

UNSPEAKABLE VERSE

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WHATEVER YOU MAY make of it, I think you have to admit that one of the more astonishing features of the literary scene in the last ten or fifteen years has been the revival of spoken poetry. Across the country — and up and down the continent — the poets have been coming out of their lairs to read their works in all kinds of likely and unlikely places. University lecture halls, libraries, art galleries, coffee houses and night clubs have all seen them reciting their verses to sizable crowds. They have even invaded the mass media. It would be a wild exaggeration to say that contemporary poetry occupies a large place in broadcasting. But increasingly it does occupy a place. And that statement is not just a plug for CBC programmes such as *Anthology* which for the past seven years has offered Canadian poets an audience at least ten times larger than they could hope to get through publication in a literary magazine or a book. I am also thinking of the educational radio and television stations in the United States — whose audiences may be small in terms of broadcasting but are far from negligible in terms of poetry — and of strictly commercial enterprises like the Caedmon company which specialize in recordings of the spoken word. *Time* magazine reports that 50,000 records of Robert Frost reading his poems have been sold in the U.S. alone, and 400,000 of Dylan Thomas.

These are pretty startling figures and they should certainly be heartening to poets and their friends. But even when they are not taking advantage of modern technology and are simply reading in art galleries or clubs to audiences that range from, perhaps, twenty-five to one or two hundred, poets may reasonably feel that they are reaching many people who would not ordinarily encounter modern verse. It is easy to understand why Irving Layton recently “exulted,” as according to *The Canada Council Bulletin* he did: “This sort of thing would have been incon-

ceivable 15 years ago. When I first started writing in 1942 people wrote poetry as if it was a secret vice. . . . This takes the poem out of the classroom and into the market place." It is a long time since poets have been in the market place. No wonder they exult.

But exultation should not, I think, be confined to the fact that poetry is reaching a new and wider audience. Surely it is of some importance that it is reaching this audience in a new way, a way that offers distinct advantages over the blurrily mimeographed magazine or the very limited edition laboriously handset by a friend.

In the case of readings which the public attends as they attend a movie or a play, there is an authority and an intimacy in the presentation which is absent from the poem on the page. Most people are, or think they are, rather baffled by modern poetry. And most people think, rightly or wrongly, that the writer is the final authority on what he writes. How satisfying, then, to have him actually there reading the lines as they were meant to be read. But if in this sense the experience is more authoritarian, more directed or "structured" than the experience of reading a book of poems, in another sense it is much freer. Read by the author to attentive listeners poetry becomes a flexible, fluid, personal experience quite different from the "literature" of the classroom. There is, or can be, something of that emotional interaction which characterizes the theatre. The poet can alter his tone, his interpretation, even his material to suit what he senses to be the mood of his audience. And they participate in the poem at a level of interest beyond even the most careful book reader.

In the case of broadcast or recorded readings, some of this intimacy may be lost. But much of the authority remains. And to compensate for the loss, there is, as I have indicated, an enormous expansion of audience. The poet on the air may not reach people with quite the same personal note as he does face-to-face, but he reaches far more of them. I suspect there is something else. Is it too fanciful to suggest that there is a kind of glamour about these performances, a sort of twentieth-century magic? They seem, incredibly, to combine myth and mass production, the oldest idea of the Poet and the most avant-garde. On the one hand, they remind us of the origins of all literature, of the poet as minstrel, bard, scop, sacred vates chanting to a spell-bound audience the great epics which were at once the history, the science, and the religion of his people. On the other, they are themselves part of the evidence for those very contemporary theories which announce the replacement of a tired "book culture" by a new "audio-visual culture" of the future. As we listen, we think, perhaps, of Homer's Demodocos

who sang the stories of the gods to the court of Alcinoös and concerning whom we are told "in every nation upon the earth the minstrels have honour and respect." But we think, too, of those 400,000 records of Dylan Thomas. Is it possible that the tape-recorder and the hi-fi set — not to mention the picture tube — are restoring the minstrel to us, and to the minstrel some of that ancient honour and respect? Modern engineering seems, for a moment, to open for us a way back to the very well-springs of poetry. Through the double glass of the recording studio Irving Layton bears a shadowy resemblance to Demodocos. The centuries come full circle and we return to the work of art made magically, in the words of W. B. Yeats, "out of a mouthful of air."

Possibly this is pushing things a bit far. But if I exaggerate a little, it is only to emphasize a point many others have also made — that seldom have the opportunities open to poets and to poetry been so many and so various. Certainly the prospect is an exciting one and I want to return to it later on. But before I get lost in these somewhat heady visions, I have a feeling I should back-track a little and take a closer look at the phenomenon. There are, after all, limitations to spoken poetry, as there is to any form of art; and its revival today, especially in the new ways offered by the mass media, raises a number of difficult questions. I am afraid that the limitations are not always recognized, and the questions, although they have been asked by a number of perspicacious critics (and even by some poets), do not always get the attention they deserve.

TO BEGIN WITH what seems to me the most obvious limitation, there is a fairly large body of the poetry of our time which was not intended to be read or recited aloud and which can only be damaged by such presentation. It is, literally, unspeakable verse. As I say, you might think this obvious. But it is surprising how many poets refuse to recognize it or react to the suggestion as if it were an outrageous attack on Poetry itself. They appeal, as I appealed a moment ago, to its origins. But poetry is a long way from its origins, and no magic, not even of the electronic variety, will take us back to them. It is true enough that poetry began as an oral medium and that even as late as the end of the fourteenth century Chaucer was still making his reputation by reading or reciting *The Canterbury Tales* to a court audience. But Gutenberg's revolution did finally arrive. If people encounter *The Canterbury Tales* today it is not usually with

their ears. The tradition that poetry is a performing art, something essentially done with the voice, has never died, but it has been considerably attenuated. Poets have continued to pay it lip-service, writing of their "songs" and invoking a *bel canto* Muse, with or without musical accompaniment, at the drop of a hemistich. But when, for example, in the eighteenth century, Pope writes of "singing" *The Rape of the Lock* we recognize the ironic use of a convention. The villa at Twickenham was bought not with fees from recitals but with subscriptions to a book — a translation of the bardic Homer into the polite conventions of the printed page.

Needless to say, I am not denying that there remains a strong oral or auditory element in all poetry even today. No one doubts that a poet in composing "hears" the lines in his head, even when he does not say them aloud as many poets do. No one doubts that a strong and subtle sense of rhythm and an acute ear for the sounds of his language are as important to a contemporary poet as they were to Homer. Many modern poets have written eminently recitable and even singable verse, and many have had more than a casual interest in the musical affiliations of their art. There is a story that Yeats composed his poems to an old Irish "chune" he had picked up somewhere as a boy. There is the fact of his experiments with Florence Farr and Arnold Dolmetsch in speaking poetry to the "psaltery." It is perhaps merely unkind to add that there is also a story that Yeats was tone deaf. Unkind or not, it is irrelevant. On the evidence of his work he possessed, and in the highest degree, that sensitivity to the rhythmical and harmonic qualities of language without which a man is simply not a poet. I do not question this *sine qua non*. But I do claim that three or four hundred years of writing for the printer's devil have inevitably had an effect on poetry.

Exactly when this effect began to show itself is difficult to say. Marshall McLuhan has suggested it was some time in the first half of the seventeenth century, when "there occurred that strange mixture of sight and sound later known as 'metaphysical poetry' which has so much in common with modern poetry." Certainly by the time of Pope a tradition of verse intended primarily for the eye was well established. In any case, Professor McLuhan's phrase "a strange mixture of sight and sound" seems a fair description of the present situation when the revival of spoken poetry is again tipping the balance. There is plenty of poetry today which sings, or occasionally howls, itself off the page so that one is practically forced to read it aloud. But there is also a great deal of poetry in which sound is subordinated to sight. This is poetry meant to be read silently and alone as one reads a novel or the report of a Royal Commission.

It can suffer heavily from oral presentation.

Sight is not necessarily superior to sound. The eye may have no general advantage over the ear. But it is a different instrument. Its element is space more than time. On the printed page it moves at its own pace, not the author's. It can stop and absorb, as the ear cannot. It can flick back and re-examine or compare, as the ear cannot. It can appreciate form and pattern, can distinguish and combine images, in ways denied the ear. For all these reasons, seeing is generally a more intellectual and analytical experience than hearing.

It is not hard to find evidence for these contentions. Most obvious is that kind of poetry (traceable perhaps, as Professor McLuhan's remark indicates, to poems like George Herbert's "Easter Wings") which depends so heavily on typographical arrangement in the space of the page that it loses most of its form and much of its force when read aloud. The work of E. E. Cummings provides many contemporary examples. There is also a kind of poetry—much of William Empson's, for instance—characterized by literary allusion, multiple meaning and word play which is largely lost on a listener. The linguist Mario Pei says, "It is fairly well established that in a normal conversation the hearer really hears only about fifty per cent of the sounds produced by the speaker, and supplies the rest out of his sense of the context." Even if we suppose the percentage to be higher in the case of an attentive listener at a reading, this seems a pretty formidable fact for the poet to contend with. It is easy enough to imagine what happens if the context is new and strange, as with poetry it frequently is. I wonder, too, if this filtering out or altering of sounds between speaker and listener has something to do with the curious way in which the rhythmic effects of, say, William Carlos Williams, which often seem delicate and original on the page, tend to be flattened out and made prosaic by the voice? Unheard melodies may be not only sweeter but more subtle than those heard. Finally, there is a cinematographic kind of poetry where the effect, as in film montage, depends on the close juxtaposition of images. Passages in Ezra Pound's *Cantos* would exemplify this. Read aloud, there is considerable danger that these images merely become a confused blur.

Of course, these are examples chosen to make a point. Sight and sound are frequently more closely mixed within the same poem than they suggest. I would have to agree on the basis of my own experience with *Anthology* that it is often difficult to predict from reading a poem in typescript whether it will read well aloud or not. The only test is the empirical one of having it read. There is some of Dylan Thomas's poetry which does not look like very good material for a poetry reading, but, once again, we remember those 400,000 records. Perhaps it

should be pointed out, however, that Thomas seldom read from his earlier and more surrealistic work with its tough knots and violent explosions of imagery. And then he was, of course, a magnificent performer. There is little doubt that his triumphant tours of the North American college circuit in the late 1940's and early 1950's had a great deal to do with the current renaissance of spoken poetry. Listening to him now on records, one sometimes suspects that he could have made the telephone directory sound like an epic. Is it merely cynical to wonder how many of the several hundred thousand people who have presumably heard him read, say "In the White Giant's Thigh" really have any clear notion of what it is all about?

BUT THERE ARE very few Dylan Thomases, a fact which leads directly to another limitation on spoken verse and into some of those questions I mentioned earlier. Most contemporary poets are, to put it bluntly, bad readers of their own or anybody else's work. This is not their fault. It is also a product of the split tradition to which I have referred. In the time of Homer, or even of the Provençal troubadours, one simply did not become a poet without the voice and the histrionic talents to present one's work orally. But "book culture" introduced the division of labour into poetry and it is relatively rare these days to find a poet who is also a good performer. In the case of public readings to small audiences, this may not matter very much. Something will come through, and the defects of the performance may be made up for by the presence of the author as a person and by the authority and intimacy I have described. If the reading is very bad, especially if the poet has chosen to read "unspeakable verse," we may sometimes wonder what, if anything, has been gained. But then probably not very much has been lost. It is in the case of the poet's attempting to reach the wider audience available through recordings and radio and television that the real problems and difficulties arise.

There is a fairly widespread notion that the mass media simply record reality and "bring it into our living-rooms." This is sometimes true, but, generally speaking, it is a considerable oversimplification. And for good reasons. It is, of course, possible simply to record or photograph a poet reading his work as one records or photographs a hockey game. In fact, this is the course sometimes followed by "educational broadcasters." But while one must admire their restraint and the

purity of their intentions, it is difficult to admire the results. Deprived of the social occasion, of the human intimacy and immediacy of the public reading, reduced to a nervous disembodied voice or to a twitching shadow a foot and a half high, the poet loses nearly every advantage he gains by reading and his defects are savagely magnified. Most professional broadcasters would feel, I think rightly, that this is what comes of "ignoring the medium," that what is needed is to adapt the performance to the art of broadcasting, to make it, in short, more of a performance. Unfortunately, this process can be even more perilous than the first. The results, at best, often have very little to do with the original aim. At the worst, as with Charleton Heston reading the Bible on "The Ed Sullivan Show," they have, as the saying goes, "to be seen to be disbelieved."

In justice, I must quickly add that catastrophes of this kind do not come about because the people involved in broadcasting are black-hearted villains with a psychopathic hatred of art, or even because they are abnormally stupid, though there is obviously greater chance of that. They occur because of the very nature of the medium, which is just that — that it is a *medium*, that it comes *between* the writer and the receiver of what he writes. Faced with the problem of presenting poetry on the air and with a poet who is not a good reader, the broadcaster's first thought is to hire an actor. Many actors are excellent readers of verse, but inevitably they introduce between the poet and his audience another voice and another personality, often a very high-powered one. With the best will in the world, there are bound to be differences between what reaches the listener and what the author had in mind.

But of course the situation is considerably more dangerous than this. I have never seen it formulated, but I suspect that there must be a kind of First Law of Communications to the effect that a message retains its original meaning in inverse ratio to the complexity of the medium which carries it. And broadcasting is a very complex medium, more like theatre than poetry and more like an assembly line than either. It not only involves many people — from five or six in the case of a radio recording to perhaps twenty-odd in the case of a television programme — each of whom has some effect on the result, and a quantity of machines each with its own limitations and demands, but it is also aimed, even in the case of a so-called "minority-audience programme," at very large numbers of people who must be induced to give up whatever they may be doing in their homes and watch the programme through to the end. In these circumstances, it is surely understandable if the original material, the "message," sometimes undergoes a considerable change before it emerges from loudspeaker and picture tube.

Especially if the material is not well suited to the medium in the first place, the producers will be tempted to compensate by using all their resources of presentation and adding what are usually called "production values." When this happens, it is fatally easy for the final product, or "package," to be so smoothed down and slicked up, so tucked in and decked out, that any resemblance between it and the original purpose, or idea, or hope, is purely coincidental.

It is, of course, precisely this kind of result which has led a number of critics to question whether the mass media should attempt to deal with the arts at all. Do they not inevitably warp and debase them, turning painting and poetry and high drama into mere "consumer goods" and reducing the artist to the level of the mere entertainer? Do they not by their nature tend to make *Hamlet* the cultural equivalent of *My Fair Lady*? The American critic Louis Kronenberger recently observed, "Culture . . . is being dispensed to more and more people in more and more hybrid forms, with more and more synthetic flavors, with more and more doubtful effect. . . ."

I am afraid there is some truth in this observation. I am afraid, too, that I do not have handy answers for the questions I have cited. But this does not mean there are no answers. The observation is only a warning and the questions strike me as far too pessimistic. The limits they suggest for what the arts can do are much too narrow. Behind these somewhat querulous voices I detect faintly another voice — that of the minstrel lamenting the invention of moveable type with all it meant in loss of spontaneity and warmth and in the enormous expansion of audience to include those unappreciative of the old arts. The mixture of art and mass production raises many problems, but I believe they can be solved if the artists will give thought to them.

THIS IS THE CONCLUSION I draw, then, from this somewhat sketchy account of the revival of spoken verse — that it is in some sense an obligation on poets to study more consciously than many of them have done so far the opportunities it opens up for them. I hope that more often than they have up to now they will write "for the medium", for the ear and even for the eye that watches moving images on a screen. Something along these lines has already been done in radio. One thinks of John Reeves' play *A Beach of Strangers* and of the two programmes — "Message to Winnipeg" and "Message to Stratford" —

which James Reaney has contributed to “CBC Wednesday Night”. But these are only a beginning and they remain curiously isolated. I confess I am somewhat surprised that poets, especially younger poets, are content to be so conventional and old-fashioned in the forms they employ. I do not mean they should abandon them. But surely they should begin to explore and exploit the new media, just as three hundred years ago their ancestors began to explore and exploit the printed page. There is nothing magical about these media. They have their limitations as I have tried to show. But they also offer all kinds of opportunities and, in the end, it is these I want to emphasize. There is no way back to the minstrel singing “the tale of the tribe”, but there may well be a way forward to forms of poetry as vital and as important to their audience. The prospect *is* exciting, and the future of poetry seems to me, as Matthew Arnold said it was long ago, “immense”.

