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A Commitment Dialogue

*Parts of a Recorded Discussion with Christopher Logue as Protagonist. Others who took part were: Graham Martin, Alan Lovell, Maurice Butterworth, Paddy Whannel, Charles Taylor, Gary Pearson, Alex Jacobs, Stuart Hall. {The two poems discussed in detail were "Song To a Dead Soldier"—*New Reasoner 2, *and "To My Fellow Artists," which is reprinted here.)*

S.H.: The first question is, does your judgment of this poem differ aesthetically from politically? Do you yourself make a distinction between poems, and poems that are not; and do you think the same sorts of commitments can be seen in all the kinds of poetry that you write?

C.L.: I *don't* make any distinction between these things. Recently I've been able to write poems that have an overt political content. Three years ago I could not do this. I've learnt how to do it. I've learnt how to do it by studying the works of Brecht, and, curiously enough, the works of Beckett. I wished to do this before, but apparently there was something lacking in my work. I didn't feel it was lacking in my work when I first began to write poetry, because my consciousness as a human being has been developing all the time. Consequently I include more and more subject matter in a poem. As my style becomes more fixed and more firm so I can include things. First of all the attempt is to create anything that will be viable in literary terms, and I think all other thoughts apart from that of making a form are not even subsidiary—they hardly exist. Then slowly you develop, as a person. You see that events and things are going on around you—you can come to terms with them. You can become more and more inclusive because your way of writing grows strong; you have more courage; you can actually write about the things which mean something to you.

S.H.: You see your poems as a specific contribution which you as a poet can make to events going on around you. Do you see a poem as a political act?

C,L.: Yes I do see it. I think all poems can be considered legitimately as political acts. Some have an overt political content, others just exist within the political framework, like a man selling cabbages. The question I have to ask myself as a poet is this: Is it feasible with the ideas I hold and the way I feel about things, to go on writing poetry in this context? If I answer this positively—yes! Then the second question arises: Is it feasible for me to go on writing about very private subjective matters even though I express these very openly and very clearly, and if I answer this positively, 1 usually stop there. If I answer this negatively, then I must go on to introduce some things which are less personal and actually concern the lives of others as well as my own, but I'm bound to learn in a sort of very definitely social context which I realize and understand as a social context, the fact that I am here a human being among other humans. I pause, and I reflect, and I go on to understand how I've become human, what makes me become human, how to preserve this notion of humanity. Take Gide: at a certain point he decided there was no more point in writing anything. 1 think in 1933 he decided things were too dangerous—there was just no more point in writing books at all, but he must act politically in another way altogether. He must cease in fact to be a writer. I think he was wrong to do this because the writer operating within his form of being, perhaps a very good writer, is operating at the top of a pyramid. There are many writers in operation but he happens to be giving a very fine expression. In this illusion based on his existence in a literary world he suddenly thinks he can transfer from the top of the literary world to the top of the political world. This is the mistake that Pound made too. He goes running to Mussolini; and although we disapprove of Pound running to Mussolini because we're opposed to his political ideas, and I might sympathize with Gide because I'm in sympathy with his political ideas, I see both efforts as futile. If the writer is going to stop writing he may as well go back to the most humble level and pick up a gun. If I'm convinced this is the time for a gun—O.K., then, I'll stop writing.

S.H.: In other words, when people talk about the artist's commitment, you don't see it as simply that the artist as well as writing should be a member of political movements, political parties, and attend demonstrations and so on. You see commitment specifically in terms of *what he's writing.*

C.L.: Exactly; and for me from the outside a man is very

much what he does, and a writer is a writer. For instance, I don't think Brecht ever attended a political meeting in his life; he just couldn't abide the things. They just got him nervous and irritated, and he'd just get up to make a fool of himself. Literary men are in he habit of making fools of themselves when they get up to speak. They treat the audience as if it were a piece of paper, and they're alone in the study with it, and they just "go." Good, If there are some writers who can make speeches that can actually influence a crowd of people, then let them do it, but I think this is not their most important activity. Their most important activity is to produce the text by which people can stand, which will encourage people to think, which will make people move forward.

P.W.: Don't you feel that you are in a better position to make a vehement protest about something like the hydrogen bomb, which is, in a political sense, a fairly simple issue, than you are perhaps to make a more analytical criticism in your work, of other aspects of society which require a deep political understanding?

C.L.: Yes, of course I am. I can get up on a platform and speak against the H-bomb by all means. I do this not as an artist, but as Christopher Logue. As an individual I realize where I stand and I know where my strengths are, and this is my decision. Yet an artist's position is a special one. It seems to me that a teacher might just as easily say, if I keep on going to political meetings, if I join the Labour Party, I won't be able to read the books, I am not going to be able to talk to the people who will be of tremendous value to me in my job of teaching. I think we ought to destroy the whole thing that an artist is different from anybody else.

P.W.: This is an extremely important point. A lot of people, as I understand it, don't see that these issues, the issue of peace and so on, are quite inseparable from socialism, and that in any country the issue of socialism is quite inseparable from a commitment to the labour movement. There is no future at all for socialism outside the labour movement, and I feel that you misunderstand the sort of protest you get when you say it is a matter of indifference whether you join the Labour Party or not. You see, I think the feeling here is that you, because you happen to be an artist, should therefore not be engaged in selling the *Daily Worker* or attending committee meetings, etc., but that you, as a person, should identify yourself with the labour movement. It's the act of identification, you see. It might be disastrous for you as an artist to be heavily engaged in the kind of detailed political work to which you are probably temperamentally completely unsuited; but the act of identification is important to the Labour Party, and I would have thought that actual identification was important for you as an individual, and even probably as an artist, because surely one of the difficulties which has been discussed in *U.L.R.* is this whole question of saying: "Well, we must make a positive act of faith here; but the minute you talk about economics, sociology, politics, the artist says "This doesn't concern me'!" Surely, if you begin with a purely poetic response to a situation, there comes a time when you are examining this in your work, and you're brought up against a need to understand, even intellectually, certain sociological things, not from a sociologist's point of view, but as an artist.

C.L.: Haven't I made that identification, or is it necessary for me to join the Labour Party?

P.W.: Join the Labour Party. I think that even in those narrow terms it would be a good thing, and could do no harm if you and others would actually become Labour Party members and say: "I identify myself with the organized working-class movement."

C.L.: Am I not allowed to ask myself this question? How can I identify myself with a Party that supports German rearmament when the general working class do not want rearmament?

A.J.: Well, this is a political argument. One doesn't join the Labour Party because one agrees with its policies —one joins because it is in this realm, the realm of the Labour Party movement, that ultimately we must act, and if no action takes place there, then everything else is futile, even though the Labour Party may not be doing the things that we as artists think are tremendously important.

C.L.: Now we are back on the position where I place myself as a critic, but I'm not a critic, I'm a creator. I don't want to say why I'm not doing things; I want to say why I am doing things.

P.W.: But we're all human beings, and we have to face situations. They impinge on us as we have a particular role. It would seem to me to impinge on an artist tremendously in this country at the moment, that unless some sort of political changes are made, one's whole future as an artist is going to be both restricted and very ineffectual. So that one feels the need now to do something political—to make a political act as it were. Now obviously in this country the party that's most likely to do it is the Labour Party, and one sees also there is a tradition in the Labour Party which is dormant at the moment, with which you can to a certain extent associate yourself, which has some respect for the arts and thinks the arts have a place in the political movement. There's something to join on with as it were. You mentioned specifically Brecht and Beckett, and how they taught you to write in this way, which you didn't do, say, three years ago. How far have the changed social and political events in the last three years determined this change in *your* approach to writing.

C.L.: This is a very difficult question. To estimate my personal reaction for instance to political events. I'm of course a person who responds quickly to a situation and can easily be moved one way or another, but I don't think it's the little individual things that have moved and changed me a great deal. One thing I can remember very clearly. I was living in France at the time when there was the defeat of the forces of capital at Dien Bien Phu, when Ho Chi Minh finally defeated the French supported by American money and then by Geneva. I felt enormous tensions lifted inside me. I saw that in fact the hopes I'd almost had in spite of the situation became far more real in the light of these things. On a more aesthetic level, I suddenly realized that I'd been frighteningly isolated, that I was in fact the only writer bar one of my own age who was even barely interested in political matters at all; and I realized that this isolation had set me back many years when I got to Germany and saw the Berliner ensemble there. I no longer had to discuss basic questions of philosophy and this sort of thing. There was a certain agreement existing and things were going forward, and you cannot imagine how much this helps. This is a fantastic thing because the people who taught me to write essentially are Yeats, Eliot and Pound. I learned to write from their books. Now all these people I am

at complete variance with, politically. Brecht I'm in almost complete agreement with. Then I suddenly see how it can be done—it ceases to be a sort of thing I would like to do and potter around experimenting with. When I see somebody actually do it, I can say, yes, it could be done. Does that explain?

P.W.: I think so.

C.L.: Brecht had about three years as a sort of anarchist; at least he was in that vein with his *Ballad of the Dead Soldier* and *Die Groschen Oper.* These works then came quickly into contact with a vivid, living, political force. This is what the German Communist Party certainly was. Brecht came in contact with many artists associated with it, Wiesel and others, and at this age of, I think, 22, the energies inside him were immediately canalized, and he saw his way with many people pushing him on. In England, when I came out of the army, I was just 20, and there was just nothing at all in writing, and so one goes to France where there are a lot of writers, but where there's no direction.

G.M.: Do you think this growing realization that your future is possible rather because of your hopes than in spite of your hopes is specific to an artist? I should have thought that it is probably something a lot of people share who are not actually writers. At least, I did after Geneva, after Hungary. Then the possibilities of human life in the future change, and this is in fact the release of human tension, and that is at least something I felt, and other people I know also felt. But in an artist it takes specific literary political formulation, whereas in people who are not writers it takes less explicit, less clear formulation. But the experience is still there. This is the thing that you feel shared with other people in the sense of going forward.

C.L.: Yes, and not so much a release of tension but a building up of tension, but not of negative tension—positive tension. In the dark years—'50, '51, '52—one always had one's notions, ideas and theories *in spite of things.* To me, this is one of the terrible things about the Left and Left-wing artists. We must start concretely affirming things all the time, not take up the negative critical position. We must become a little more complacent almost, because the Big Tory Father-figure always has it over you. The Bishop Bloodrun, there he sits—and he sort of deafens you with his absolute certainty. One is almost holding one's ideas as a sort of shield against him, instead of scooping up his big fatness and saying: "There, daddy, you just go to bed for a little while; we're taking over now, chum!" This is the sort of thing I think Lenin must have given to the people he spoke to, a supreme confidence that this was going to happen—no two ways about it.

M.B.: Do you see any value in the climate of critical opinion being built up as a kind of nursing ground for future talent?

C.L.: As far as the arts are concerned, we are soaked and saddled with criticism. There has been more criticism published in the last three years than there has been in the entire history of literature before, and out of it all there are only about five essays, and these have not been written by professional critics. I don't believe in the professional critic. I think he is a fraud, and I think he is an advertising man. Sidney, Daniel, Wordsworth, Shelley, Dryden, Browning—these are the valuable critical essayists about English poetry—these, only these, and they are all put into one little Penguin book!

A.L.: Don't you see the work that Leavis's *Scrutiny* did in the '30's as having done a tremendous amount to create the climate that makes it possible for what we call specifically '50's literature?

C.L.: Exactly, and look at the '50's literature!

A.L.: Do you think that this criticism can perform a function in this way—can help to create literature?

C.L.: Criticism is a powerful thing, very powerful indeed. Don't forget that Leavis began by criticizing one set of works in one period, and these notions that he developed have now been re-applied. It seems to me that writers are taking their lead from the critics and not from the situation.

S.H.: So what you have found liberated you a few years ago was a movement which was both a movement of ideas and of people sharing ideas, to which you could speak?

C.L.: Definitely.

S.H.: You found this essential to liberate you from the atmosphere created by the critics?

C.L.: Not so much just by the critics, because 1 read almost no criticism. 1 read the essays in question that I mentioned: these essays 1 read and study, but books of modern criticism I just cannot get through. They just don't talk to me.

S.H.: 1 don't agree that the critical atmosphere or ethos in which a writer works is as unimportant as Chris is trying to make out at the moment. I think we are trying to get back to a total situation in which both critic and audience and writer work together. One looks back for instance at the kind of things that *Scrutiny* said about Auden: a very important interesting case in which the failure of Auden to develop as a poet was directly related to the adulatory, uncritical praise which lie had gained in the very early stages and to the very absence of that affirmative but critical discrimination which would have forced him to re-examine some of his early assumptions. In about five or six years, he became the literary tower of the whole movement, he was at the head of the movement almost before it began. Auden was obviously a very talented man who was in a sense satisfied at too early a stage in his career with certain "commitments" which weren't lived through or experienced; and his audience helped.

Here followed a more detailed discussion of "To My Fellow Artists"

G.M.: *To My Fellow Artists* is more of a political poem, but it's less politically committed than *To a Dead Soldier.* The attitudes towards the reader and towards the material in *To My Fellow Artists* seem to me essentially hortatory. There is an insulation between writer and material, between writer and reader. He doesn't invite his reader to assent, he commands him from a rather superior position. In *To a Dead Soldier* the writer is more engrossed in his material. The result is that the writer and material come out on a more egalitarian level, if one can use that term. The attitudes in *To My Fellow Artists* are more forced upon us from the outside. *To a Dead Soldier* is a more committed poem in that it embodies acutely the political situation in a human figure.

S.H.: I would say something similar about *To My Fellow Artists.* The lines I like best in that poem are the ones in which we can feel the pressure of some personal

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engagement with the material. I mean the lines, "You stand to lose your world, and look alike as if you spat each other out. You say, Logue grinds his axe again. He's red, or cashing in. And you are right. Compared to you, I'm red and short of cash. So what? I think, am weak, need help. I live, and will, with your permission, live." Suddenly here one has a direct grasp of the material. In other places a harsh but somewhat distant criticism is brought to bear, as it were, from the outside—against Amis, *The Sunday Times,* the "death before dishonour boys." The attitudes in this passage have a personal, concrete force. They have been individualized. Elsewhere, we feel some of the material and attitudes a little unassimilated.

M.B.: 1 think that the part Stuart picks out here is the centre, but that the rest falls into place quite well around it. I can't accept that there are political and non-political parts to the poem. It's one kind of poem, and it's not fair to split it like that.

S.H.: I'm not saying that the half I don't like as well is *less* political. The whole poem is a political poem. I feel that, although the passage I selected is more personal in tone, the political commitments come through much more clearly.

C.L.: I'm sorry that you like that passage best, because it seemed to me the weakest part of the poem. I think on technical grounds as well, that this poem is better than *Song to a Dead Soldier.* It's far more open in construction. I'm able to include in this framework all kinds of thing—logical arguments, satire, jibes, etc. An emotional rapport established with the reader enables me to use words like "help," "need," "weakness."

S.H.: Oh, I approve of the use of those words. You'll see that they occur in the passage I've selected as the best. I think that proves my point.

C.L.: But you seem to be making the point I am arguing against in the poem. "If I tell you how sunlight glows on intricate visions etched into breastplates. Now you believe me, you sanction my desires." But for me the most striking things in the poem are the points where we strike a note like "I feel we are easily beaten."

G.M.: But that line is very much like the lines before "I think, am weak, need help," etc. The same personal note is struck again. The passages that need more exploration are the other parts, where the attitudes are more externally arrived at. The point I think Stuart was trying to make was that the values out of which the poem springs, which it serves and tries to disseminate, are offered more convincingly in those lines than elsewhere. In that sense, it *is* the centre of the poem, and it's important for us to try to see why it is.

S.H.: I'm not saying that I would like those eight lines to be extracted from the poem and set up on their own. But I want to know why, in a poem in which these lines are not singled out formally, they seem clearly to me, and to others, to be the centre of the poem, drawing the rest together. You see, someone who agrees with the point of view would respond directly to the lines about *The Sunday Times.* But it's easier for someone who does *not* agree to set up a barrier between himself and the other parts of the poem. Against these lines none of the usual sorts of defences work.

A.L.: I agree with much that's said in the poem, but I feel, you know, something being pushed at me which I might want to resist. It seems to me that one of the functions of political poetry should be to *undermine* established prejudices and attitudes.

M.B.: Exactly. But I think that the piece about *The Sunday Times* does that. I don't think you're responding properly to that piece. There's a refreshment—not exactly of language—but of our responses. That reference is not just to a newspaper, but to important aspects of our culture.

P.W.: I have heard people who were apparently in basic sympathy with our general point of view, discussing this poem. They were complaining that these references to the I.C.A. and Better Books were ambiguous. Shouldn't we be more critical of these things—they were saying. Isn't there something a little smart about these things? Aren't they a part of a sort of Left establishment, a culture fringe? But here's the poet coming along—is he suggesting that we *should* try to preserve them, or not? My feeling was that he had put these things in, naturally, for a very sharp effect, but perhaps without clarifying fully his attitude towards them.

G.M.: That's just the point. Presumably these things—"The Film Institute, the Royal Court, Better Books and the I.C.A." stand as images of our art and culture. But other people's art doesn't have, in this poem, as specific a connection with the writer of the poem as we should like. It's an external world, and he doesn't seem to stand in any given relationship to it in such a way that one can get hold of it and talk about being committed. His own situation does, however, emerge in the passage which Stuart quoted, and the difference between those lines and the rest of the poem are important. I don't want to split the poem in two—it's got a unity. But there's a deeper commitment in "Logue grinds his axe again," which he recognizes as *his own.* He brings to the surface his personal relationship with what he is talking about. In some of the other parts of the poem this relationship does not emerge, so that the "Commitments" appear a little official—they're not quite ingested. They're intellectualizations of something that doesn't quite emerge from the poem.

S.H.: How general are you making this point? Do you mean that commitment only comes off in a poem when one feels the poet, or the image of the poet offered in the poem, in direct personal contact with the material, the situation, the values which he is invoking?

G.M.: Yes. I think that good writing establishes a certain kind of relationship between the writer and the reader, a relationship which accepts the individuality of the writer and the individuality of the listener, and suggests that the only kind of relationship between them must be based on that acceptance, on the interplay which follows from it. They are incomplete units needing one another, so to speak, but nevertheless, individual ones. And poetry which talks to *people* as if they weren't *there,* as if they were only there as abstract groups, as if you had to impose something *on* them —that's bad.

S.H.: Raymond Williams has a remarkable passage on that in his essay on *Realism and the Modern Novel* (see elsewhere in this issue of *U.L.R.),* which I think explores the same point of view. His view is of a kind of literature which achieves its "realism" because of a certain view that it holds to of the nature of the relationship between the individual and society. The

two are not polarized, nor is one the background for the other, or a symbol of the other. The two interpenetrate—on the basis of what Graham just called "mutual acceptance." The general truths about society emerging from literature, not because of its capacity to build up ideas into rhetoric, but because whatever insights it offers into "life" must be offered in concrete, and personal terms.

P.W. You mean that commitment does not necessarily have an over-political content—it depends upon a certain view of society and the individual's relation to it, and that without that, everything else is false?

C.T. Yes. We cannot gain insights into society unless we make more real, more alive, more deep the life of the individual or individuals about whom you're writing. In other words, there are points in *To My Fellow Artists* where the individual is short-circuited, whereas this is never so in *Song to a Dead Soldier,* and this is why it is so moving. The problem is trying to write about a social theme without going through the reflective of the person one's writing about.

G.M : It's losing the sense of *society* as you write about the social theme—that's the trap. I mean society as a *living human thing,* which exists in entities, not just as a sort of a-human institution.

G.P. Those lines near the beginning which we like so much. It's because at that point the language really communicates the actual experience which is the subject of the poem—the fear of destruction. It's really felt —and, as you've said, must be felt by *someone*—in this case, by the poet. One feels the direct impingement of the experience on a human mind or consciousness—and, for that reason, the part of the poem which seems most *personal* and limited, is probably the one which moved us *all* most deeply. Of course, it's also in a tradition which we can recognize—the tradition of the personal confession. It's an exploratory verse. Also, of course, it is distinguished from the other, rather looser and disjointed lines, by being phrased with a certain poetic intensity. The feelings have been worked up and worked *on* here. There's conciseness and a denseness of effect. And it has a very marked elegance, cadence. "And will, with your permission, live." But this is because it is really *felt* here, and the feeling has been communicated.

M.B : But don't we have to establish a connection between these lines and the rest of the poem. Why are they in the same poem? Aren't you asking him to write the whole poem in only a single mood?

S.H.: Well, the same effect is made elsewhere in the poem—but of course, it isn't as sustained as it is here. I think, for instance, that we understand his passion to save the beautiful objects and things that man has created —at least we see the problem. But he is a little unclear as to what our attitude towards these things should be, and that's because they're invoked in rather abstract, easy references—"The I.C.A., Better Books" —for a purpose. The purpose is good, but they're not solidly enough established *in* the poem. They're argued in defence of—but they are not offered positively enough.

M.B : It's clear enough what Logue stands for in the poem.

A.L. That's just the point. In some cases it isn't clear. The poem, after all, is about the beautiful things which we would store away if the big blast came. It's also about the things which future generations might remember about us.

S.H. Yes, the whole appeal of the poem is made *in terms* of these great creations which would be fossilized by a hydrogen war. Our commitments are summoned out in their name. So it is important that something quite deep and personal of the poet's feeling for his culture, for these objects, should be established in the poem. This must be offered, because the effect of the poem ultimately depends upon how deeply *we* feel about these things. It's not—in spite of the irony—a cheap or light poem. It's an embattled one. That's fine.

A.J.: It might be a denunciatory poem—like Pope's. But in that case, it would have to exist within the framework of accepted values and attitudes.

G.P.: It is part denunciatory—but it's even more a polemical poem. I mean, it's consciously trying to change attitudes—in this case, towards hydrogen warfare. In that case, it is intended also for the unconverted. So the values which are being affirmed must be offered *in* the poetry—or else the unconverted don't know what we're appealing to them in the name of. Now a good deal of this they would write off as special pleading. They have their defences ready, and they bring them into action. For example, they would reject as melodramatic an attempt to shock their sensibilities with an image like "when your beds are near sopping with blood." It's an image which isn't properly worked out, its unfocused, and it won't have any effect on the unconverted.

S.H.: They'll regard it as rather cheap effects. The point I tried to make earlier is that the unconverted couldn't shrug off "Logue's red, and cashing in," and the other lines at that point in the poem because, being so highly personal, being so felt, and concretely realized in the poem, it undermines our established prejudices. It does move at the very deepest level of commitment—where our attitudes and values are just forming up—where they can be unwound and strung together differently, where they can be influenced. You are being faced there with a full personal response to a threatening disaster. You *have* to respond directly. The poetry doesn't offer you any outs. He has appealed out of his very weakness and confusion.

M.B.: But I'm not sure that we can expect the poet to do all these things at once. He can't make mass conversions first before he writes a single line. There's a satirical strain here which, to my mind, does succeed.

G.M.:But even so, the poem must establish some kind of internal consistency. A consistent attitude, whatever the different modes of attack. I think when we say that there is a certain confusion of modes of attack here, we know now just what we mean by that.

S.H.: Yes. I'm glad we've spent so much time in trying to say in detail why some parts of this poem come off more effectively than others. We've been exploring, in fact, the very relationship—such a difficult one to understand—which we raised at the beginning. I mean the relationship between "literary" and "political" judgments of a poem, and how they reinforce each other. We've really shown how, when commitment is properly understood, there isn't any sort of nice, tidy boundary between them. They cut into each other at every point. It's been very useful to make this sort of examination, for once, in a fair amount of detail—particularly on a poem which is timed so effectively, and which is reaching audiences who haven't read a line of poetry since they closed the Golden Treasury.