

MONTAGU SLATER

A Group of Poems

Montagu Slater died at the end of 1956, a few weeks after Hungary. He was 54 and, as they say, at the height of his powers. Likable and good to lean over a bar with, he was difficult to know : usually easy to read and with an acute understanding of the subtleties of voice, he is now even more difficult to assess. Maybe it's too early and there was too much? Drama, libretti, novels, criticism, poetry, TV, political pageants, journalism — he tried and made his mark in them all; but he always used to say himself that he was best at film scripts, and he left *The Brave Don't Cry*, *Out of True*, and several others as evidence. Of his six novels perhaps *Once a Jolly Swagman*, with its heroes of the dirt-track, was the most popular; recently he earned fame for his book on the trial of Kenyatta; most prestige came from his libretto for Benjamin Britten's *Peter Grimes* which is also a poem in its own right. But no-one saw through fame, prestige, success more readily than Monty Slater. After a brilliant beginning at Magdalen and with his talents the Establishment lay wide open to him. but before the nineteen-twenties were out he'd joined the C.P. What's more he stayed there, until the end, not because he ever had anything in common with the hatchetmen - he loathed and rampaged (often successfully) against them - but for him history offered no alternative. Above all Monty belonged to the 'thirties,' to the gusty, passionate time of *Left Review* - he was a member of the editorial board with Ralph Fox, Tom Wintringham, and Hugh Macdiarmid. To say he remained loyal to those days is true but misleading, because his thoughts and feelings were never set, because he liked the espresso age and was in tune with people much younger than himself, though it would come as a shock when he casually mentioned a grandchild or that he'd voyaged across the Atlantic aboard the R.101 as a young reporter for the *Morning Post*. He was both the most intellectual and simple, the most sophisticated and humble of men. He never ceased to take his share of what he called the 'chores' - addressing envelopes for a peace appeal, arguing at A.G.M.'s with complacent professional colleagues, approaching progressive business types for donations. If he could have known that, because of his politics, his death would be ignored by the posh dailies and weeklies, he would probably have exploded into one of his quite extraordinary, alarming laughs — they were like some mechanical soda-syphon hopelessly out of control - and then have noted the omission as a possible theme for a short story. No one, certainly.

could be a less amenable subject for an obituary and he would, no doubt, have protested at this introduction and argued that his own words should be left to speak for themselves.

John St. John.

Among a deskful of unpublished work were these poems which have been chosen by Edgell Rickword :

A Group of Occasional Poems

These poems are not linked by a plot or theme. They hang- together, if at all, by dint of a common character.

Encounter I.

When I see my colleagues' faces
Inturned on their unwritten verses
Abstraction-blurred, their troubled eyes
Seem to be peering through a veil:

My poacher I remember, who
Stood me a drink. I was alone
Propping the bar when he said, " Jack
I know you write by your look,"
Much as he'd judge a ferret's oast
Or the white fox (he mistook for a ghost).

My friend, poacher, with eyes outstarting,
As much an oddity as an artist,
Your life is shaped by other needs
Than over-simple quest for food—
As if you set a pheasant-snare
With your own instead of horsehair.

The Other Encounter.

You are a stranger, one whose face
Seen casually in a public place
Puzzles me. Where did I before
See that brow and hear that talk—
Accents so free no doubt assails them—
And in your gestures see your children?

Not young, nor old, but much as I am,
In pride of life or else its doldru,
(About the pride you'd have no doubt;
Doldrums would be your partner's fault!)
Bold flower we humbly breathe your pollen
And in your gestures see your children.

National Gallery [special exhibition).

Gala concert, Filarmonic, Venice (1782)
 Painted at his easy best by clever Guardi (Francesco)
 Sets the human problem squarely. Here the people are sat down
 Under the high-vaulted marble, and the wine is passing round.
 Violins perched on a ledge — the high Musicians' Gallery—
 Behind them stand the female singers, in a row, respectfully.
 Candelabras are a glaze upon the silk and velvet gloom,
 Individuals merged in audience waiting the composer's theme.
 O the centuries piled up to this Venetian finery,
 Guardi's high-lights and his glazes will provide us with a key
 To another kind of music. We owe a debt of gratitude
 To Guardi for his architectural painting (1782).

Next door are the earlier panels: Christ is mocked, a virgin born;
 Mars strips Venus; and Giotto's gilded skies are Byzantine.
 Here the individual feels his questing ego gone
 In among the splendid visions, finds his ego not alone—
 We create our gods and angels, we create ourselves, and then
 Out of ribs create a lover, out of sympathies a friend.

Guardi's concert, Filarmonic, Venice 1782
 Takes a reading in his sextant of a different latitude.
 All the finery, the ribbons, even chairs are *comme il faut*
 Certainly du monde is present but not solitary soul,
 Not a pair of lovers, nor a torturer, nor Mars;
 No Giotto to encircle warmth with his Byzantine skies.
 Here is neither history, nor suffering. It is all
 Horsehair scraping over catgut and vibrating vocal chords,
 Candelabra, and the velvet touched to high lights with a glaze
 Clever Guardi learned the trick of in his architectural days.

Can you smell the smell of order which has neither ears nor nose
 Only odour of the odour of these bodies without pores?
 Music cannot reach them therefore, nor can sweat, nor can the ardour
 That might tempt to good or evil or the apple in the garden.
 We've no people here but classes ranged according to a plan
 Guardi knew it. Guardi saw it, Guardi, Guardi, he's your man—
 Points of light and points of darkness: darkness, darkness that endures
 From 1782 to 19. . . . my guess is as good as yours.

National Gallery {permanent collection).

Your touch has still its ancient power,
 Painter, and your full brush has made
 Mythology of old desire
 New: seeing which I am afraid.

Violence and crime and lingering death
 And love forced on unwilling limbs—
 The sunshiny agony of the flesh—
 Your touch sets to familiar hymns.
 Your god is carried to the tomb,
 The bearers straining at the slings
 Under the loins. Canvas shows through
 Where the work is unfulfilled.

Mythology breaks down, a space
 Lets in the undecided hope.
 Your touch has still its power perhaps
 Also in knowing where to stop.

Character equals situation: a postscript.

Character equals situation
 I used to think and think so yet.
 But being older my revision
 Places more emphasis on death
 As the near-limit.

The situation first is man,
 Upright, so prone to hernia,
 Who in the transports of his joy
 Emits premonitory fear.
 That is his summit.

The situations we can count
 (The learned mention thirty six)
 Are worth only a small amount,
 Forged guarantee and syphilis.
 The facts are richer.

Say to a playwright, 'Find a plot!'
 He picks his fancy from the index
 But Romeo and Juliet
 At a building estate window
 Feel, feel it's different.

They feel, and what they feel's the point
 And wishing's whole fulfillment
 That works statistically out
 In interest and debt payment
 Comes to roost—home.

'Colour comes home into the eyes'
 And dreams invent mythology
 A fabulous code, made up to hide
 The plain man's plain prosaic lie,
 The human treason:—Shame.

The fear.

Labourers and tradesmen are
 The population of this star
 And the solar system turns
 On labouring and trading terms.

Gravitation's mystic bonds
 May be measured in foot-pounds
 And fixed stars raise from ancient graves
 Old light like capital reserves.

Attraction — ah! the lover's debt —
 Centrifugal curves offset,
 And the old dissatisfaction
 Is moon-hidden by rotation.

Nebulae and Milky Way —
 In between them wise men say,
 In blank spaces of the sky
 Lurks the fear of bankruptcy.

Mad Song (deleted from Peter Grimes).

Home? Would you give a comet room
 Beneath your eaves and call it home?
 This God who made the world and said
 Let there be light and darkness made
 And breathed a self-degrading love
 Into the dust and called it life
 This is your God of love — but I
 Climb to his heaven to defy.

Here is an eye that sees the plan
 For the enfeeblement of man
 And a will strong enough to roll
 Creation back for a new man's soul.
 O I can breathe the naked dawn
 And drink the sea to pull God down
 Deny his laws, like fire consume
 The shame that breathes in all things human.

O would you give a comet room
 Between your breasts and call it home?

" We need not worry about prospects of the art of victorious socialism. Full life has a way of expressing itself, and laughing at pedantry . . . whichever camp it appears in. The critics who are alarmed for fear the conventions of Parisian painting of the 1920's should be

forgotten are on one side. And on the other side are those severe pseudo-marxists who are so vocal. In reading their repressive moralizings I cannot help thinking of a famous Northern Union football team. The ball was kicked over the hedge, but they said ' Never mind about the ball, let's get on with the game.' For pseudo-marxists the ball is always over the hedge. They renounce life like puritans: but if ever there was a man in history who looked on life and saw that it was good, it was Karl Marx, the man who made generalizations that worked."

Montagu Slater in *Left Review*, 1936.

