

Notes on Revolutionary Poetry

STANLEY BURNSHAW

ANYONE investigating the accumulated revolutionary poetry is impressed by two apparently inexplicable facts: (1) much of it shows a cleavage between subject-matter and expression: a lack of integration causing an irrefutable poetic flaw; and (2) much revolutionary poetry seems to move in the direction antithetical to the creation of a powerful mass literature.

An explanation of these facts may be obtained by applying a fundamental critical tenet with which most contemporary critics and poets readily agree: the inseparability of form and content. In collecting material on this point for a volume of criticism I found plenty of testimony from past and present-day writers, but no "proof." Such various viewpoints as those of Flaubert, Newman, T. S. Eliot, Edmund Wilson, Edmund Spenser, Matthew Arnold, Ludwig Lewisohn, Frederick Prescott and numerous others stated that form cannot be considered as separate from content, and let it go at that. I. A. Richards went a step further. He tried to prove by analyzing the physiological neural reactions during the reading experience that all of the elements in the response run together; and that sound cannot conceivably be separated from meaning. His investigations constitute the only "scientific" proof, for he found that the reading experience of a given word is not a single reaction but a *stream of reaction* simultaneously involving the following six factors: (1) visual sensation of the printed word; (2) the images inextricably linked up with these sensations; (3) relatively free images; (4) references to other things; (5) emotions; (6) affective-volitional attitudes. Richards was left stranded with the conclusion that "the old antithesis between subject and treatment ceases to be of interest. They are not separable or distinct things." (*Principles of Literary Criticism.*)

But even more substantiation of this conclusion may be found by investigating the process of poetic creation. We know that the creative process may be simply stated as *image-making*, and that an image is the outcome of the attempt to find a suitable name for some phenomenon which has no name in our language. The poet makes a fusion of two elements which the new un-named phenomenon calls forth in his mind. To say how this fusion is made, where (i.e., in what division of consciousness) it is made, or under what circumstances the fusion takes place would require many pages of documentation confirmed by examples . . . and yet the whole procedure in image-making can be expressed by a simple algebraic formula. Let us take a most elementary example: the poet hears the wind making a noise which is strikingly different from any other wind-noise he has heard; he "hears" this either in actuality or in memory.

Wishing to describe this phenomenon he at once finds the simple word "wind" not only hopelessly inadequate but plainly incorrect, for merely "wind" is not what he is describing. Other elements in the sound-phenomenon call out of his store of sensory impressions certain approximations. The stimulus, being the initiator, *begets* its approximate-word. And in this case let us say that it makes him think of a human voice sobbing or moaning or crying. As a result he writes: "sobbing wind" or "the wind cries," making thereby a fusion of two elements: an *image*, that is to say, a *copy* of the nameless phenomenon. Image originally means copy or likeness; and this is precisely what the poet has made: he has made a likeness of the new phenomenon by having conjoined two elements of his experience. And this fusion—this symbol—may be expressed by the following formula: "x: wind as a human voice: sobbing."

The process responsible for making the single image is identical for the entire poem. For the whole poem is merely a configuration composed of units which are themselves inclusive images. It is a single all-inclusive image composed of secondary inclusive images, which are themselves composed of tertiary inclusive images, and so on. To find the true formal structure of a poem one analyzes it into its large and small groups of images.

The important observation for the present inquiry is not, of course, our algebraic formula but the magisterial fact that the stimulus-phenomenon expressed in poetry *begets its image*, actively evokes its word-names. A different word constitutes a difference in the image: in the copy of the new phenomenon. And the corollary follows: when a word is changed the precise meaning for the reader is changed since the reading experience is a new and different one. To say that a poet changes a word to "improve the form without changing the content" is simply an impossible statement: by changing "the form" he at once has changed "the content."

The confusion has arisen because many have lost sight of the fact that a poem is not a mixture of two elements: one formal, the other contextual; a poem is an entity growing out of a configuration of words. One may approach it with its message in mind and purely by a device of analysis refer to the "content," or by a similar device of analysis, to the "form."

But these things are merely abstracted from the poem. The poem exists as a whole.

Bearing these facts in mind, there is no excuse for making the common error of taking form to be synonymous with technic or sound-pattern. Technic has to do with generalizations regarding word-combinations: questions of spacing, sound-pattern, syntax, punctuation, etc.—devices which are recognizable and self-

existent regardless of meaning. It is a simple matter to confuse technic with form, as for example in discussing what is called the sonnet—allegedly fourteen lines in a certain rime-scheme. But the sonnet sound-pattern is not one but a number of sound-patterns including the Meredithian sixteen line, and as many differing rime-schemes as for example, Spenser, Milton, Shelley, and Hopkins cared to use. The sonnet cannot mean anything if it is merely sound-pattern, since we should have to say, "there are many sonnets which are many sound-patterns." But this does not define the sonnet. Why are these prosodic explanations unsatisfactory? Because the sonnet is not a form of sounds but a mode of expression. It is a "cleft unity," or "bi-partite" treatment, or "ebb and flow," or "statement and solution," to use some of the commoner designations. And form must be similarly looked for in the mode of expression whenever form is applied to the analysis of poetry. For example, if you describe T. S. Eliot's most characteristic form-tendency as loosely rimed or unrimed free verse you really describe nothing; but you give a clue to Eliot's poetic form if you speak of his method of juxtaposing unrelated units of mood whose configuration is a desperate nostalgia for a past epoch. Or in Hart Crane's case: his poetic form cannot be indicated in terms of sound-patterns but in a unique method of telescoping images. Or Emily Dickinson. If you say the form consists in regular sound-arrangements carelessly, awkwardly used you do not distinguish her from countless others. But if you observe that she brings a fresh approach to experience by, in inverse ratio, giving to vast phenomena immediate domestic names, you are actually describing something about the form of her poetry. No clearer illustration of accurate usage of these terms can be adduced than the current Soviet designations as to the direction of literature: "nationalist in form, proletarian in content." The mode of expression indigenous to the cultural group will determine the form; proletarian ideology, the content. Significantly no mention is made of technic.

These theoretical considerations have been emphasized because of their direct bearing on certain confusions which have seeped into revolutionary poetry. No single poet has been wholly guilty, but there are tendencies in the air and revolutionary poets have occasionally succumbed, some in passages, some in phrases. The following stanza, for example, from one of the most gifted writers:

Horatius Power,
white-haired millionaire, pince-nez on fire,
screaming:

"The banks are broken, Gas has fallen,
Consolidated Ice and Frigidaire dropped down
Chicago River—

river swimming rats, the poor,
 (pity the poor,
 but not the undeserving torso,
 right arm raised in blood whose hand is bleeding
 at my door)

No virgin safe tonight, pack up your girls,
 call the militia, O my gold, my daughters
 of Lebanon's green waters flowing in triple-plated
 glass

seated in limousines, Atlantic speed
 in liners overseas . . .

Eastward my sirens, weave, weave,
 grass green Aegean bonds at six per cent—
 did no one hear the poor?"

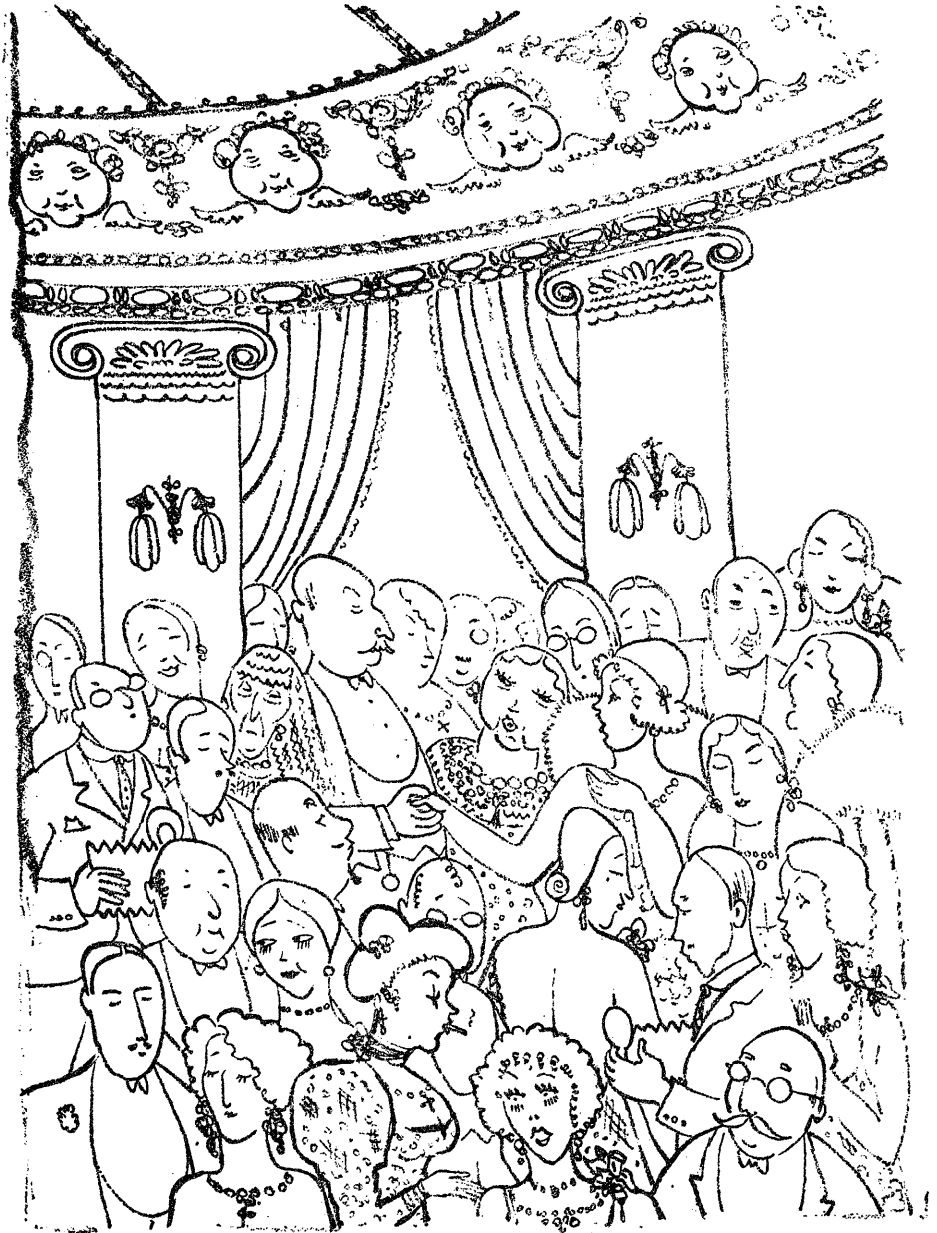
One can add other examples, among these
 a poem of several hundred lines. One can
 present passages from revolutionary poems,
 which are plainly precious:

...The nervous leaves rustle voices of sadgreen
 light . . .
 ...The waterfront nearby smells like a black
 restless wind . . .
 ...The soft sunsetwinds blow rosegold odors . . .

It must be added, however, that the real
 harm is still potential. And since in America
 we have no "school" of revolutionary poets
 building together a body of vanguard verse but
 many poets working separately, there is a need
 for pointing out the indissoluble dilemma
 awaiting poets who follow, let's say, the form
 of T. S. Eliot. These revolutionary writers
 will be attempting to write affirmations while
 thinking in negative modes of expression.
 They will be trying to express revolutionary
 content in the terminology of its very op-
 posite: a defeatist reaction. Obviously, the ir-
 reconcilable dichotomy must result in a flaw;
 in fact, in a double flaw because these poets
 will not only fail to write a successful poem
 but will fail to achieve revolutionary propa-
 ganda since poor art is poor propaganda.

Immediately some writers will protest the
 foregoing analysis. They may say, for example,
 "Aragon has written an important revolution-
 ary poem (*U. S. S. R.*) in Surrealist form—
 and the subject-matter of Surrealist verse is
 hardly proletarian or revolutionary!" The
 difficulty here can be solved by a precise use
 of terms. Aragon utilized certain of the tech-
 nical devices employed by Surrealism; he did
 not use the Surrealist mode of expression
 which, as we know, is inseparable from the
 Surrealist disinterest in intelligibility and con-
 tempt for communicating ideological concepts.
 Aragon has written a revolutionary poem in
 which he has incorporated certain technical
 devices used by Surrealists.

But there may be other protest against our
 application of form-content indivisibility. Some
 writers may say: "Since all past literature is
 not revolutionary in content all of its forms
 are non-revolutionary, and therefore we must
 make a clean break with all past literature."
 The conclusion would be correct if the pre-
 mise were not immediately disprovable. One
 finds in past literature a definite stream of
 writing which is clearly revolutionary in rela-
 tion to its background. Furthermore, a large
 part of the writing of the past remains as
 valid and significant today as when it was first
 written: penetrating perceptions of human re-



FIRST NIGHT

Pearl Binder

lationships, insights, affirmations and judg-
 ments implicit in narratives, characterizations,
 dramatic episodes, etc. To deny to contem-
 porary revolutionary poets the right to use
 certain modes of expression used by revolu-
 tionary poets of the past, is to deny the con-
 tinuity of revolutionary thought.

So much for the confusions arising out of
 the misconception of form and content, al-
 though it bears directly on revolutionary
 poetry critics as well—particularly on such a
 remark as the following: "MacLeish is Amer-
 ica's *greatest* poet even though he is a Fas-
 cist." If words are to have any precise mean-
 ing such a statement is hopelessly wrong.
 Greatness involves not only artistic competence
 but human values in terms of the progress or
 retrogression of civilization. The same critic
 would have to say, given two groups of men:
 one stammeringly advocating a better world,

the other eloquently advocating a worse so-
 ciety, the better speaker is the "greater."
 "Comparative eloquence regardless of ideology
 determines relative greatness!"—again a con-
 fusion because form and content have been re-
 garded as separable.

And now to the second point which follows
 from the first. Much of our revolutionary
 verse seems to be going in a direction anti-
 thetical to the creation of a powerful mass lit-
 erature. There are two bases for this con-
 tention: (1) by utilizing reactionary, negative
 thought-forms the revolutionary poet drives
 himself into an impossible form-content dil-
 emma from which no integrated product can
 issue; (2) there has been a tendency among
 certain of us to hold monologs with our-
 selves. These latter poets are obviously sin-
 cere, genuine and talented; they are busy
 working out their individual problems; and

they utilize modes of expression suitable to this ultra-private purpose. No one would pretend that they have not achieved excellent things—but let us be sure to add to our commendation that such obscure and subjective poetry cannot effectively serve in the creation of a powerful mass literature. Of course contemporary life is infinitely complex and the complexity will reflect itself in verse. But never before have poets been equipped with Marxist methods; and to an understanding Marxist clarity burns through all the obfuscations of contemporary society. A Marxist poet has no reason to be obscure. If he chooses obscure, oversubtle terminology he cannot expect to be a vitalizer of revolutionary mass poetry. Let him remember that if literature is to be a weapon it must not be a thin, shadowy, overdelicate implement but a clear, keen-edged, deep-cutting tool.

Appeal for clarity hardly advocates tin-pan-alley doggerel. It is infinitely more difficult to write simply and clearly than sophisticatedly: far greater discipline and technic are needed; for instance, the easy path of random image-association would demand expert exploitation. But if we achieve clarity and directness we create a literature interesting not primarily to intellectuals, sophisticates, and specialists but to masses. As research has shown, simplicity and directness are essential ingredients of early communal poetry. They are also frequently ingredients of the greatest works of poetry, the greatest art—and therefore result in the most effective propaganda. There are countless ways of writing simply. However, there is no need for discussing the details here. Clarity, simplicity, directness, intelligibility—these are in the direction of affirmation: and as such, in the direction of revolutionary poetry wishing to be concretely effective.

Although only at the beginning of its career, revolutionary poetry offers an encouraging picture. There is surely no dearth of talent. One can arbitrarily designate a number of different approaches to the problem: the individual human document taking the form of a resolve of some sort, or an outcry against circumstances, or an apostrophe to some individual, group, or object. There are poems of specific controversy. Poems of symbolic fancy. Dramatic slices of life. Description of events or of locale. There are such different modes of expression as may be found in the poems of Fearing, Bodenheim, Kreyborg, Freeman, Schneider, Gold, Kalar, Lewis, West, Gregory, Funaroff, Rolfe, Spector, Hayes, Mad-dow, etc.

But two types of revolutionary verse remain largely unexplored: first, satire. All of us agree that the possibilities are limitless. Daily it becomes increasingly clear that our enemies are making it easy for our satire; they seem to be posing, waiting to be caricatured. And yet little has been done with this incomparably effective method.

My second suggestion is harder to define. All about us are human characters who are inevitable outgrowths of our particular age

and locale. They have their roots in the present; they are in reality significant myth-figures despite the fact that they breathe and talk. Just as the important characters in Homer, Dante, Milton, Shakespeare are mythopoetic figures (unmistakable symbols of their age and locale) so these various, recognizable contemporary characters offer possibilities of a great mythology of revolutionary figures. This use of "myth" and "mythology" has, of course, nothing whatever to do with make-believe. Myth is used here in its precise sense: these characters are mythological because they embody an inner consistency, a logic of action and character making them real and inevitable. These types become the touchstone of their time and locale. And they offer us today a supreme opportunity for creating vital, effective, as well as lasting poetry. Barbusse remarked that propaganda must be organically integrated in the whole work of art. Surely revolutionary mythopoetic poetry shows perfectly how one can be effectively subversive merely by telling the truth.

In summary, there are four "appeals" in this essay. First, let those poets wishing to be effectively revolutionary free themselves from the modes of expression of the poets of despair

and decay. Such models are not in our direction. They speak, at best, in exquisite whispers. At most they are to be admired for their feats; but to submit to their macabre spell, or to emulate them?—hardly! Second, let us turn our backs on oversubtle, overdelicate, oversophisticated, obscure writing. Let us forge a clear, sharp weapon of poetry to make it effective beyond our cubicles; let us speak in immense, clear tones which can be understood by multitudes, realizing that this program requires supreme artistic effort. Third, let us bear in mind that a terrific instrument, satire, has been neglected. And fourth, let us consider the creation of a vital mythopoetic literature.

Such appeals may well strike certain readers with cynical amusement. A great poetic literature does not automatically follow a "call to pens" or public appeal, for poetry grows according to laws independent of deliberate exhortation. But revolutionary poets working apart must realize their collective effort. Aware of one another and of their common direction, they must blend their voices into a thundering revolutionary chorus, a concerted shout that will not relent until their vision has grown into reality.

Correspondence

We're Back in Wellesley

TO THE NEW MASSES:

My attention has just been called to a clipping from THE NEW MASSES headed "Wellesley College" Library and signed "Periodical Librarian." I wish to apologize for the tone of this communication and to say that it was sent without my knowledge or authorization. We have no desire to prevent our students from reading THE NEW MASSES. I shall be obliged to you if you will give this letter the same publicity you gave the one from our Periodical Clerk.

Very truly yours,

ETHEL D. ROBERTS,
Librarian.

Wellesley College Library,
Wellesley, Mass.

A Student's Protest

TO THE NEW MASSES:

If I had not been entering the mid-year examination period when you published the petty affront of the College Periodical Librarian, I should have written immediately to let you know that she is not an accepted spokesman for our college. It is not merely an apology that I wish to present, however, but a condemnation of the attitude it represents. Although such ill manners in a professional capacity are inexcusable, the situation is much more serious because it defeats the only purpose that makes such an institution as Wellesley an asset to society; namely, to provide a broad background that will give insight and perspective and training in sifting out the important issues in a situation so that young women can take a more efficient and active part in social reconstruction.

In a period when the prevailing economic system has collapsed, it is imperative that the young people who must construct a new one have every assistance in formulating a new economic philosophy as a basis for action. The NEW MASSES is the only revolutionary weekly where the news is reported by

people who have a solution for the mess we are in and one of the few periodicals ideologically apart from the intellectual maze in which those in power are lost. As a member of the student body, I resent having this opportunity to learn denied us by the autocratic whim of a prejudiced and narrow minded librarian.

Yours for intellectual honesty,

E. A. M.

Reply to Lawes

TO THE NEW MASSES:

Enclosed is a copy of our reply to Warden Lawes of Sing Sing on the question of his refusal to admit working class publications into the prisons for political prisoners.

WILLIAM L. PATTERSON.

LEWIS E. LAWES, Warden,

Sing Sing Prison,

Dear Sir:

Your letter of February 6th raises very important political questions. These cannot be discussed within the confines of a letter nor between two individuals. They are questions of a fundamental political character which must be brought to the attention of the masses of the American people, to the intellectuals and the middle class.

Granted that every man in your prison has been convicted of the violation of a penal law, it is nevertheless equally true that certain of these laws bear directly upon economic and political questions and are obviously enacted for the purpose of protecting the class interests of those who make the laws. There are men in your institution whose only "crime" is their activities in strike struggles, participation in demonstrations of unemployed workers, struggles against decisions of the Department of Labor on the question of deportation of foreign born militants, struggles to secure for the Negro masses the constitutional rights supposedly theirs. In

Wellesley College