

# The 'Poems' of Christopher Caudwell

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## I

**T**HE *DIAL* for March 1927 printed a poem entitled 'Once I Did Think'. Its author was Christopher Sprigg. This was his first published poem and was in fact to be the last published in his lifetime. He had just begun work in a specialist aeronautical publishing company founded by his elder brother, T. Stanhope Sprigg, and was studying mechanical engineering, aerodynamics and physics. He had not yet written under the pseudonym, taken from his mother's maiden name, of Christopher Caudwell.

For the remaining ten years of his life he continued to write poetry, none of it published until the appearance in 1939 of Christopher Caudwell's *Poems*, a selection made by his friend, Paul Beard, from a great quantity of manuscript. Christopher Sprigg continued his public career from the early 'thirties as a writer of popular books on aviation and of eight detective novels. Christopher Caudwell came into existence around 1934. In that year he began to read widely in marxist theory and to apply its principles in a series of commentaries on literature, aesthetics, philosophy and science. For these works, all of them published posthumously, he used his pen name. He wanted, he said, to protect his reputation as a writer of thrillers. He spoke lightly also of his short stories and his two plays — never published — and of his straight novel, *This My Hand* (1936).

His self-deprecation was undoubtedly sincere. He was impatient of cant, of the phoney, of the fashionably pink opinions of the intelligentsia. Though his work had none of the qualities he despised, he genuinely feared the possible identification. He withdrew to an anonymous life in the East End of London, where as a member of the CPGB he devoted himself to the tedious chores of street meetings and fly-sticking. Though he disliked

them, he considered they were more useful than the routine of Party bureaucrats or the vapourings of intellectuals.

For the same reason he went to Spain in December 1936, driving one of a convoy of lorries across France. On 24 January a letter home from Albacete referred guardedly to mischiefs in his International Brigade Company: obsolete guns, political surveillance, cursory training. These recognitions did not abate his loyalties, much stirred by revolutionary Barcelona. Before the end of January he wrote, 'Things look like being more interesting in two or three days . . . which means you may not hear from me for some little time'. No more letters came. His brother's efforts to persuade Party leaders in London to re-call Christopher succeeded too late. He was killed in the Battle of the Jarama River on 12 February 1937, in his thirtieth year.<sup>1</sup>

Though Caudwell's path was that of many of his age in the 'thirties he travelled it with no clique and sought no patronage. He was a man of remarkably versatile and capacious mind, truly an original in all his enquiries. His acceptance of marxism was unequivocal, but he used it to supply premisses, not dictate answers. It convinced him that literary creation is essentially and in quite specific ways a social act. *Illusion and Reality* is not too persuasive in arguing from this that economic forms determine literary styles. His hypotheses do not admit all the resonances that direct the traffic between the poem and its origin in 'real life'. With considerable force and cogency, however, he elaborates his distinction between dream or phantasy, and literature. Dream is aimless release, private to the dreamer. Literature links the inner to the outer world through its medium, language, 'created to signify otherness'. The most interesting parts of his criticism turn upon the capacities and limitations of language. It clearly fascinated Caudwell, and returned him again and again to poetry, its severest proof. So, though he had a modest enough regard for his own poems, they were his most serious literary undertaking.

## II

*The Dial* poem, which ante-dates Caudwell's interest in politics, has a theme that obsessed his poetry to the end. The speaker

<sup>1</sup> Mr George Moberg is at present working on the official biography of Christopher Caudwell.

recounts a visionary moment when life seemed to disclose to him its end and pattern. From 'where stars teem' he looks down on all earth's activity transfixed, flight, movement, growth struck still 'as in Death's calm pose . . . froz'n, ecstatic, hair and heel':

Each swallow held its arch of grace;  
The falling leaf touched not the grass.  
My soul no more was dim with dross,  
But steeped transparent like pure glass,  
Her rich thoughts patterned in hard lace.

Something like Death, arresting the flux, has elicited its beauty. The para-rhymes earn their passage here, counterpointing the poem's elegant cadences and diction. But Caudwell never used the device again, presumably because he thought it too slickly contrived a form of comment, though his poems often scrutinize in other ways the conventions and resources of poetic language.

It is an impressively executed poem: about death, or about life that cannot be apprehended except through death, movement whose form is expressed in repose. To take another analogy, it is as though 'natural' human behaviour could best — or only — enunciate itself to an observer through some kind of artifice, like that of an actor on the stage; just as in the poem the range and fluency of action appear only when halted in a stylized moment (the 'arch of grace'). The implications of the poem's 'narrative' are manifold, rather puzzling, perhaps disheartening. At their centre is some such idea as that physical existence takes its meaning from the death that must terminate it. When death permanently intercepts growth, it determines the final stance and pattern of a life. It is a curiously oblique approach to life, particularly for Caudwell, so energetic and so vital in his own affairs. But 'Once I Did Think' does indeed foreshadow various interrogations of death in the later poems, especially in the published selection. It was by no means, however, his only concern, either there or in the larger body of unpublished work.

Most of this is in typescript. A couple of handwritten exercise books include Caudwell's translations from Horace's *Odes* and the *Greek Anthology*. The unconsciously pathetic epigraph to his

*Poems*<sup>1</sup> ('In world-edge Spain, so far from Lesbian lands / He lies, a stranger on uncharted strands') gives a good idea of his strength as a translator. Generally, the unpublished poems suggest sustained trial of a variety of subjects and modes. A number of epigrams lampoon, without rancour, such victims as 'A Tory M.P.', 'A Successful Publican', 'A Wicked Man'. 'Sales Pastoral' heralds the joys of Spring in adman's patter:

The sales resistance of our blood succumbs  
To copy ever-old yet always new  
And when we see the wrapper of sky-blue  
We rip the carton up with eager thumbs . . .

Thus Nature, Being's Arch-executive,  
Observes the sales-graph of our area leap.

A sardonic temper fortifies Caudwell's whimsy, working here, mildly enough, through linguistic parody.

'Heil Baldwin!' is sharper tongued. It was written after the Anglo-German Naval Agreement and is Caudwell's only poem on a contemporary political event. Celebrating the union of Britain and Germany, its heroic couplets achieve some neatly venomous characterizations of the Nazi leaders. The ending, however, a marxist vision of 'the classless world' does not solve the notorious problem of making Utopias attractive. Neither there nor in the satire does Caudwell seem altogether at home with this sort of roundly affirmative exposition. He sought more complex metaphysical enquiries, more allusive forms of discourse.

Two in particular of the unpublished poems experiment with different kinds of rhetoric for his mordant questioning. 'Kensington Rime' is a blackly comic revision, in ballad form, of the *Ancient Mariner* story. Miss Miffin, the penitent here, completes a farcical journey of atonement, burlesquing its model's Christian 'moral':

If to do good were to do good  
Then to do good were meet.

'The Kingdom of Heaven' is a derisive allegory of the church's ministry. Abruptly, the narrator is walking along the tiled

<sup>1</sup> References in this article are to Christopher Caudwell, *Poems*, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1965. I am much indebted to Mr T. Stanhope Sprigg for allowing me to read and quote from Christopher Caudwell's manuscripts. A fuller account of Caudwell's poems will be found in my *Poets of the Thirties* (London, 1969).

corridor of an anonymous office block. Slogans cut in on his account:

WHITE TIES PLEASE. NO NIGGERS. PLAY THE GAME.  
DO NOT SPIT.

It is the way to the Kingdom of Heaven, but no one can direct him to God:

PLEASE USE THE SUBWAY

I used the subway. I am still walking.  
I have met many of my friends. Some of them are dead.  
The place is well organized. The commissionaires  
Are civil, and put their harps aside  
When one speaks to them . . .

I will go on walking though I know it is useless —  
I heard the manager muttering in his sleep

'If they find God the place will have to close.  
That is why I tell them God is only Out.  
Don't tell the boys God'll never be In.'

Neither of these experiments closely resembles anything in Caudwell's published poetry, though some of the 'Twenty Sonnets of Wm Smith' (*Poems*, pp. 26-36) and parts of the play *Orestes* (*Poems*, pp. 47-86) have similarly phantasmal montages and sequences. More generally, however, 'Kensington Rime' and 'The Kingdom of Heaven', for all their flippancy, are again meditating judgement and death — Death the Antic as Caudwell dramatizes it here. In both these poems he is cultivating a poetic voice suitable for one kind of emotional resistance — mocking, astringent, contemptuous — to Christian eschatology. However different their terms, they are both making their statements about the same enigmatic destinies as 'Once I Did Think'. The latter's sombre tone is close to that of the most ambitious unpublished poem.

*The Requiem* (or *The Requiem Mass*) is a sequence of twelve poems taking their titles from the parts of the Mass. Another series, *The Canon*, of five poems, evidently belongs to the same scheme. 'The Requiem Nov. 11 — 1921' is about the slaughter, which struck deep into Caudwell's imagination, of the First World War. Each of the poems, some of them spoken by the dead soldiers, questions one aspect or another of the suffering. 'Confiteor' sees it as in part the outcome of a collective indulgence

in phantasies of war, a treacherous 'dream of flight' from 'the petty cares' of reality, enticing the victims to their fate. But 'The Collect' and 'Credo' salute the soldiers' heroism, however questionable its cause. It may warrant 'The pardon they desired'; it is 'a bulwark build of flesh'; and though the sense of loss is uppermost, 'Their bravery we understand'. 'Requiescat in Pace' suggests that better causes may exact a similar sacrifice:

We (it may be) to greater wars,  
To murders done for purer stars.

This is as near as Caudwell comes to finding any sense in the enormous waste of life. The sequence, especially in the poems describing the carnage of battle watched by an indifferent God, denies any 'medicine of belief', a lesson 'clear and cold and clipped' taken from an 'unannotated script'. ('The Gospel').

Again, a profound distaste for Christian apologetics is unmistakable. But *The Requiem*, though it clearly seeks a solution to the perplexities it formulates, leaves them unresolved. This poem has uncertainties of style that perhaps reflect unsettled grounds of judgement. Throughout all the poems considered here, Caudwell seems to choose, when he turns to his major theme, between a comic and a serious lyric mode. No single poem brings the one to inform the other, on the model of Eliot's 'tough reasonableness beneath the slight lyric grace'. It is that synthesis which Caudwell achieves in the published poems.

### III

The themes of the published poems are quite traditional: pleasure is brief; great enterprises attain their ends, then decline; society masters its circumstances and, as will, purpose, awareness fail, is mastered by them: a dominant group, class, nation loses grip. 'Tierra del Fuego' (*Poems*, pp. 13-14) invents an incident in the Spanish colonization of South America. Nearing the tip of the continent a captain encourages his superstitious crew with edifying visions:

And at his words the hoarse bird-bearing night  
Blazed with sharp fires, in rank seraphic ranged,  
An orderly regression of bright eyes  
That watched us. Voiceless company of comets . . .

'An angel stands by each, tending with art  
 His steady flame, his curled brows bent in thought,  
 Ingeminating some creative hymn,'  
 So said our captain, in his galley kneeling.

After landfall the conquerors set ruthlessly about their business. The language shifts to a tone quite different from that of the captain's euphonious cadences:

Mere brutes they knelt, revering Christian giants.  
 A few we spitted on our swords; the rest  
 Our priests whipped till they owned the Christ; one girl  
 Ape-faced but breasted well, our captain took.

We are to make of this what we will, perhaps just that morality is irrelevant. Cultures will pursue their interests as far as their strength permits. Technical superiority and a dynamic myth will subdue a weaker group. The reader may infer these ideas but the poem does not directly state them. They are, perhaps, to be seen as assumptions from which the poem might have been written.

'Essay on Freewill' (*Poems*, p. 23), suggests similar assumptions. It is a bleak reckoning of the final impotence of self, of the delusion that the personal identity may preserve itself in deeds ('broken horns of glass / Cast on the cold Atlantic shores'). Death obliterates the individual. Two fine metaphors characterize the collective fate, and the throwaway final couplet queries the sense in which anyone is 'remembered':

Our vain regrets are dinosaurs  
 Infesting coalseams of the hours  
 Our hopes as fast as time can spin  
 Pressed up in calf-bound books like flowers.

Remember me when I am dead  
 The last thing that Napoleon said.

At work within this poem, as within 'Tierra del Fuego', is Marx's attempt to state a relationship, in the history of human society, between the pressure from impersonal forces of environment and the activity of its human inhabitants in pursuit of their collective and individual ends. Other poems turn upon the marxist view of the artist in a bourgeois society, and particularly in such a society on the verge of its final collapse.

'Was It?' (*Poems*, p. 15) proceeds by asking cryptic questions about manners and social forms. Is there more behind them than appears? Are they significant of realities that do give society its shape? Is literature no different? —

Was it mere manners  
To practise that deft flexion of white wrists  
That gave the ruffles their hypnotic grace? . . .

Was it no more than repartee  
To wind the question in neat folds  
Then lay it bare in one uncoiling gesture?

Hence the poet questions his own activity in an art that may have now a merely synthetic life:

Outside the nightingales (bemoaning me)  
Tear their brown breasts; and the June roses moult.  
Open the window and throw down a coin.

'The Stones of Ruskin' (*Poems*, pp. 18-19) more openly canvasses the marxist alternatives. Ruskin, 'the organ-voiced old maid of art', is the type of the modern writer. A witty opening section imagines him, 'Forsaking the decorous slim-waisted Misses / Of a Greek-Oxfordized mythology', destroyed by sexual fantasies. Only an early and romantic death ('in blue gulfs drowned') can save the contemporary bard from similar destruction. He may join the system ('Succeed in imitating business men'); close his eyes to all but some interior vision ('Sleek, ox-eyed, ruminative beasts'); or, literally, go mad. There is no direct ideological profession, but the poem is very close to the marxist prognosis for the present-day writer.

The ending of 'Was It?' seems to associate the poet's futility with, or represent it by, the vacuous diction and properties with which he has to work. 'Twenty Sonnets of Wm. Smith' deploys more elaborately the linguistic evidences that any 'grand manner' in poetry is now impossible. Addressing his unnamed and lickerish mistress, Wm Smith tracks their affair through shabby hotels and boarding houses. He has a hardboiled pose, but underneath it seems vaguely aware of vanished kinds of feeling and of values now cheapened.

As with the subject, so its form. His diction ridicules the conventional 'business' and language of romantic love poetry.

Sonnet XII introduces the cheap hotel by way of an ironically intended décor:

Doves descend  
And nymphs elaborately girt with swags  
Draw back the pleated clouds from a blue sea  
Where a plumb brig pursues a spouting whale.

Sonnet IX dismisses both the legend of Philomel — 'this ex-reptile of an old-wives' tale / With her lost only asset maiden-head' — and the kind of romantic paraphernalia she evokes — 'Those great bumpers, filled with heady wine!' Nightingale, rose, moon are counters now bereft of all their potency. But for all his knowingness, Wm Smith at the end admits a regret for the fate of

the rose the rose  
Whose petals crumpled by a thousand thighs  
Were virgin and unfingered once God knows;

and even predicts that a love song may once again assume the purer forms it had 'two thousand years ago'.

Caudwell worked on 'The Art of Dying' (*Poems*, pp. 37-42), in its final form a poem of one-hundred and eighty-four lines, between 1926 and about 1934. If one of its lines might be its motto, it would be, 'For what's perfection except to be dead?'; and as that suggests, 'Once I Did Think' evidently had some part in one of Caudwell's early conceptions of the poem.

'The Art of Dying' entertains a variety of ideas and feelings about death, which has induced in men either some kind of resigned acceptance, or fear, of course, passionate resentment, or a religious faith in an after-life. Caudwell regards all these responses with some compassion. Even his customary aspersions on Christianity are moderated here, though he still looks on its promises as illusory:

Well, you are human and you have in dreams  
Seen a strange blossom which no earth's gross streams  
Could diet.

But he wants no truck with it himself. These are dreams no more substantial and no more relevant to the facts of human existence than the romantic clichés derided in 'Wm Smith'. The same images are appropriate to fantasies of eternal life:

The nightingale would chatter to the rose  
Of desperate fables, hopes as old as death

Which, as their age imports, exchange for breath  
Your breath . . .

The poem achieves a tone which while elegiac accommodates a relaxed and good-tempered wit, notably in the passages on death and sleep and on the philosophy of suicide. The conclusion is a secular yet strangely mystical vision of the world of death, 'Soul's last eternal equilibrium'. The flux of life is put behind in an unending stillness whose peace is that it in no way offers to prolong consciousness:

But do not fear, since millions have passed  
This way (which everyone must treat at least)  
Without complaint, and like the punctual host  
Of heaven gleams each cold and distant ghost  
Alone in the vast ether; in our sight  
Some trepidations foreign to pure light  
May make them shudder, but in truth all are  
Content and constant as the Polar Star  
There, where the sea from useless labour rests  
And hangs unmoving at the heaven's breasts.

It is towards some such statement as this that 'Once I Did Think' is working. 'The Art of Dying' resolves the possibly dispiriting set of the *Dial* poem. It is Caudwell's definitive commentary on the renouncement of a life beyond life for the satisfaction of a purely temporal field of view. Some distance behind the poem we can discern the marxist incentive of a wholly human-directed society and a millenium attained in the world of hunger and poverty. But it is discreetly well behind the poem. Caudwell speaks obliquely through image, and dramatic parable, not by direct statement.

This style and strategy appear, unusually, to have been his from the start: 'Once I Did Think' is very similar to the published poems considered here, most of them written around 1935. The unpublished poems were not early misdirections corrected by experience. They were contemporaneous experiments over a range of manners, in none of which did he make himself so much at ease. But even as it is, his handful of poems, quite outside the fashionable Audenesqueries of the period, is a remarkable poetic account of a marxism that had become a mental disposition, not a dogmatic code painfully applied to experience.