their counterparts. This distorted picture of the past both ill-prepares Americans to deal with their present dangers, and ill-prepares Europeans to see the present struggle in America in true proportions.

Idealisation of the American past also tends to hide the way in which generations of Americans have rectified evils in their body politic. As a realistic study of the slavery controversy suggests, the most effective incentive to put an end to the practice was its visible and damaging material consequences. The Abolitionists who based their arguments on moral grounds tended to arouse equally eloquent opposition, also based on moral grounds. The same is true of McCarthyism. But once the American people become convinced that McCarthyism is actually weakening the United States, for example by undermining morale in the Foreign Service or reducing recruitment in the Army, etc.—once they can see tangible damage rather than moral outrage—their reactions may well prove far more disastrous to the Senator's fortunes. Quite contrary to the picture painted by the American legend, the American tends to fight best, not against violation of abstract principles, but when the violation of principles actually begins to bear tangible fruit.

I have attempted to present the case for a new attitude to the United States, one more suitable for her present role than the old starry-eyed attitude of admiration based on ignorance which, in the new circumstances of the post-war world, is fast turning into hostility based on ignorance. America has a chequered past, and will no doubt have a chequered future, and the sooner we accept this inevitable fact the sooner we will be able to take full advantage of her manifold blessings without harping on the blemishes. Legend created an American God. The God has failed. But unlike the Communist God which, on closer examination, turned out to be a devil, the American God has just become human. Criticism, irritation, doubt, disagreements, all such sentiments towards America are fully justified. But the mounting tide of bitterness, despairing disillusion, and even, in some quarters, hatred, are totally misplaced, and spring from illusions about America that never had any real justification.

PRODUCED 2003 BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

On Poetry: A Discussion

Dylan Thomas • James Stephens • Gerald Bullett

[The following is the text of a BBC broadcast on June 18th, 1946. The discussion was one of a weekly series called *Books and Writers*, produced by Mr. Gerald Bullett.]

Bullett: Tonight we have with us two poets, James Stephens and Dylan Thomas. James Stephens has been writing poetry for something like forty years, and when he's not writing it he's speaking it or talking about it. Our second guest, Dylan Thomas, leapt into fame some years before the war as the possessor of an exciting and highly original talent. These two are going to discuss poetry together, what it is, and how, and why.

Poetry can't be defined: it can only be pointed at. But, just to start the ball rolling, let's begin with something easier. The relation, if any, between poetry and verse. The popular idea has always been that all verse is poetry and all poetry is verse—in fact that the two words are interchangeable. Any comments?

Thomas: That of course is nonsense.

Stephens: There's some truth in that. A very large part of the produced verse that we have is just prose, shaped and quickened and vivified. A good deal of rhetoric passes for poetry, because it is written in verse form—"Roll on thou deep and dark blue ocean, roll, a thousand fleets sail over thee, Man marks the earth with ruin: the something or other that thunder strike the walls of rock-bound cities, bidding nations quake and monarchs tremble in their own dug-outs," and all the rest of it—it's just excellent prose, no secret about it, no music, just measure and vehemence. Or the Macaulay ballads—"But with a noise like thunder fell every loosened beam, and like a dam the mighty wreck lay stretched athwart the stream," and the rest of it. It's magnificent, said the Frenchman one time, but it isn't war. So, with a vast area of our printed verse—some of it is very good indeed, but it's prose, disguised in the casts-off of verse. Get a copy of the longer poems of the English. More than three-quarters of these are prose, and bad prose at that.

Thomas: "Paradise Lost"? "Ancient Mariner"? "Don Juan," which is really all good *verse*? But anyway, we want to know what poetry is. All I know is that it is memorable words-in-cadence which move and excite me emotionally. And, once you've got the hang of it, it should always be better when read aloud than when read silently with the eyes. Always.

Stephens: Poetry does two things, according to Keats. It must astonish and delight. If it doesn't do both, it does neither.

Bullett: It doesn't consist of fine sentiments or great thoughts. It's something existing in its own right, something made out of words, a new creation—and the magic of it has something to do, hasn't it, with elements that are inherent in human speech—

PRODUCED 2003 BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED