Poetic Drama, Worldliness, and the Anti-Poetic in Plays by Charles Williams, T. S. Eliot, David Hare and Mike Bartlett

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Abstract: The uncertain achievements of 20th- and 21st-century verse drama in English invite enquiry concerning the possibilities of the genre. This essay considers three dramas, by Charles Williams, T.S. Eliot, and Mike Bartlett, and also a play by David Hare published as prose drama but comparable in its themes and rhythms. Discussion is advanced through the category of the 'anti-poetic', as exemplified in a reading of Goethe's *Faust*. Three issues are raised with regard to each drama – its scenario and agents, its implicit claims about poetic utterance and linguistic intercourse, and its achievement as dramatic poetry. Williams and Bartlett present protagonists who champion unimpeded speech and action and seek to renew the energies of fading societies, but become trapped by their initiatives and entangled in their own residual worldliness. Eliot and Hare stage a worldliness which is maintained and perhaps, for their audiences, poetically reinvigorated by the martyrdom, or the contradictory life and language, of their heroines. Bartlett's blank verse and Williams's prosodic variety barely sustain plausible dramatic conversation, whereas Eliot's careful gradation of poetic rhythm stages, with some success, a confrontation between different levels of verbal and emotional intensity. In Hare's play, poetry is reborn from apparent prose.

Résumé : Les succès incertains du théâtre en vers en anglais aux XXe et XXe siècles invitent à réfléchir aux possibilités offertes par le genre. Cet essai se penche sur trois pièces de Charles Williams, T.S. Eliot et Mike Bartlett, ainsi que sur une pièce de David Hare publiée en tant que pièce en prose mais comparable dans ses thèmes et ses rythmes. La discussion utilise la catégorie de 'l'anti-poétique', dont la meilleure définition se trouve dans la lecture du *Faust* de Goethe, et qui est analysée dans chaque pièce – dans ses scénarii et agents, ses revendications implicites quant à la parole poétique et la communication linguistique, et ses succès en tant que poésie dramatique. Williams et

Bartlett présentent des protagonistes qui défendent une parole et une action qui ne connaissent pas d'obstacle et cherchent à renouveler les énergies de sociétés sur le déclin, enfermées dans leurs pétitions de principe et embarrassées par leur propre expérience résiduelle. Eliot et Hare mettent en scène une expérience qui est maintenue, et peut-être, pour leurs publics, revigorée poétiquement, par le martyre, ou la vie et le langage contradictoires, de leurs héroïnes. Le vers blanc de Bartlett et la variété prosodique de Williams soutiennent à peine le dialogue dramatique, tandis que la minutieuse gradation du rythme poétique d'Eliot met en scène, non sans succès, une confrontation entre différents niveaux d'intensité verbale et émotionnelle. Dans la pièce de Hare, la poésie renaît de ce qui est en apparence prose.

Keywords: Drama, poetry, anti-poetic, worldliness, renewal

Mots-clés : Drame, poésie, anti-poétique, expérience, renouveau

Why have there been so few successful poetic dramas in the history of twentieth- and twenty-first-century English theatre? We think of Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*, unusual in occasion and structure; we weigh up success and failure in Eliot's more conventionally-staged *The Family Reunion* and *The Cocktail Party;* and we pause. Pausing, we remember, or research, plays, long unperformed, from before and during Eliot's period of dramatic creativity - by Stephen Phillips and Gordon Bottomley, by Ronald Duncan and Christopher Fry, by Charles Williams and Dorothy Sayers - and we continue to pause upon, to adjudicate, and on the whole to dismiss the claims of their many verse dramas. We notice more recent plays by Tony Harrison - albeit mostly skilful translations and adaptations of works from earlier centuries and traditions - and the growing oeuvre of Glyn Maxwell, with his spirited and intelligent defence of a specifically conversational mode of verse. More recently we may observe the success, in London's West End and in adaptation for television, of *King Charles III,* Mike

Bartlett's meld of royal gossip with Shakespearean pastiche. And we wonder whether, amidst such partial successes, something is missing; some recipe for success, some undiscovered site of neglected achievement, perhaps some interpretative formula offering to make, out of apparent or supposed failure, intelligibility or paradoxical triumph.

In this essay I shall discuss dramatic texts by three of the authors so far mentioned - by Eliot, by his precursor and (by him) admired contemporary Williams, and by Bartlett. In choosing these plays my aim is to range across three of the theatrical modes most frequently explored by recent English verse-dramatists. Bartlett's recent success is overtly Shakespearean in its dramaturgy, indebted most clearly to *Richard II* and *Macbeth.* Williams's drama, originally performed in the cloisters of Canterbury Cathedral, invokes traditions and examples of medieval and early Renaissance Moralities and chronicle Histories. Eliot's tragicomedy, typically more various in its use of tradition, blends mythic narratives drawn from Euripidean tragedy with features of two other sharply antithetical styles - the brittle conversation of boulevard comedy (one thinks of Sacha Guitry) and the spiritual interrogation typical of baroque martyr-drama (given renewed critical salience during Eliot's career by the writing of Walter Benjamin).

In my discussion I shall have three types of questions in view. An obvious and basic question: what happens in such contemporary verse-plays? What kinds of scenario, what types of dramatic agent, what types of personal and social confrontation are, in these dramas, emphasised and placed into sharp relief? A supplementary question, which in fact requires some prior consideration: what features of these plays bring them to life as, to different degrees, compelling dramas? in what ways (to anticipate some of the terms of my answers) do 'poetic' energies and protagonists confront and interact with forces, seemingly very different in nature, which may, in action, be represented as 'worldly,' and, for aesthetics, as 'anti-poetic'? And a third question, which I shall consider throughout my individual analyses and more generally in a brief conclusion: in what respects are such plays intelligible as being poetic? What, beyond the deployment of verse-lineation in their printed formats, sets them within the lineages of verse-drama?

My very summary responses to these questions will suggest that Bartlett's and Williams's plays are, given obvious differences of temporality and milieu, in some ways rather similar, and importantly different from Eliot's drama. In brief development of this idea I shall offer reflections on a play written and set in a time-frame halfway between those of Eliot and Bartlett; a play printed, published and characteristically discussed as prose, yet abounding in verse-rhythms and increasingly governed by them, and usefully comparable in its dramaturgy to Eliot's tragicomedy - David Hare's drama *Plenty.*

In discussing these four texts I shall mainly proceed play by play, partly because of the relative lack of currency, for different reasons, obtained so far within academic study by the earliest and latest dramas, those of Bartlett (the most recent, with which I shall begin) and Williams. Into each discussion I shall interweave material relating to the three types of issue I have identified. Both in advance, however, and later in conclusion I shall draw out, in response to my initial questions, claims - about 'anti-poetic' worldliness, about dramatic action, and (in conclusion) about poetic language - which are relevant to these plays and may have wider validity.

For the notion, first, of '(the) anti-poetic' I must acknowledge indebtedness to a remarkable study, by the Germanist Benjamin Bennett, of Goethe's immense two-part poetic drama, or dramatic poem, *Faust.* Bennett's elaborate interpretative arguments, and also of course the coruscatingly various modes and verse rhythms of Goethe's epic, far outrun the scope of the present essay. In particular Bennett's conception of the anti-poetic involves applications of such notions as self-consciousness, irony, and 'submergence,' whose value in relation to my chosen set of English plays, while not negligible, would be impossible adequately to suggest here. But a brief presentation of Bennett's line of thought, and of a reading of *Faust* (my own, not his) which it might stimulate, may be relevant to what follows.

Early in his book Bennett advances a claim fundamental to his sense of what it might be for *Faust*, and for any drama, to be poetic: "The business of poetry is to 'reveal' a world-shaping or in truth a

world-originating 'power' in *all* language" (16). In the dramatic context of *Faust*, Bennett's point is to develop a correlation between the lyrical poetic flights of Faust and his inexhaustible imagination, beyond the worlds of scholarly and scientific disciplines which he has mastered and in which he finds nothing but frustration and ennui, of exciting and life-enhancing worlds elsewhere. Hoping, in such imaginations, for self-renewal and (to varyingly conscious extents) renewals of the human societies in which he invests his energies - petit-bourgeois Germany, Imperial culture, and an independent republic - he experiences, and comes damagingly to expect and indeed engender, for himself and others, disappointment and disaster. Mephistopheles, for his part, is the chief vehicle of the 'anti-poetic' energies of *Faust*, at once devilish and worldly-wise. He offers Faust the chance - in truth, for Goethe's thought, at once negative and positive - to submerge himself in the seemingly tangible reality of such worlds, to sustain his hopes so as all the more reliably to exacerbate his disappointment and eventual despair. On this interpretation, the drama directs irony against Faust's 'poetic' supposition that self-renewal is to be achieved solely by his own individual powers, enhanced as they may be by Mephistophelean magic and poetic charisma. Mephistopheles in practice works to accelerate, in and around Faust's self-servingly egotistic projects, the self-shaping and mutually limiting energies inherent in the world, made up at it seems to be more or less separable worlds, through which he and Faust pass - worlds of erotic love (Gretchen), aesthetic and cultural beauty (Helen), and political and technological reform (the reclamation of land from sea). Faust's poetic solipsism, in each of these spheres of poetic lyricism and dramatic action, is fulfilled to the point of destruction – a fulfilment which, from a different and more general perspective, involves the powers, at once creative and transitory, of all humans and all human language. Poetry, thus, by being claimed on behalf of an individual and supposedly unique vision or language, automatically generates its 'anti-poetic' antithesis; and poetic drama lies in (some version of) their dramatic interaction, and the self-consciousness which is thereby, in a theatre audience, generated with regard to their own powers, even if latent, of poetic self-creation.

Turning now to the question of dramatic action - of what, at a basic level, takes place in the English plays upon which I shall focus - I shall first suggest a few summary conclusions; I take these to be in line with the possible reading of *Faust* sketched in the previous paragraph, and hence amenable to Bennett's notion of the anti-poetic, from which it has been derived. Protagonists in these dramas seek free agency for themselves and, for themselves and others, sincere and direct linguistic self-expression; in practice, however, they are entrapped in self-contradictions and unintended consequences, in both self-discontinuity and self-repetition. Their socio-political worlds appear to them as encoded, figured, caught up in a network of worldly and all too easily accepted lies and half-truths. Such worlds seem, to the sincere (and more or less poetic) protagonists, either overtly hostile or, more significantly, unreliable just when seemingly most responsive to the protagonists' aims and hopes. Thus, within these worlds and in relation to these protagonists, there emerge functionally ambiguous dramatic characters - wise tempters, mysterious Guardians, false friends and friendly enemies. Such character-functions embody processes and energies of an antipoetic, regularly impelling protagonists into obsessive double-or-quits projects and patterns of action, while at the same time implying the limitations of such agency. Hence, at the level of the individual protagonist and would-be hero(ine), there may emerge a sense of pathos, elegiac in defeat or even potentially tragic in martyrdom. Upon the social worlds of the plays, in their turn, the impact of the protagonists may amount merely to confirmation in their own worldliness, or to some larger sense of its true necessity; on the other hand a poetic protagonist may, by or beyond his or her conscious intention, to some extent renew the anti-poetic world against, and yet within, which they stand and act. Across the actions of such dramas, thus, there may resonate the ambiguities of poetic prophecy and utopian dream.

My consideration of individual plays can usefully begin with Mike Bartlett's *King Charles III*, the most recent and in some ways most straightforward example of issues and features so far discussed. Its roy-

al protagonist is perceived, by himself and others, as one who is alone; as "A virtuous man of dignity and grace, / Immovable, inscrutable as stone", and as a man, in his "whole existence", "built upon the ones who gave [him] birth" (11). These claims and representations are not obviously coherent. It is also unclear how far Charles (or even, perhaps, his author) is conscious of significant tension between them. In fact the tensions here are important for the emergent dramatic action. At the outset Charles is seen to be released, by the death of his mother the Queen (Elizabeth II), from endless princely potential into the actuality of kingship. Having (as one says) his own ideas, he seeks to put them into political effect. He takes a stance as defender of sincerity and emotional freedom, refusing to be limited by the superficial and worldly theatricality to which his daughter-in-law Kate expects and fears that his coronation and monarchy, and that of her own husband William after him, will be reduced. Against the plans of his Prime Minister (Evans), and despite his own past and emotionally damaged family history, he stands up for the causes of free publication and free comment by the Press. Unable to impose, upon Evans's pre-existing political plans, his own personal will, and given ambiguous encouragement by the Leader of the Opposition (Stevens - one hears here the phrase 'even-steven,' 'nothing in it either way'), Charles takes a constitutionally invasive step, proroguing by personal intervention a sitting of the House of Commons. Public order is threatened. The ghost of Diana (Charles's dead first wife) appears on stage to Charles and to William, promising to each that "You'll be the greatest King we ever have / had" (62, 71). Kate, anxious for the fate of the monarchy, and for her power through her husband to influence and dominate, propels William into what is ostensibly a process of mediation between King and Parliament; this quickly turns into usurpation by William, while Charles, abdicating, self-pityingly projects his future as an old forgotten gardener.

Has anything changed or been renewed with William's succession, to the throne and to the ambiguous limits of monarchic power? He promises renewal by way of a return "to what your mother [i.e. Elizabeth II] did, / Stability and certainty, above all else" (112).

Kate for her part hopes to:

> be a Queen unlike the ones before,
> ...[with] power to achieve my will in fair
> Exchange for total service to the State. (92)

Here again one may sense a pattern of contradiction within seeming or supposed continuity. Meanwhile the subordinate dramatic action around Prince Harry generates, within repetition, a certain difference; generally a prose speaker, like his girl-friend Jess, he learns to speak verse, perhaps therein blending, with deference to his superiors, some vein of self-creativity. The idea may be in the air that Harry might function, for the all too poetic state of the nation, as an anti-poetic complement, poison and cure at once - despite his reduction, in the play's denouement, to (temporary) subservience to ceremony. But Harry's fate, within the plays' narrative, like that of Charles, is portrayed largely in terms of pathos - an alternative path that fails to be taken. The overall effect, in Bartlett's play, of poetry seems to amount to a sense of dignified but sterile repetition, at the levels at once of public policy, personal project and linguistic self-consciousness; Charles and William, Kate and Harry sleep-walk and dream-talk their way, through villainies channelling Shakespeare's *Macbeth,* in rhythms distantly echoing the sporadic energies and elegiacs of Shakespeare's abdicating Richard II.

Charles Williams's play *Thomas Cranmer of Canterbury* has on the whole been discussed in the context of English twentieth-century revivals of religious drama. Yet for Williams, in this play as in his religious novels, God remains hidden; nor, despite the partial resemblance of the play to the modes of Shakespearean History (Cranmer appears, in fact, as a notable role in Shakespeare and Fletcher's *Henry VIII*), do monarchs male or female occupy more than relatively minor roles in the drama. Williams's action is centred on the dramatic antithesis, and the occasionally conscious theatrical relationship, between his titular protagonist Cranmer (Christian reformer, prayer-book author, Archbishop of Canterbury, and hesitant Protestant martyr) and a role named in speech-prefixes as The Skeleton and self-described as 'Figura Rerum' – a figuring forth of the play of worldly business and earthly

power, and an all-too-accurate prophet of the vacillating infidelities of the rulers of this world.

Cranmer, like Bartlett's Charles, begins from a personal project – the restoration, out of its present sleepy materialism, of the realm of England to a newly vibrant Christian faith:

> O that the King, O that God's glory's gust
> from heaven would drive the dust of the land, unite
> his people with might of doctrine, embodied raise
> their subservient matter, set with his fire ablaze
> their heavy somnolence of heavenly desire, his word
> bid what God said be heard, what God bade be done! (6)
> He seeks and prophesies, with this, a renewal of language:
> O now
> our common English, whereto we were born
> …having and meant to have
> wealth so great of words, language of power
> this hour receives its consummate miracle; the Word
> takes the sound heard natively around,
> the excelling grace of speech... (19-20)

Cranmer comes, indeed, to embody a role-function familiar in twentieth-century drama – the liberal martyr-genius, seeking constructive reform, serving governments on whose goodwill or consistency he relies too much, and always tempted to trust his own unaided insights and energies; one thinks of Shaw's Joan, Osborne's Luther, Brecht's Galileo. The action of Williams's play shows Cranmer dangerously exposed amidst the openness of the specific historical moment which enables his visionary agency. King Henry promotes, challenges and protects Cranmer by turns. The regents for the young King Edward manipulate and scorn him. Queen Mary, restoring traditional Catholicism, puts him to the torture; he recants, and, fickle and vulnerable himself, recants his recantation.

All this, indeed, is on historical record, and is duly, though rather cursorily, chronicled in the play. But Williams's greater emphasis falls upon his anti-poetic character, Figura Rerum – at once a Morality Vice-figure and a reworking of Goethe's and perhaps Marlowe's

Mephistopheles. Like Goethe's devil he befriends and betrays a poetic protagonist, circulating an encyclopaedic profusion of linguistic paradox between the utopian world of Cranmer's poetic vision and the various worlds, of business affairs, unreliable rulers, and ultimately universal death, which reject such poetic vision and language.

> - I am the delator of all things to their truth.
>
> - You believe in God; believe also in me;
> I am the Judas who betrays men to God.
>
> - I am Christ's back: I without face or breath,
> life in death, death in life,
> each a strife with, each a socket for, each,
> in the twisted rear of good will, backward-running speech,
> the derision that issues from doctrines of grace
> through the division man makes between himself and his place. (*TCC* 34-35, 54)

The difficulty of poetic language here corresponds to a genuine and inherent complexity in Williams's sense of the play's theme. Human individual genius, however consciously it may be dedicated to the service of a world outside itself, remains - as in Faust, so in Cranmer - ineluctably self-assertive, and, to that extent, treacherous in relation both to those it seeks to serve and to its own preferred self-image ("the division man makes"); it requires the imagination of a larger and less euphorically conceived world, that embodied in Figura Rerum, to comprehend and accept this anti-poetic treachery, this "death in life." Such an imagination, and such an anti-poetic drama, may indeed find, as well, and with both "twisting" and "good will", some hope for a worldly "life in death."

T. S. Eliot knew and admired the writing of Williams; Reilly's citation, in *The Cocktail Party*'s last act, of lines from Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* amounts in effect to a citation of Williams's use of the same passage in his novel *Descent into Hell*. One linkage can be traced through the Skeleton's speech, just quoted – "the division man makes between himself and his place." Where Williams depicts a protagonist over-insistent on the supposed necessity, to God and to his nation, of

his own identity, his 'self,' Eliot's drama works towards an epiphany of strangeness, to others and to oneself – a condition of disillusion with a world perceived as never truly shared:

> there had been neither giving nor taking
> But we had merely made use of each other
> Each for his purpose. That's horrible. Can we only love
> Something created by our own imagination? (Eliot 416)

Eliot here approaches, by contraries, lines by Williams in *Thomas Cranmer of Canterbury*:

> There is this to be said for my lord of Canterbury,
> he dimly believes in something outside himself –
> which is more, I can tell you, than most of you do. (Williams 42)

Of the plays under discussion here *The Cocktail Party* seems to me, however, perhaps the most insistent on the virtues, as well as the limits, of worldliness - the most determined to keep together, rather than merely to counterpose, the poetic and the anti-poetic. The point is articulated, perhaps too emphatically, by Edward in the play's final moments:

> Sir Henry has been saying,
> I think, that every moment is a fresh beginning;
> And Julia, that life is only keeping on;
> And somehow, the two ideas seem to fit together. (440)

In this spirit Coghill observed that "no other English comedy has linked [...] the quest for love in marriage and the quest for the love of God" (237). More generally the play, discreetly but unmistakably, foregrounds in the course of its action the renewal of marriage between Edward and Lavinia, the achievement by Peter of some measure of adulthood, and the pertinacious efforts, to these ends, engaged in by the three Guardians – all amidst representations of national and imperial culture, from music and theatre and diplomacy to Harley Street psychotherapy and "connections – even in California" (423). Just as (following Eliot's well-known invocation, as dramatic prototype, of Euripides's *Alkestis*) Reilly/Herakles restores Lavinia/Alkestis to the common life of everyday unhappy marriage, so Lavinia, ancestress

(in Virgil's *Aeneid*) of Roman Imperial civilisation, is given renewed life and currency partly through Julia, named after the greatest family dynasty of the Roman Empire.

Yet Eliot's insistence on parallels with *Alkestis* may mask his use, in addition, of a different Euripidean drama, *Andromache.* Basic to both this and *The Cocktail Party* is a pattern of mutually-frustrating worldly desire; 'A loves B loves C loves D' – a pattern from which, in Euripides, there emerges, as physical and emotional survivor, transcending the blind passions around her, the role of 'D'; in Euripides, Andromache, in Eliot, Celia, whose name means 'the heavenly one.' Led but not driven by the searching conversational scrutiny she undergoes from Reilly, she floats free into poetic meditation, religious withdrawal, and upside-down crucifixion on an anthill. If her poetic status is offset by the worldliness, predominant to the end, of the other three lovers, it is her own involvement in their anti-poetic affairs which generates Celia's isolation, ambiguous glorification and martyrdom.

On the basis of this alternative mythic and poetic-dramatic model, the Guardians, Julia, Alex and Reilly, emerge less as other-worldly figures, more as familiar and rather caricatured professionals demonstrably, even irritably, exhausted by self-imposed missions. They suffer almost as much, in the service of a barely-functional social world, as does Celia in her exile from it. Between Celia and all the others, the roles of martyr and saviour seem interchangeable; she dies for them so that their lives-in-death may memorialise her, each the antibody and antipoetic to the other. Eliot's London stands between California and Kinkanja, and his drama is a poetic cocktail in which each, by each, is both shaken and stirred. Yet, despite Peter's "ideas to make a revolution in the cinema", Reilly's reminder stands; "But that world does not take the place of this one" (435, 438). As in Williams so in Eliot, life and death inhabit together one and the same incommensurate site.

Hare's *Plenty,* ostensibly a play of social realism and historical satire, merits further and rather different consideration, I shall suggest, within the conceptual framework of this essay; it is another martyr-drama, another worldly critique of worldliness, another exposé of repetition

and renewal masquerading as each other - and, both metaphorically and technically, a play deploying and even taken over by poetry. It begins, at Easter, with a middle-aged man covered in dried blood. Its heroine's surname, Traherne, is shared with the seventeenth-century English mystical writer and poet. Its staging deploys emblems of national celebration (the 1951 Festival of Britain) and degradation (the Suez debacle, five years later). In a seasonal cycle between spring and autumn it closes on a vision of summer in the liberated France of August 1944 – a final scene which is a flash-back, an imagined utopian fulfilment of the worlds and languages through which, in otherwise more or less linear sequence, have moved Susan the protagonist, her worldly and bohemian friend Alice, and her diplomat husband and defeated lover Brock. The status of these worlds and their languages are shown as, for Susan, provisional; adapting herself to them, she also puts immense and devious energy into subverting their assumptions and professed codes of conduct. Sean Carney well observes that for Susan post-war England is an "ontological fraud" (35).

The chief critical issue in the play's reception has been: does Susan herself embody, seek, or credibly imagine anything more integritous and self-expressive, anything less fraudulent? At the final crisis Brock remarks: "You claim to be protecting some personal ideal, always at the cost of almost infinite pain to everyone around you..." (78) An early scene offers a conceivable shape for such an ideal – a passionate though desolate embrace between a young Susan and another British agent, exposed like her to enemy action and local resentment in occupied wartime France. Five scenes later, amid the demonstration of the lies on which 1950s British foreign policy had based its linguistic practices, Susan reinterprets this ambiguous event in a bold but tenuous claim that "by and large we did make it our business to land in countries where we were wanted" (56). Is she practising a fraud on her listeners or on herself? Consider, in its splendid fusion of social and linguistic critique, self- and other-directed, the exchange that shortly follows this remark:

> BROCK Please can you stop, can you stop fucking talking for five fucking minutes on end?

> SUSAN I would stop, I would stop, I would stop fucking talking if I ever heard anyone else say anything worth fucking stopping talking for. (57)

As the main linear action of *Plenty* develops, Susan, tiring of her affair with the conventional diplomat Brock, tries to have a baby with her working-class lover Mick, and, this failing, threatens to shoot him. Rescued again by Brock from Pimlico bohemia, on a whim of devotion to a good cause she ruins his career, then makes a threat of suicide, ostensibly for the sake of his frustrated advancement, to his Foreign Office boss. Filled with the 'plenty' of her own manic energies, and living in a house full of the plenty of post-war European and Imperial reconstruction, she gives it away, throws out her husband, and is next found collapsed over a bed, drugged to the eyeballs, in a "sparsely furnished and decaying room", blearily celebrating "comrades who fell" (80, 83). Her companion in the room is Lazar, the former Resistance agent who shared embraces with her long ago in occupied France; he remarks that: "a fine undercover agent will move so that nobody can ever tell that he was there" (84).

Susan (as Lazar's words imply) functions in the play at once as Williams's Cranmer and his Skeleton. They exhort their world to a costly self-renewal – and they undermine all credibility in both their world's and their own attempts to achieve it. Herein Susan in particular is, in relation to the action of Hare's play and to the way of its world, at once protagonist and anti-poetic supplement, poison and cure. To adapt Brecht's famous formulation, unhappy is the land that needs a heroine. Like *Galileo*, Hare's play seeks, through its poetic and infuriatingly (un-)worldly protagonist to educate her, and its, worldly audiences into a sense of the price to be paid for the coexistence of 'anti-poetic' and 'poetic' within a world at once habitable and renewable. The projects of Hare's and of Eliot's dramas thus tend to converge; singularity and sociability, poetic self-isolation and anti-poetic worldliness, irritate and enhance each other.

How far – one may ask, in conclusion – do these plays, in terms of their language as well as their protagonists and their worlds, convincingly establish, alongside their thematic relations to poetry, a sustaina-

ble status? An answer must take into account not only their features of style but also their deployment, within verse styles and forms, of the two central resources and tests of dramatic poetry – the monologue and the voicing of inter-personal conversation. Bartlett's blank verse exhibits many irregularities and awkwardnesses; these might befit his royal protagonist, whose monologues afford some of the play's more convincing occasions of self-expression, but in fact they occur chiefly in conversations, which largely amount to alternate speeches exchanged between unpersuasive and unpersuaded partners. In sharp contrast Williams assembles every available option for verse-lines – Hebrew psalmody, four-stress alliterative verse, pentameter and short-lined rhymes and quatrains, even Prayer-Book prose along with blank verse (often Hopkinsian in its crowded rush of syllables) – a tour-de-force which overrides any sense of consistent difference between the play's increasingly depersonalised voices, and thereby tends to eliminate any sense, from the dramatic action, of feasible conversation. Eliot's writing in *The Cocktail Party*, a play whose superficial realism largely excludes monologue, subtly develops between two extremes; the rapid four-stress-line exchanges of cocktail-party conversation are gradually displaced by the slower blank verse which dominates the crucial conversation between Reilly and Celia. As the play ends, actors, and audiences, find opened to them a world in which choices of pacing, stress and lineation are up for mutual negotiation – a world where motivation is indicated and sensed in line-breaks, and in the relative degrees of emphasis assigned to them.

But it is in Hare's *Plenty,* printed throughout as prose, that ears and bodies, minds and desires of audiences engage with those of actors as they give voice to what amounts to a network of concealed blank-verse lines, couplets and sequences. In the play's final scenes, in particular, these lines and passages assume thematic and structural centrality; the ambiguities latent in the play's normative prose conversation have, by then, established themselves so as to allow any utterance whatever the option of revealing, by its difference – its properties of rhythm and concision and memorability – the survival, or renewal, of power available in all language. Appropriately the final scene is dominated

by blank verse (printed still as prose), as Susan and the French farmer meditate, in mutual disagreement but also in shared fantasy, upon what is old and what may be new, what will be repeated and what might be restored:

> - I've only spoken French for months on end.
> - The harvest is not good again this year.
> - I have to work each moment of the day.
> - The English have no feelings, yes? are stiff.
> - There will be days and days and days like this. (85-87)

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