

PREVIEW

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A COMMUNICATION

To the Editors of Preview

SIRS:

Your Mr. Patrick Anderson in his "Stephen Spender and The Tragic Sense" gives such a poor performance as a critic that, until he has considered the position of the contemporary poet with the intellectual honesty the problem demands, one is bound to suggest he content himself with the private circuses which constitute his own poetry. Mr. Anderson's article can have value only as a criticism of his personal thought. Preview should set higher standards.

Mr. Anderson starts out with what is a loud but not very significant bang when he places on the record a long quotation from Karen Horney which in toto declares the essential isolation-insight ("the tragic sense") of the private-world poets (Lorca, Rilke, etc.). All this had become platitudinous until Mr. Anderson ran across it. Not satisfied with this, he goes on to use the word "tragic" as an ultimate critical yardstick, whereas its application even in the sense in which Mr. Anderson uses it, is extremely limited. In other words the gum doesn't stick: Mr. Anderson's labels come off too easily. For a poet who has consistently developed an inner world of reality, the word "tragic", used empirically, is not only slick but also silly.

The whole sorry business boils down to the fact that Mr. Anderson is either incapable of resolving the conflicting dualism of his politico-poetic world, or simply won't face up to the task. Mr. Anderson recognizes (good for him) that we are by this time somewhere beyond the eternal reciprocity of tears; it is too late for that; but he cannot, like Rilke, realize himself "ineffably individual as I am" and accept the heavy artistic responsibility of synthesizing his attitudes.

What Mr. Anderson fails to see is that the major English poets achieved a synthesis early in the 1930's. For these poets, particularly Auden and Spender, this war began a long time ago. Auden wrote his major war poems in the sonnet sequence "In Time of War" ('He neither knew nor chose the Good, but taught us/ And added meaning like a comma' he says of the soldier in China) and in the unsuccessful poem, "Spain". Spender wrote the disastrous "Vienna" and went on to write his scarcely more commendable Spanish poems. None of the English poets of note produced anything of comparative merit in their Spanish War phase: perhaps they had already written 'the war' out of their blood. In any event, both Auden and Spender entered a period of personal affirmation, and both produced poetry characterized by a reaffirmation of integral personal values at a time when the disintegration of personality caused by the advent of the main war meant a great human need for just such reaffirmation. "The Double Man" and "Ruins and Visions" constitute a more genuine war poetry than ever appeared during the last war simply because these modern poets proceeded to build an order of belief after they had mastered their normal horror and indignation at the circumstance of war. The poets of the last war never got past the recoil stage--they only

learned to disbelieve. Thus Owen's own table of contents to his poems shows that what he has written is a chapter of futility and disgust: he was overwhelmed by his own pity. Similarly Sassoon in a book of war poems called "Picture-Show" (the very title underlines the pan-oramic nature of the poems) suffered a comparable reaction but was not able to absorb it into his experience as growth. Yeats was right in a way he did not intend when he said "passive suffering is not a theme for poetry".

Poetry's calamity howlers are of course clamouring for the physically tortured and indignant poet, the man of actions and reactions, a positive and plausible "war poet". Mr. Patrick Anderson peeps over the shoulders of this herd with what amounts to the same look on his face. In a volume entitled "Eight Oxford Poets" (1941) such poets have indeed appeared on a minor but legitimate scale ('for all the Saints is no use as a marching song now/ God can let this happen without turning a hair/ Though he weeps with us'), but even these young men are not altogether taken in; they disavow Auden and swan-dive into a romanticism of 'spiritual readjustment' (which rather turns out to be a pool without any water in it); another group of Britons has taken a header into the muggy waters of outright escapism (New Apocalypse); neither of these groups shows any signs of the toughness necessary to come out of the pool and despite bombs and bulletins build a heavenly mansion raging in the dark; no real effort is made to endorse principles of faith; instead they busy themselves with aesthetic patterns. The point is, however, we are not likely to have any 'war poets' in the Old English or the School Tie sense; for thirteen years we have been 'involved': the poet has little left except his own power to create and believe.

Moreover there is another consideration. The Eliots and the Rilkes and Joyces and Kafkas established the literature of a war-torn society. Much of this was war literature directly related to the nature of the work being done by men like Auden and Spender now. This is recognized by Spender when he says (1941): "The world in which the poet finds himself is ruled by forces which have made life into a kind of death; a mechanical process, with mechanical laws, into which lives are flung. The choice for the individual is either to be destroyed or corrupted. Modern poetry accepts the inevitability of corruption and tries to discover an innocence and a faith beyond that corruption", and this statement is linked with Eliot's line "What is life? Life is death," and Spender shows that Eliot's line implies its opposite "What is death? Death is life." It is this rebirth out of our way of civilization that makes the modern poet revolutionary, much more of a revolutionary in fact than the politically-minded partisan who would insist on the necessity (even for the poet) of a social consciousness (which Mr Patrick Anderson passes off as 'emotional involvement') as the sine qua non of a revolutionary spirit. The political reformer insists that the poet accept a politico-social outlook; it would be equally fair and equally ridiculous if at the same time the poet maintained that on a pro rata basis the political reformer should accept in professional life the poet's subjective and symbolic values. Mr. Patrick Anderson has been sold a bill of goods and is loath to take delivery; by lambasting Stephen Spender, Mr. Anderson hopes to be able to square his conscience. The figure in Mr. Anderson's carpet looks suspiciously like a ballot.

Consequently in Mr. Patrick Anderson's article we have much yea-ing and nay-ing about 'defeatism', 'tragic view', 'lack of power in decision and action' and other such rubbish, balderdash and rot. The upshot of

this is a high quacky note of hysteria: "Spender...presents a strange but likeable combination of the indignant and the cuddly". If Spender's lyric powers were coupled with indignation even Mr. Churchill would be quoting him; it is Spender's very ability to feel indignation but synthesize it that gives Spender's poetry its intense positive quality. As for the rest of it, what can you make of a man who calls the personal but objectively neutral world of Spender 'cuddly'? Mr. Spender is 'involved' in the qualification of life, not in its action.

In the last paragraph of his essay we find Mr. Patrick Anderson "deplores" Spender's "various restrictions of range and limitations of outlook...-the tendency towards abstraction, the absence of people and the 'feel' of people, the reedy public-school note. There is a lack of universality. One feels that war-time is at once more hopeful and more tragic than this." This barrelful of casual assumptions, tossed off with a plush Victorian certainty, betokens if words ever do the amateur and immature dabbler in art. I cannot for the life of me understand what Mr. Anderson can possibly mean, poetically, by "restriction of range"; but as for "limitation of outlook" Mr. Spender, while not going far in space still manages to roam fairly successfully the extent of the human consciousness. "The tendency towards abstraction" is Mr. Anderson's phrase for Spender's positive and magnificent concepts ('which to refuse to search and find/ Is to be cold and cruel and blind'); "the absence of people and the 'feel' of people"--what does Mr. Patrick Anderson expect: Stephen Vincent Benet and Archibald MacLeish in a bathtub together? "The reedy public-school note" is, I believe, an echo rather than an assertion on Mr. Patrick Anderson's part; instead of going out from him it comes back to him.

Finally--for let us be done with all this--Mr. Anderson finds in Spender "...a lack of universality. One feels that war-time is at once more hopeful and more tragic than this." Universality is rather a good word when applied to Spender; it sums up rather well his insistence on the fundamental human need of personal tension established through definitive subjective values. Mr. Anderson's final statement is the last squawk of a Donald Duck dualist--School pulling the politically-conscious tyro one way and Gentlemen pulling the sentimental poetaster the other.

Come, Patrick--stop being the man in the middle.

ALLAN ANDERSON.

A REPLY.

What is Mr. Anderson driving at? His reckless use of words is well illustrated in the following sentence: 'Poetry's calamity howlers are of course clamouring for the physically tortured and indignant poet, the man of actions and reactions, a positive and plausible war-poet.' For those unfamiliar with Mr. Anderson's vigorous and not entirely honest phraseology, this sentence can be translated as follows: Many readers of poetry would welcome a poet capable of handling a theme such as the Russian defense of Stalingrad.' But this would not do for Mr. Anderson. To him, concern with Stalingrad or Dieppe is 'calamity howling' and a poet dealing with such a theme is 'physically tortured'--although how this uncomfortable state of affairs is conducive to writ-

ing is not plain. Hitler has physically tortured a number of his poets, but we have not heard from them since.

Mr. Anderson's qualifications as a critic strike me as dubious-
vide the extraordinary remark: 'None of the English poets produced anything of comparative merit in their Spanish War phase.' Even if he finds Auden's 'Spain' unsuccessful, can he justly overlook Barker's magnificent 'Elegy' or Cornford's 'Huesca'? But what can one expect from a critic who, in the face of all the evidence, refers to Federico Garcia Lorca as a 'private world poet'- Lorca who was the very soul of Spain and who was actively engaged in Spanish cultural movements as dramatist and expert on folklore? At least I have the satisfaction of knowing that I am not alone in finding the recent work of Auden and Spender inferior to their earlier: nor am I without considerable critical support in wondering why these two poets should find it necessary to 'enter a period of personal affirmations' now when, as Mr. Anderson says, they had already achieved a 'synthesis early in the 1930's.' I am not even sure that Mr. Anderson is right in viewing a 'disintegration of personality' as a result of the war: was not Munich worse in this respect than the Blitz, and League shilly-shallying than Dunkirk? 'These modern poets proceeded to build an order of belief' says Mr. Anderson- but does not stay to tell us what belief, or whether this new creed is more or less satisfactory than the one they seem to have thrown over, the 'synthesis' of the 30's. Personally I have met no one who has found spiritual comfort in the professorial mysticism of 'Another Time' or the 'Double Man.'

But perhaps I should stress once more the two points I made in my previous article. First, I said that a gap existed between the artist and society. If Mr. Anderson thinks I am the only person to hold this view, let me refer him to the article by Delmore Schwartz in NEW DIRECTIONS 1942. I said further that it was difficult for the poet to fit in with prevailing thought-patterns in war-time. In corroboration of this, I remind Mr. Anderson of Spender's Introduction to 'The Still Centre' poems- 'Perhaps I should explain why they do not strike a more heroic note... etc.' Then I attributed this dichotomy to what I called, perhaps injudiciously, the tragic sense of life- a viewpoint more comprehensive than that of, for instance, the rigid Marxist or the die-hard patriot. If Mr. Anderson will take the trouble to compare Spender's poem in which he describes two armies in Spain as sleeping in each other's arms with Michael Sholokov's idea of what to do with Germans, he will see what I mean.

Secondly, I suggested- and it was, and had to be, in so short an article, a tentative suggestion- that this contemporary schism might be settled in two ways. The poet could become a definitely socialist writer, as John Cornford was. Or he could remain a semi-socialist, a liberal, a mystic or whatever- provided his work identified itself so strongly with the masses, was so full of common humanity, that it succeeded in expressing the life, aims and dreams of the people. To give an example: omitting his occasional obscurity, Karl Shapiro has the gift for illuminating simple objects and actions of everyday life, so that one's very delight at recognition fuses with one's general emotional attitude towards the world. I have no idea whether he is a socialist or not, but I know his poems- like most good art-illuminate and reinforce my socialism. As I said before, my quarrel with Auden and Spender, even in the days of their 'synthesis', more so in the days of what Mr. Anderson terms their

'affirmation' of personal values, is that various influences--public-school, psycho-analytical, cliquish, sentimental--limit their capacity to give a picture of more than one section of one class. They lack the human touch. Mr. Anderson cannot understand what I mean by 'restriction of range'. Let me give him an example: the guerilla wars of Auden's early work and his private jokes. This, for instance: 'Shock troops equipped with wire-cutters, spanners and stink-bombs... silence all alarm clocks, screw down the bathroom taps, and remove plugs and paper from the lavatories...' Isn't that a kind of superior Beverley Nicholls?

No matter how vigorously he may sling mud at my poems and personal motives--his readiness to do this is in itself suspicious--I cannot see that this incipient editor of a progressive paper has either disposed of my points or done much to justify his bellicose intervention. Nevertheless I can honestly say that I welcome his letter, because my criticism, however crude, is, in the present state of Canadian letters, better than none.

P.A.

GENERATION.

Schooled in the rubber bath,
 promoted to scooter
 early, to evade and dart,
 learning our numbers
 adequately, with a rivetting tongue;
 freed from the muddle of sex
 by the never-mention method
 and treading
 the treacherous tight-rope
 of unbelieved religion,
 we reached the dreadful
 opacity of adolescence.

We were an ignored
 and undeclared ultimatum
 of solid children;
 moving behind our flesh
 like tumblers on the lawn
 of an unknown future,
 taking no definite shape--
 shifting and merging
 with an agenda
 of unanswerable questions
 growing like roots.

Tragically Spain was our spade:
 the flares went up in the garden.
 We dug at night--
 the relics within the house
 sagged.
 Walking down country lanes

we committed arson--
firing our parent-pasts;
on the wooded lands
our childhood games grew real:
the police and robbers
held unsmiling faces
against each other.

We strapped our hands in slings
fearing the dreaded
gesture of compromise;
became a war,
knew love roll from a bolt
long as the soil
and loving saw
eyes like our own
studding the map like cities.

Now we touch continents
with our little fingers,
swim distant seas
and walk on foreign streets
wearing crash helmets
of permanent beliefs.

P.K. PAGE.

PLATITUDES OF NECESSITY

I am encompassed with myself,
leaning through the socket of my eye
and feeling lands unfold like fans.
Arrow-shod have I fled before the Gods
who, tall with rage, have reached
down clinging corridors
and sought
to do me harm.

O heart, bear courage
to deny the shrines an easy knowledge makes
which, loud with flowers, hold high the sun-caught
rigid dogmas of our day:
for who will say I don't know
and, willing, face the ignorance of a septic night.

bound in armour, the knights ride
freedom bloody on their flags
and words that gleam on fore-aimed swords.
For it is easier so to die.
Slogan-wise, drums shake the skin of air
And, with their ball of sound, lay low our desolate monument.
For of necessity is simplicity bred.
And, peopled with our blood, their strong abstraction
becomes our new reality.

NEUFVILLE SHAW

DEATH OF AN ANIMAL MAN

Gestures he had to tear gauze and the world
 and tore with his bare hands his apple heart:
 processed in history
 by running and dancing of his tubular legs
 on highways, alas not love that penetrates,
 under light rain falling on chemical cities,
 by winter's deciduous fires that burn
 in the factual library of a brutal time,
 on yellowed parchment fields for the drums of summer
 he wore the rigid cape of a street blown back.

Running and dancing in that punishing wind
 since first his mother trundled from the garden
 to ride bare-back the white horse of her bed-
 in love's lean-to, in careless
 running and dancing, shouting among the trumpets,
 the curve of his mouth was carved on silence:

he poured at the forward face with an animal light:

like flowers swearing in aspirin his eyes swore.

Behind his laughter his archaic smile
 was sad as an athlete's modestly downcast glance
 when rolling in cold height, clearing the bar,
 while the wind's white flares hiss in the perfect grass,
 he drops his graceful body sweating glass,
 his maiden blood upon its sifted grave.

What can I say of him? except that he ate
 ceaselessly the mottled yard of his breath;
 that, when he stripped, his clothes crumpled in shadow
 upon the anatomy of chair and his watch
 ticked like a star under his pillow:
 that his nest was between the grave and columnar flight
 of elevators, lined with human hair,
 while the dark around was the history of his time.

Detached from stations into several cities
 sobbing with wind: woolly and variant clouds
 peed rain on dogs and sculpture- in light rain
 light news, the equable disasters only,
 he spent himself. Led from the shoulder
 the mountain pass of his arm to a flowering valley
 and alone in bathrooms whistled and twisted water.
 Was sketched by girls in their cosmetic blood
 and stood
 hearing the questions waiting to be answered
 and the going gale in the mathematical wood.

What can I say of him? except that now
 dead for his dancing he is: the emergent bone
 white as the sprains of athletes on the perfect grass,

rigid as chair's anatomy, Euclidean,
 achieves perfection in the animal flesh-
 the precipice hand
 gives back no more the rose as a soft echo
 nor does the arm defend the cottage brain
 nor shoulders wear the massive past as muslin
 for all, all, all
 lies now dissected on the battlefield.

PATRICK ANDERSON

CANADIAN POETRY 1942

Three years ago the silence of Canadian poetry was alarming. Mr. B.K. Sandwell made a remark for which I shall long remember him-- that, as far as the SATURDAY NIGHT was concerned, poetry was merely a filler for prose articles. The CANADIAN POETRY MAGAZINE naturally took the opposite tack, opened its arms wide and welcomed one and all into its mid-Victorian parlour. Some of its contributors moved quite prettily among the knick-knacks-- turning graceful triolets and tilting at free verse. Anne Mariott wrote THE WIND OUR ENEMY-- a long poem of drought on the prairies-- in which she dared to use a modern technique, and, more terrible still, to display a consciousness of one of Canada's social problems. But the annual poetry award that year went to Mr. Arthur Bourinot who wrote, if I remember rightly, of the first trillium and shadows on the hills. And what hard-bitten judge of Canadian poetry is not won over and softened by the first trillium? I ask you.

There seemed at that time little hope for anything remotely contemporary appearing in print anywhere outside the pages of the FORUM. And then something quite unprecedented happened. Within the length of a year three new Canadian magazines appeared-- magazines which were not only willing to print 'modern' verse, but actually wanted it. The first-- CONTEMPORARY VERSE-- didn't say a particularly loud 'boo' to the pink tea pretties but it was loud enough for one of their wags to dub it Contemptible Verse in a moment of irritation. That was possibly its first victory. Since then it has published among other poems-- few of which have been really bad in the sense that Canadian poetry can be bad-- glimpses into the interesting but specialized world of Ronald Hambleton where 'Around us roam/ Canada's three syllables,/ Cold, like a madman's grin'; an introduction (for me, at least) to James Wreford who, refreshingly, is aware of more than his own ego but who writes a metronomic and inverted line; an older, less biting, less adequate Livesay, most strangely in these times replacing her radicalism with a lonely introspection and writing of 'This bleak half-knowledge where/ Mind stumbles for a door-- and none is there.' Three of the NEW PROVINCES group reappeared briefly, A.J.M. Smith alone standing out as good and Leo Kennedy trailing off into a grim distance accompanied by a bedraggled collection of epigrams.

FIRST STATEMENT, the newest magazine, is being run by a group of young people and it stresses the fact on its cover that it is for YOUNG CANADIAN writers. It has produced a number of new names and a rather wide-eyed uncertain policy of inclusion. A recent editorial, after a discourse on the function of the Canadian magazine stated: "Hence our desire to exhibit, without discrimination against any, the various modes and types of writing as we find them in Canada. We would like to become the mirror of this variety and so provide the Canadian reader with the

freedom of choice he requires.' This same blanket approach is evident in the work of the members of the editorial board-- take for instance John Sutherland's overgrown essay on words (incidentally presented as a criticism of a specific story) which declared that words are not utilitarian; and the how-can-one-ever-express-it quality of Robert Simpson. For all their lack of direction these two are by no means uninteresting and the former deserves credit for having begun the magazine and having realised the necessity for literary criticism.

In this same year the Pelican ANTHOLOGY OF CANADIAN POETRY was published. In rereading Mr. Gustafson's introduction and checking carefully to see when it was written and finding the date to be March 1942, it is distressing to see his: 'I am hoping the poems herein will become synonymous with pleasure'-- his emphasis, but it could easily be mine. One would like to ask what Utopia Mr. Gustafson is living in that he could conceivably write such a sentence seriously. Indeed, what century Mr. Gustafson is living in that he could omit so many of the more interesting young writers and include Sir Charles G.D. Roberts' sonnet, 'Canada Speaks to Britain.' And still talk of pleasure. Pleasure for whom? I don't want to leave the impression that the anthology is all bad. It isn't. I feel that Mr. Gustafson is guilty more of laziness than inadequacy. Perhaps I malign him even there; it is possible he was not allowed a completely free hand.

Today with three new magazines-- CONTEMPORARY VERSE, FIRST STATEMENT and PREVIEW-- the poet is no longer silent. He has yet to come to grips with himself and stop crying 'Help' from the prairies and woods and mountains. If instead he will hitch-hike to the towns and identify himself with people, forget for awhile the country of his own head, he may find his age and consequently his belief.

P.K.PAGE

WASTELAND

This title is, in some degree, an unfair one. I have seen Canadian landscapes in which farms were farmed, portraits in which people were painted for other reasons than that the painter was tired of the classical mandolin fruit and vase but these are so far in the minority that the title, if not completely true, is, at least, generally appropriate.

I do not intend to make a plea for a humanist art. Any aesthetic accepted for external and intellectual reasons is dangerous, even if instead of a Union Jack one waves the Hammer and Sickle. This article, then, can only be a comment, or if possible, an explanation.

That the fact of a dichotomy of political (using the term broadly) and artistic interest exists is indisputable. Many of us can recall the sale of paintings donated so generously by our local artists to the cause of democracy in Spain. They were cold pictures of the Laurentians, still lives, street scenes without people, in fact, everything save the depiction of the cause motivating the donation-- love of the individual. I think that there can be little doubt that this divergence is bad. One might add that it is in striking contrast to the work of the great decadents, for their lack of emphasis on the broader human values was an expression, generally speaking, of a complete indifference.

The question is, I suppose largely, a social one although I have heard one painter state that, in his opinion, it is predominantly a

technical one. His feeling is that, only after he has attained a certain degree of skill, can he turn to what he believes are the more exacting problems posited by the world about him. It is possible that pure treatment of subject is a necessary transitional stage to be passed successfully before one deals with the inspiration of men and women--an inspiration which, by the way, this particular artist already feels politically. However, I can't agree with him. Besides training one's brush one must, I feel, train it to fulfill one's integrated perception.

Surely the explanation is simpler than this. The war has among other things, emphasized the bad values inherent in our society. We can't be assured of their ultimate rejection. It is this uncertainty of future, the fact that the relative Utopia seems so remote, that makes these times, at once, both so distant and so personal. In the immediate, there is both the negative and the positive. There is that which we would kill and that which contains our hope, but there is nothing to attach oneself to except the small minority who are striving for a genuine political and economical improvement, and this minority is so small that they lack a social reality. They are but the embodiment of a principle, a text book promise rather than a mass movement. For this reason those few painters who attempt to paint in a genuinely humanistic manner so often fail because they do so for a priori reasons rather than because their inspiration derives directly from the people themselves.

I have not attempted to condemn but to comment. The same problem which is facing the painter faces the writer. I doubt if any of us has solved it successfully. I hope that the show which is to be put on by the CONTEMPORARY ARTS SOCIETY, November 6 to November 30, at the Art Association-- will provide evidence that some of our painters are aware of it and, possibly, even have solved it.

I have deliberately refrained from using the phrase 'social consciousness' because of its political implications, humanist, in my opinion, being a broader term embracing the former.

NEUFVILLE SHAW

We are grateful to Allan Harrison who designed our cover and to the Cambridge Press who printed it at cost. We would particularly remind our readers that we welcome contributions, although we are not able to pay for them at present. Subscriptions (\$1.00 per year) and manuscripts should be sent to Mrs. Kit Shaw, 5593 Cote St. Luc Road, N.D.G. Quebec, Canada.

