



Stephen Spender—"a way of thinking of things."

FOR A WIDER VIEW OF POETRY

By STEPHEN SPENDER, *English poet and critic, and, since 1953, co-editor of the magazine Encounter.*

IN AN early essay, Edmund Wilson argued that the epics of our time, corresponding to those of Homer and Vergil, are the novels of Flaubert and other great novelists. He returned to the same idea in 1944, when he referred to "Finnegans Wake" as a "very great poem." W. H. Auden, as well, has often said that "Ulysses" is a poem, rather than a novel.

At first sight this extension of the category of poetry may seem unimportant, at most perhaps an attempt to express admiration for certain novels, by granting to them the praise usually reserved for great poetry. But there seems to be implied in Wilson's statements the idea that because some novels are great poetry, most modern poets who write formal verse are small beer. In another early essay entitled "The All-Star Literary Vaudeville" (1926), Wilson showed a curious irritation with the poets, as though he thought they have a far too narrow concept of their craft. He described Pound's Cantos as "a mosaic which fails to reveal a pattern, a monument, in its lack of cohesion, its lack of driving force or a center, to a kind of poetic bankruptcy—an account with which all but Canto-specialists would agree today. Of T. S. Eliot, he wrote, "I deplore the fatigued and de-

spondent mood that seems lately to have been drying up both his criticism and his poetry."

These are, of course, the words of a young man, but I think they are interesting for the incompletely expressed thought behind them: that somehow modern poets have too narrow a view of poetry, that they are imprisoned in their view of the medium, and that their work is thus starved of life-giving material which would make it more robust.

Poets have probably felt that Wilson was unjust in treating modern poetry as so much a special case as to be a minor art. I wonder, though, whether they themselves do not have a view of poetry which is too narrowly based not so much on tradition as on the modern forms they have created, and which have become the standards of a new academicism. I do not mean that they should abandon their forms, but that they should enlarge their concept of what is poetry to include works such as "Ulysses," "Finnegans Wake," "Women in Love," "The Playboy of the Western World," the cinema of Eisenstein, and David Jones's book about the first world war, "In Parenthesis."

To the reader this may seem simply a matter of sticking on labels, and multiplying unnecessarily the already complex categories of modern literature. But I think it is a question of thinking rather than of name-giving; a matter

of poets broadening their concept to include certain novels and plays, of realizing that the kind of poetry which the poets of the modern academies are writing at a particular moment is not necessarily everything that is happening in poetry.

Today it is thought that, in England at all events, poetry is undergoing a kind of strategic withdrawal from the great ambitions of the poets of the modern movement early in the present century to write about the whole experience of modern life, and also from the confusing social subjects and politics of the 1930s. Poetry has become integral and pure again, the poet only writing about things which he is quite sure he feels poetically about, and not making raids into societal or scientific subjects. It is called a period of consolidation. There is a narrowing of aims down to the circle of the poet's most personally felt experience. This may well be a justifiable reaction against a period of experimentation. All the same it becomes a bit discouraging when one thinks of the modern world and then reads the works of the best young poets, and sees how little of surrounding experience they have realized in their poetry. My argument is that if one took a rather wider view of the ways in which poetic imagination is expressed, it might appear that in a time of withdrawal by the formal poets, certain novelists—notably, Mr. William Golding—are writing books which can

be considered as poems, and that it would be helpful to regard some as both fiction and poetry.

That there is a real loss resulting from the narrow concept of what is poetry—and, for that matter, what is fiction—is shown, I think, by the bewilderment with which a book that might equally be regarded as a poem or as a novel is received today by the reviewers, with the result, often, that it is ignored by readers. A recent example of this bewilderment was occasioned by the publication of Philip Toynbee's novel "Pantaloön," written partly in verse, partly in prose. This is the purported reminiscences of an octogenarian, living in 1990 and evoking his youth from the early part of the present century (the first volume of a projected work in several volumes, "Pantaloön" goes up to the 1930s). It is a book full of faults, together with occasional absurdities, but nevertheless remarkably vital—and compulsive reading if one can survive the first thirty pages or so. Philip Toynbee draws extensively on the memories of his own childhood at school and on a farm, and in his ancestral home. His memory is almost Wordsworthian in its natural strength and minute particularity, Rabelaisian in its uninhibited exuberance.

PHILIP TOYNBEE in "Pantaloön" makes skirmishes of a rather informal and sketchy kind into territory as yet uncaptured by contemporary poetry. One would have thought that poets would have seen in this experimental work openings through which they could follow, and novelists indications of a new kind of novel. I do not know how "Pantaloön" has been received in America, but in England its reception was almost entirely one of shock and discouragement. The regular novel reviewers derided it for not being a novel. The poets dismissed it for not being a poem. That these judgments could be powerfully challenged was shown by Auden who, in one of those end-of-year best-books-I-have-read summations published by one of the Sunday newspapers, put it among the three best books he had read in 1961. I myself bought half a dozen copies and sent them to several people whose judgment I trust, but who had decided not to read it on account of the reviews. All the recipients were enthusiastic.

A book which, if it fell into the category of poetry, would be recognized as a poetic masterpiece is that prose-poem-novel-memoir of the First World War, "In Parenthesis," by David Jones. This work first appeared in England in 1937, where it attained a *succès d'estime*, and it has now been published in the U.S. It might best be

summarized as a vision of the apotheosis of a group of soldiers in the first World War, through duty and suffering, into the legendary Arthurian traditions of heroism and chivalry, and into the communion of saints. It is a work of authentic vision arising from exposure to terrifying experience. It is not an easy book, but it is no more difficult than "The Waste Land" (whose author proclaimed it "a work of genius") and far less obscure than the Cantos. I suggest that it has until now been completely neglected in America, and comparatively so in England because readers are not prepared to give the attention to a work of this kind (reading it several times over) that they would give to a poem, unless they are first told that it is a poem. According to our current categories "In Parenthesis" is only "poetry" in certain passages—of which there are indeed some, but these are few and far between. Here, for the pleasure of quoting, is a passage falling between prose and verse forms:

To groves always men come both
to their joys and their undoing.
Come lightfoot in heart's ease and
school-free; walk on a leafy holi-
day with kindred and kind; come
perplexedly with first loves—to
tread the tangle frustrated, strik-
ing—bruising the green.

Come on night's fall for am-
buscade.

Find harbour with a remnant
Share with the prescribed
their unleavened cake.

Come for sweet princes by
malignant interests de-
prived.

Wait, wait long for—

with the broken men, nest with
badger and the martin-cat till
such time as he come again, cry-
ing the waste for his chosen.

Or come in gathering nuts
and may;

or run want-wit in a shirt for the
queen's unreason.

Beat boys-bush for Robin and
Bobin.

Come with Merlin in his
madness, for the pity of it;
for the young men reaped
like green barley,

for the folly of it.

Seek a way separate and more
straight.

If the reader were told that "In Parenthesis" was a poem, he would be prepared to read it as many times as he does a poem, and not expect immediate satisfaction from a first reading. If he regards it as a novel, he finds it too difficult.

Critics are baffled, and readers put off, by not being able to see that a work can be two things at once, not just a "poetic novel" (like Virginia Woolf's novels), but poem and novel at the same time, and perhaps memoir into the bargain. Poets also suffer, I think, because they are inhibited from writing certain works, which nevertheless they are tempted to write, when the idea of these does not fit into accepted categories of what is poetry. Or if they do write them, they force them into the mold they think of as modern-academic-poetic.

The most signal catastrophe resulting from this failure to enlarge the concept of poetry is the poetic drama. T. S. Eliot, in his early dramatic sketch "Sweeney Agonistes" and in his comments on the English music hall, had the clear idea that a modern poetic play does not have to be written in lines of verse, but must exploit the stage, the action, and symbolic properties as well as language to create its poetry. He understood that the visible stage, characters, scenery, etc., are available to the form of the poetic play, as rhyme scheme and fourteen lines are to the form of the sonnet. T. S. Eliot also realized in his early days that the nearest things to the poetic drama in England were the music hall, the revue, and musicals; the things furthest from it, drawing room comedy. Yet, oddly enough, in plays like "The Cocktail Party" and "The Confidential Clerk," he adopted the convention of drawing room comedy, trying to insinuate it into lines of verse so prosaic that the audience hardly notices the "poetry," which at times rises to passages filled with lyric intensity.

The English tradition seems centered on the idea that poetic drama must be verse drama. At the turn of the century there were pious verse plays written in iambic pentameters by Irish Celtic Twilight poets and performed in tiny halls before hushed spinsters. Today matinee audiences go to a drawing room comedy and are delighted to learn that, after all, poetic drama is only the sentiments of the Parish hall expressed among the tea cups in slightly rhythmical speech.

Because of the narrow view that it is verse lines which make poetry, the modern poetic drama in England has been a failure, petering out in the fireworks of Christopher Fry; whereas in France, where Giraudoux, Cocteau, Anouilh, and others have used a prose language and concentrated on the poetic vision of the whole play, on the symbolic possibilities of the acting, and on theatre effects, a world of the poetic imagination has been presented on the

stage. The nearest thing we have to genuine poetic drama is the plays of Beckett—translated by him from his own French—and the adaptations by theatre workshops of passages from “Ulysses” and “Finnegans Wake.”

THERE are, I suggest, two attitudes towards works of poetic imagination which need not be opposed, but which may be regarded as complementary. If we want to have our minds open to all the possibilities of transforming the experience of our time into a language of the imagination, we must bear both these attitudes in our mind, and we must think of poetry as an area which, beyond a certain barrier fencing it into a garden, extends to a much broader landscape.

One view is that, whatever medium is employed, the transformation of experience into symbolic vision is poetry. Thus if a play can achieve this transformation better in a prose medium than in a verse one, then the symbolic play in prose is closer to poetry than the one in which the verse medium hinders the symbolic vision.

The other view is that poetry consists of the lines and the form employed and that experience which does not deliver itself into accepted poetic forms (and these include free verse) is not poetry. From the latter point of view “The Waste Land” is a poem; “Ulysses” and “Finnegans Wake” are not. Joyce is a minor poet in “Pomes Penyeach,” and a prose fictionist in his novels.

I admit that a good deal is gained by preserving narrow distinctions, especially at a time when advertisers claim every virtue for any marketable product, and tooth paste can be described as poetry, and a large screen makes a movie an “epic.” All the same I think that much is lost by a narrowness of thinking about poetry which causes certain works to be neglected, and which gives poets themselves a narrow view of the forms they should use and inclines them to think of drama as a form which has to be forced into their verse patterns, instead of poetry as something that has to be thought out again in terms of the conditions of the theatre of today.

One way of looking at the poetic imagination is to envisage it as a wide circumference of works invented, within which what is called poetry is the limited area of language used in a particular way. But beyond this area of poets writing poems there is a wider area of poetic imagining, merging into the novel and the drama and perhaps into the cinema, and even into television. To give a particular instance one might describe “The Waste Land” as

an area defined as a poem which exists like a concentric circle within the much vaster waste-land area of poetic creation which is “Ulysses.” “The Waste Land,” let us say, is by definition a distinct poem; “Ulysses” is a great invention of poetic imagination. If the poetic imagination which is molten in “Ulysses” is to some extent energy drawn off into “The Waste Land,” then “In Parenthesis” also owes something to the material that is both “The Waste Land” and “Finnegans Wake” (debts acknowledged by Mr. David Jones).

This way of looking at things has the advantage that we can think of the poetic imagination as transforming the modern world without necessarily being canalized into formal poetry. At the same time we can see that poets owe a great deal to works of poetic imagination which are outside the circumference drawn round their poetry.

A striking example of the inflowing of the poetically imagined work into poetry is the debt to the cinema—particularly to early Russian films—of W. H. Auden and other poets in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Before Stalin’s impact began to be felt, certain Russian directors made some films which were notable for the photography used to produce unforgettable images. If there was a revolutionary message, this was somehow inseparable from a view

of modern life as essentially tragic. In films like “Ten Days that Shook the World,” “Potemkin,” “Earth,” and “The Way into Life,” there were certain images which I am sure remain part of the stock of memories of the poets of that period: a pram and baby rolling down the steps of a palace among a crowd of revolutionaries, an equestrian statue of a Czar reflected in a river. The most extraordinary characteristic of these photographic images was the air of tragic, ironic detachment which they established in films which were meant to be propaganda (they were art: no wonder Stalin stopped them).

I need only describe these images and effects to make the reader see how the revolutionary imagery, the detachment, and sense of tragedy ironically viewed are transported into the early poetry of W. H. Auden. A cruder example of this kind of transposition is my own poem “The Express,” whose sequence of imagery is owed, not so much to “trains I have travelled in” and journeys I have made as to photography, particularly, if I remember rightly, to a Russian film made to celebrate the opening of the trans-Siberian railway, called “TurkSib.”

Many years after this phase of poetry, while reading Eisenstein’s book on the cinema, I was astonished to dis-

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“If I have to listen one more time to how his grandfather hornswoggled Captain Ahab, I’ll . . . !”



Peace Corpsman in Ghana—"a continuing commitment."

—Black Star.

PEACE CORPS:

By SARGENT SHRIVER, *Director of the Peace Corps since its establishment in 1961.*

A BEARD and a postcard caused the Peace Corps its major problems last year. They were problems because the incidents they represented reinforced damaging stereotypes that had developed about the Peace Corps before the first volunteer was selected.

The beard was worn by Charles Kamen when he allegedly criticized "Operation Abolition" at a Miami Rotary Club meeting. When Kamen was invited to training, newspapers, organizations, and Congressmen urged that he be summarily dropped. The postcard was written from Nigeria by Margery Michelmore.

The beard gave ammunition to critics who saw in the Peace Corps a haven for bearded beatniks, confused liberals, and impractical idealists in revolt against the world. The postcard provided fuel for those who contended that sending young people overseas to dabble in foreign policy would create a continuing series of embarrassing incidents.

Our most difficult job, then, was to control the implications of these stereotypes long enough to build a reputation of our own. The major accomplishment of the Peace Corps in its first year was our ability to establish our own identity and to have our work accepted at home and overseas.

Last month, the Senate passed our legislation without a dissenting vote. In the House, only 70 Congressmen voted against the Peace Corps, while 361 voted for it. During the floor debate in the House, Judge Howard Smith, the conservative Chairman of the Rules Committee, stilled critics of the Peace Corps when he said: "I had considerable reservations about [the Peace Corps] when it came up last year and was not sold on it. I voted against it. I am happy to say that I think they have done a good job. I think they have made a good start. . . . I'm supporting the measure this year."

On the Senate side, Barry Goldwater said the doubters are no longer doubting, and the *Los Angeles Times* said that "dollar for dollar, no U.S. aid program has done more." (The *Chicago Tribune*, on the other hand, labeled our