

*From Shakespeare to Kipling, the Poets
Express Themselves Dramatically*

DRAMATIC ART IN POETRY*

BY HORACE GREGORY

AS I prepared the subject of the lecture I am to give you this afternoon, there was a temptation to turn it into the kind of talk that is usually given on the campus of an educational institution at this time of year. It is the end of the college year; the campus is beautiful, the air is warm; classes are dismissed and the younger generation sits at the feet of the visiting lecturer. Madness fills the mind of the visiting lecturer; perhaps it is better to call it a passion rather than madness, but the impulse behind it is not altogether sane; it is a mellow yet overpowering desire to give advice—to be rhetorical and to talk of world affairs. This is talk that often takes the form, so familiar to all of us, of the Commencement address, the didactic poem in prose in which all of us are eagerly, fearfully told of the mistakes that have been made and how the younger generation is to avoid them in the future. I shall warn you now that I have resisted this temptation; I shall not speak of "the wheels of progress,"

The annual Hopwood Lecture this year was given on May 28, and is herewith reproduced. HORACE GREGORY, who gave it, is known both as a poet and as a critic. The list of his publications includes his *Selected Poems* (1951), two critical studies, and *A History of American Poetry, 1900-1940* (in collaboration with Marya Zaturenska). He received the Russell Loines award for poetry from the American Institute of Arts and Letters, as well as the Levinson prize from *Poetry* magazine. Mr. Gregory was graduated from the University of Wisconsin in 1923 and since 1934 has been lecturer on poetry and critical theory at Sarah Lawrence College. He held a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1951.

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nor of how to keep them turning, nor shall I remind you that "life is a motion picture" that so closely resembles "the march of time." My subject is not concerned with didactic utterance, but with a dramatic element that enters poetry.

Perhaps what I have to say is slightly out of season with a particular time and place. I rather hope it is. Any discussion of the poetry that we care to read more than once is always both in and out of season; it is both in and behind and beyond the moment at which we read it. And my subject, dramatic art in poetry, though it may be as suitable to a winter's evening as it is to an afternoon in May, is not entirely inappropriate to a Hopwood lecture. Avery Hopwood was a playwright who had no pretensions of being a dramatist; but he did write enormously successful plays. He held to one attribute of dramatic art; he avoided dullness; he chose the mystery melodrama as the object of his craftsmanship. Rarely enough—and this is rare among writers of all description—he founded an institution for the benefit of succeeding generations of younger writers, writers of plays, of poems, of fiction, of criticism, and all other forms of prose.

Nor is my subject entirely out of keeping with current revivals in poetic drama; fifty years ago the possibility of a contemporary poetic drama seemed remote; today it exists. Even the plays of W. B. Yeats (though he received a Nobel prize for the writing of them) are not the kind of failures they

once seemed to be. But my subject is not a survey of poetic drama, its actual performances, its progress through the last fifty years, the details of its achievements, its hopes, its failures.

A good poem abhors dullness as much as nature abhors a vacuum or wit abhors a vacant mind. Even "the good bad" poems that George Orwell mentions in his essay on Rudyard Kipling avoid dullness memorably. The "good bad" poems of Kipling, which he called verse, have remained in the memory of at least two generations; how long they will endure I do not know. Behind the verses existed the presence of a vigorous intelligence and mind as well as a perception into the realities of material existence; these are qualities that are not to be lightly set aside. He had wit; surely his phrase, "It's pretty, but is it art?" is more than clever. In his lines on "The Gods of the Copybook Headings" he provided a title for Aldous Huxley's novel *Brave New World* with an irony that had more force than any of Huxley's writings. His verses had the melodramatic art of shocking his readers into attention. He compressed a violent and memorable short story (a story, by the way, that anticipated the economy of Ernest Hemingway's prose) in the four short stanzas of "Danny Deever," and even now there is some probability that Hemingway will be remembered as an American Kipling.

Kipling's verses were an assault upon all the so-called finer feelings and sensibilities of his day. It was his conception of masculine heroism that made it possible for Winston Churchill during World War II to coin the phrase, "blood, sweat, and tears." Kipling was an archconservative who appointed himself the first critic of conservative Britain. Rereading his verses today, one finds a deliberately antiartistic master of a craft, one who is excellently trained to recite his piece and then have done with it. (His family had Pre-Raphaelite associations; at an early age Kipling was unusually

sophisticated in matters of artistic shoptalk.) His art, let us say, was artfully concealed; he had sudden, unforced revelations of literal, brutal reality as it existed in a power-driven world; he believed in power, he believed in the righteousness of the British Empire, and he could not resist the dramatic act of showing the sources of its power—in war and in the sacrifice of human life. His revelations were not unlike those who write of crime—the mystery-story novelist, the writer of "thrillers," and a kind of romantic blood relationship exists between the author of Sherlock Holmes and Kipling. For his pains he did not receive the poet laureateship; his rewards were those of a generous income from his writings.

So much then for the element of melodrama as it has entered the "good bad" poetry that so few of us take pride in remembering at all and many have found difficult to forget. But what of dramatic art in poetry of another order; I assume that we know how deeply that art affected the poetry of the Elizabethans, even when the lines were not spoken from the stage; we know well how many Shakespearean sonnets suspend their resolutions, their judgments, their paradoxes, their conceits until we reach the couplet which is the last of fourteen lines. The clearest possible remark that could be made of Shakespeare—and there have been many clouded, speculative commentaries on him and his writings—is that elements of his dramatic art are readily found within his lyrical verse. As a number of his sonnets near their end, we are waiting for the knife to fall, or rather the fall of the curtain of the fifth act. We also know that Shakespeare set the stage, as it were, for a great deal of the poetry that was to be written after him. I shall not labor this point concerning Shakespeare, for one can prove almost anything by his example, and on this occasion I have no intention to add another chapter to the formidable body of Shakespearean analysis which fills such a large corner in our university libraries. My

intention is far more modest and is directed to a different end; I mention him only because the evidence he presents is obvious and because so many of us can remember

raphy in verse—with considerable dramatic skill. But I shall not go into these particular examples that are relevant to my subject; I shall speak of a little less familiar



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lines of his sonnets that are examples of dramatic art.

I could go on to say that Donne's metaphysical wit has forceful dramatic elements in it; that an epic and moral poet such as Milton wrote *Samson Agonistes*; and that Pope, who was essentially a didactic poet, and who also possessed an extraordinarily delicate eye and ear, wrote his *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot*—that remarkable autobiog-

ground—familiar, that is, to those who have made their lifework a study of English poetry.

I shall have to ask your indulgence for my particular interest in the subject, which I shall approach from two separate points of view. One is from the poetry of a philosophic poet who was unable to write a producible play. To gratify his dramatic intentions, he wrote an epic drama called *The*

Dynasts; he did not deceive himself into thinking it could be produced in Shaftsbury Avenue or in the Haymarket or on Broadway. He wrote it to be read. The other approach shall be from a vantage point that is not far from the scene of the mystery story and will show how its dramatic elements have left their traces in contemporary poetry.

II

I DO NOT know how widely the poetry of Thomas Hardy is being read today. I suspect that it holds a position of prestige; he is rather more of a poet's poet than a critic's poet, and he is probably difficult for readers who do not share the depth of his historical perspective. In much of current criticism the use of an historical imagination has dropped out of fashion, but we need have no fear that it will return again, and as one fashion changes into another, we are often startled by the arrival of an unexpected guest, which is the past wearing a mask that we have failed to recognize.

On the surface, but on the surface only, Hardy is an unwieldy, ungainly poet; and it is true that one cannot substitute certain of his qualities for certain musical values that are characteristic of his great contemporary, W. B. Yeats. Yet he did possess a particular kind of mastery over a variety of lyrical forms. The reader is usually so intent upon what Hardy has to say that the ear does not respond to Hardy's lyrical virtuosity, and what he has to say often has the appearance of being cross-grained and grim. The consolations that he offers those who read him are not easily won. His is the kind of poetry that is best appreciated by readers who are past the age of twenty-five. In writing an apology for what he thought, or rather what he perceived, to be the nature of being, he quoted one of his own lines: "If way to the Better there be, it exacts a full look at the Worst"—a statement which gives Hardy complete relevance to the condition of being that we face today

in the mid-twentieth century. He called his position one that demanded an "exploration of reality."

But for the purpose of this occasion and the nature of my subject, it is significant that his lyrics were essentially dramatic lyrics, that his *Satires of Circumstance* were for the most part dramatic monologues written by a philosophic poet. (And here I should say parenthetically that the primary distinction between the poet and the philosopher is one of means to an end. Not many philosophers have written excellent verse, for the speech of philosophic prose is not the same as that of poetry. Therein lies all the difference, a difference that has sometimes confused a few of the best of critics.) In the writing of his *Satires of Circumstance* Hardy was concerned with the presentation of his beliefs in dramatic form, even to the extreme of melodrama. I am thinking of "The Newcomer's Wife," the poem in which a naïve young man discovers that he has married a prostitute and which closes with these lines:

That night there was the splash of a fall
Over the slimy harbour-wall:
They searched, and at the deepest place
Found him with crabs upon his face.

For some tastes this conclusion of the poem may be all too obvious. I happen to prefer other, and perhaps less well-known, examples of Hardy's dramatic art that does not seem to be a conscious dramatic art at all; and in the poem I am about to read, one finds an unexpectedly dramatic use of paradox:

I look into my glass,
And view my wasting skin,
And say, "Would God it came to pass
My heart had shrunk as thin!"

For then, I, undistrest
By hearts grown cold to me,
Could lonely wait my endless rest
With equanimity.

But Time, to make me grieve,
Part steals, lets part abide;

And shakes this fragile frame at eve
With throbbings of noontide.

And there is the poem "Heredity,"
whose concealed art is of the same nature:

I am the family face;
Flesh perishes, I live on,
Projecting trait and trace
Through time to times anon,
And leaping from place to place
Over oblivion.

The years-heired feature that can
In curve and voice and eye
Despise the human span
Of durance—that is I;
The eternal thing in man,
That heeds no call to die.

Another short poem, "The Garden Seat," which is lighter in movement than the others I have read, illustrates another aspect of Hardy's dramatic art:

Its former green is blue and thin,
And its once firm legs sink in and in;
Soon it will break down unaware,
Soon it will break down unaware.

At night when reddest flowers are black
Those who once sat thereon come back;
Quite a row of them sitting there,
Quite a row of them sitting there.

With them the seat does not break down,
Nor winter freeze them, nor floods drown,
For they are as light as upper air,
They are as light as upper air!

With "The Garden Seat" I come to what may seem a large gap between my two approaches to dramatic art in modern poetry. Yet I think the reach is not so far as it appears; the poem itself makes a step toward that genre in fiction that includes tales of mystery, the ghost story, stories of crimes and criminals, stories in which the action is metaphorical in meaning and transcends the more sensational devices of plot and incident. In some of these the mystery is never fully solved, nor is it intended to be. Strip Hamlet of his mysteries as Shakespeare has revealed them, delete the ghosts and witches of Macbeth's consciousness, and we

have little left except two clients resting on an analyst's couch in an office not too far from the Lever Building on Park Avenue in the City of New York. Their transcendent being has been lost; more than that, their metaphorical relationship to human life is lost; they are in the process of being "cured"; their lives which they will gladly, eagerly recite to us after the "cure" has taken place are less revealing than they were before and reflect all too vividly the footnotes in an analyst's casebook.

III

BY THIS route I come to a particular element of dramatic art that has entered contemporary poetry by way of fiction. We speak of some poets as being poets' poets. But who are those who have become poets' novelists and writers of the short story? Herman Melville, Joseph Conrad, Henry James, Proust, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, André Gide, St. Augustine (in his *Confessions*), Thomas Mann, and a singular Scotch lawyer, William Roughead, friend of James and Conrad, author of many books of essays concerning crime. Looking through the preceding list of authors, one might ask the question: Are poets willfully, capriciously, *morbidly* interested in crime? Not more than other people are; crime remains a staple, both up and down, on all levels of literature—and of dramatic poetry. To say that the fall of man is an engrossing subject is an understatement; it is a revelation of what the condition of being is.

But to return to those writers of fiction who are read by poets of the present mid-century; in each a metaphorical aspect of life is placed before the reader, an aspect that does not exclude the presence of evil. I need not enumerate all of their works; but the mysteries of good and of evil exist in *The Counterfeiters* as well as in *The Secret Sharer*; in *The Turn of the Screw* as well as in *Felix Kroll*; in *The Remembrance of Things Past* as well as in William Roughead's study of Deacon Brodie, who as he

stood before the gallows said, "What is death, but a leap in the dark?" And Brodie was the living model of Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. There are few biographies that show more clearly and with greater dramatic stress the dual impulses toward good and evil than Roughead's recital of Brodie's career; a case record of schizophrenia is pale beside it. Roughead, like James and Conrad, was a moralist, and he intensified his Scotch Calvinism by the darkest strains of irony; he seldom preached; after his revelation he was content to rest his case. The best of moralists seldom descend to the writing of editorials; they are too deeply concerned with the action, the resemblance to human life itself.

Since poetry as we recognize it depends upon choice and economy in the use of words, it follows that dramatic action within a poem has the same laws; dramatic action is not extended to the length of a two- or three-hour play, but is compressed, and the action exerts its force through simile, paradox, wit, rhythm, rhyme—and all the resources of poetic art—but these are matters which have to do with the teaching of verse, the sometimes necessary shoptalk of the classrooms, rather than the essential and enduring elements of poetry. What I have just said does no more than indicate the way in which metaphor is transmuted from fiction into poetry.

The next question that arises is, Why is it that poets who have a highly evocative sense of dramatic art in poetry do not write successful plays? In our time only Eliot and Yeats have moderately succeeded, Yeats less so than Eliot, in translating their dramatic art in poetry from one art form into another. In both cases the effort was not one of days or weeks or months, but of a number of years. The answer is not as complex as it may seem: to sustain a metaphorical resemblance to life through the action of a play, to give it the character of the same reality that we demand in the reading

of poetry, is a distinctly different art from that of poetry—as different as the writing of a novel. This fact need not prevent one from enjoying a good performance of Yeats's adaptation of Sophocles or *The Family Reunion* or *The Cocktail Party*; line for line they are better written than O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms*, yet O'Neill's play is better theater and does not fail in its analogy to life. If I have spoken of other mysteries, surely there is no mystery as to the reason why *Desire Under the Elms* is a successful play.

IV

I STILL think it fair of you to ask me another question: Why is it that when I speak of a dramatic art in poetry I choose examples that ignore the joy of being, the sight of landscape and of the sky? These exist as surely as other aspects of reality; they complement the scenes that I have given you; they exist in many happy childhoods; they are also of the Garden of Eden—and for the most part I have insisted upon talking about the Serpent. It is because one has no clear view of the Garden without the Serpent—and so many of my well-intentioned countrymen have tried to drive him out of the world with questionable success. He is an extremely interesting and complex creature; in the Orient he is a dragon and is a source of goodness; in the West he is the sign of evil, closely associated with our Passion play, the fall of man, and after the fall, the resurrection. A little more than fifty years ago, we in America, or since we are a part of Europe, Western Europe, were fairly certain we had abolished the Serpent by the ingenuities of science; a few poets, who had no particular quarrel with science, were not so sure—and all of us are not so sure today.

Many poets today are willing to agree with Thomas Hardy that "pure literature" includes religion "in its essential and undogmatic sense, because poetry and religion touch each other. . . ."

Human action and the action of those forces that are both more and less than human are the essential dramatic elements in poetry; to perceive them at their extremes, the best and the worst, is to know in the original sense of the term, and untouched by latter-day associations of melodrama, the meaning of a "mystery" or "miracle" play.

As I come to the last paragraph of this lecture, I find that I have almost kept the promise which I made at its beginning. It is true that I have mentioned errors made by elder generations, errors that so far as I know extend back to the Garden of Eden. I shall not expect this generation or the next to correct them.