

# The End of Liberal Criticism

**Graham Martin**

THE author of this collection of essays\* attempts three things. First, he isolates the originality of each poet's contribution to modern poetry; second, he accumulates these insights into a definition of "modernism": the re-emergence in poetry of "the full strength of the poet's intelligence"; and third, he distinguishes between American and English modernism, claiming that in America the movement was necessarily more self-conscious, necessarily more "technical" than in Britain, where the poets "were merely extending into modern terms what has always been there in the most vital of our tradition." The weekly reviewers have praised the book highly; and done so for critical qualifications that are pretty rare: a genuinely fresh and independent judgment, wide reading that is also intensive reading, willingness to concentrate on real issues, and to speak of them without undue palaver. Poetry to Mr. Alvarez is a real thing; his essays grow out of that reality; and all he says about it is directed towards exploring it and understanding what he finds. He is, in fact, a critic, not a gossip-columnist, prophet of doom, or disappointed poet.

Still, critics, just as much even though less directly than novelists and dramatists, speak about their time as well as about their subject. Mr. Alvarez certainly speaks about his, and it is this aspect of his book that I want to discuss, rather than to be inquisitive about details of insight or interpretation, or to argue about his thesis. These are interesting, even to dissent from, but they arise out of critical procedures and attitudes which are more so. More so, because they have a representative quality very striking in view of the intellectual strength here giving them life and authority. Mr. Alvarez is much more disinterested than some better-known contemporaries, say, Kingsley Amis, or John Osborne. He commits

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himself to his subject more thoroughly, less ambiguously, a thing no more easy to do with criticism than with any other kind of creative thinking. He doesn't get himself mixed up with what he is talking about. He has no special line of goods to plug. His preferences are offered without self-importance, but still firmly. He has chosen his critical position. He hasn't been driven into it by any of those obscure pressures and dimly-grasped attachments which wash resentfully through *The Outsider*, or *Lucky Jim*, or *The Entertainer*. There is none of the distracting emotionalism inside which "the contemporary situation" is usually packaged and sold off. As a result, for once, that situation comes through clearly, and on its own. No doubt, Mr. Alvarez, intent on his business, meant no such thing; but this, literary criticism being what it is, is what he succeeds in doing.

To be more exact: what comes through is the unpolitical, unsocial ethos of modern literary culture. The reasons for this ethos are pretty clear: the last war, the Cold War, the public deceptions and evasions behind the humanitarian facade: "Welfare State," the revulsion from a false identification of literature with politics in Popular Front poetry of the Thirties . . . all these have co-operated in bringing about our constriction of mind and heart within the narrow circle of the personal or individual life. We may say, but we do not yet believe that art and the discussion of art is a social thing, committing its participants, writer, critic, reader, to a unique kind of social act. So it is worth examining once more, not the reasons for this paralysis, but its actual nature: what it actually involves of inconsistency or inhibition in critical judgment, what latent contradictions lie within the critical procedures it throws up. Poetry tests the critic and not vice versa, said somebody. But not the critic only. Poetry also tests the assumptions on which the critic proceeds. And the interest of *The Shaping Spirit* is in the way the poetry lays

bare the assumptions on which Mr. Alvarez proceeds. These are quite usual assumptions, but by the end of the book, it is very clear how far they are from being necessary to his critical thinking. It seems to me they cripple it, quite seriously.

One of the essays is on Auden. It deals only with the Auden of *Collected Shorter Poems*, but that is room enough for Alvarez to make out his case that "at the centre of Auden's work there is only a kind of nervous blankness" which robs of any conviction the large issues so many poems are famous for claiming. The discussion centres on *Consider* and *The Witnesses*. In the first, Alvarez drives a distinction between what the poem says of itself, and what Auden, falling back on political and social cliché, wants it to say.

You talk to your admirers every day  
By silted harbours, derelict works,  
In strangled orchards, and the silent comb  
Where dogs have worried or a bird was shot.

"It is extraordinary," he comments in a characteristic analysis, "how that last line and a half makes you attend; a whole area of allusion wakes into life after the lethargy that has gone before. The movement of the verse becomes more subtle; the poet is no longer shifting around the required properties; in fact, he is less describing some actual scene than registering its importance on him. *On the evidence of the poetry, I can't really believe that social abuses ever much troubled him, though they may at one time have excited him.*" (My italics.) In this poem, the "excitement" takes a common form. Prophecies of class-doom, menacing gestures aimed at the international set: "dangerous, easy, in furs, in uniform"; an empty but fashionable conjunction of Marx with Freud . . . all these large claims for significance produce a pompous vagueness of language and rhythm, which strikingly contrast with those parts where Auden stops pretending to be deeply moved and simply observes what he sees. Behind the grandiose political significance, what is really there is "a blur of ominousness and threat, like a child telling a horror story." Contrast *The Witnesses*. Here, the poet works up into a successful "nightmare" poem the core of vague menace that lies unrealized within *Consider*; works it up with an unmoral and uncommitted skill whose free operation depends precisely upon the fact that the nightmare has no meaning beyond itself. It is just a nightmare, related to nothing, and certainly not to politics or social abuses. When, in *Consider*, the fear of psychological collapse does relate to something, the poet has avoided the significance of what he is doing—subverting his politics to a personal trauma—by withdrawing his attention *as a poet*, and substituting the journalist's alertness to a fashionable coterie shorthand. The politics, in short, is not in the poetry; nor the poetry about the politics.

## **Auden, the critic, and politics**

Now this is very well said, and any future discussion of Auden will have to start from so solidly established an insight. But what is strange is Alvarez's implication that that is all that can, or needs to be said. It is not that he doesn't actually extend the meaning of his analysis into the whole question of Auden's political and social commitment. Every critic has a right to define his own range of interest, and keep within it. But the abrupt tone, the curt lack of interest in Auden's politics, in the fact that Auden *had* a politics at all, suggest that these matters are just not the critic's business. But, of course, they are; and we have a right to expect if not critical treatment, certainly a critical awareness that these things do matter. It is a case of what interconnections the critic's judgment encourages us to develop. Alvarez puts far too

low a value on the nature and implications of so sure, and so central a judgment as the one he arrives at. He turns away from its implications, not simply because they lead, in a sense, outside the poetry, but more because, for him, the autonomy of the poetry has been defined, so to speak, by subtraction: as that which is left when everything else is taken away. Of course, the frontiers of poetry have to be strictly marked out. But you can approach the boundary in two ways: as if it were a gate letting on to all that is not poetry, or as if it were a barbed-wire entanglement shutting you off. The separateness of poetry from what it comments on is not an unambiguous thing, simply to be insisted upon, but a complex relationship which, in the individual case, you have to explore from the start. Alvarez is very sure and impressive within the poem, but outside it, all is vague with a kind of "Here Be Monsters" scrawled across the blank uncharted space. A critical inhibition so fundamental as this cannot help converting what he himself calls "the autonomy of poetry", into its insulation. This is perhaps to overstate the case. With some poets, notably Robert Frost, he goes further than with others. But the tendency is always at work.

## **Yeats and Eliot**

Auden, it could be claimed, is very much of a test-case for a critic like Alvarez, whose declared purpose is to isolate the autonomous poetic worlds of the various poets. But the critical inhibition shows up in more serious forms. His critical method to all intents and purposes disallows serious judgment between poets, though contrasts are permitted. But his actual response to poems is humanly-felt, sometimes intensely so. The result is that on many occasions Alvarez resorts to smuggling in judgments, while disclaiming all the while that he is doing anything more than describe interesting differences. Here is an example from the longest essay which deals with Eliot and Yeats. "The difference between Yeats and Eliot is not then that between the simple and the complex; it is between two different kinds of subtlety. You go to Eliot for the controlled, original, allusive subtlety of mind and feeling, for whatever is not obvious or easily stated; to Yeats for the central living subtlety, the tension between rage and generosity, impotence and desire, between, often, an attitude and truthfulness." It is really astonishing. On the one hand, the calm, patient discrimination between objects for which the claim is that they are both equally valuable and interesting. On the other hand, the powerful moral appeal of Yeats's subtlety over Eliot's, of "the central living subtlety" over "the controlled, original, allusive subtlety of mind and feeling." See how confusing is the insertion of the word "original." From elsewhere (the Auden essay, for instance, where Alvarez speaks of "the deep exploratory seriousness of an original knowledge of experience") we know that the word represents a weighty judgment. But if Eliot is "original", is not Yeats? And if we subtract "original" from the account of Eliot's subtlety, the remaining "controlled, allusive" is no counterweight to Yeats's "central living subtlety." Or, if the word simply means "technically original," then the preferential treatment of Yeats is even stronger. The preference, at any rate, is there; just as clearly as the fact that the critic refuses to recognize it.

This is not an isolated case. Earlier in the remarks on Eliot, Alvarez pins down very finely an important aspect of Eliot's poetry. "Even in the most intense moments of feeling in Eliot's verse there is never any sense of an immediate and living response *from another person.*" (His italics.) In its context, this qualifies, but does not seriously take from Alvarez's general admiration of Eliot. Its main purpose is to

provide a descriptive contrast with Yeats. But as we read on, we begin to sense that there is much more to it. It is Yeats's achievement that "he breaks down the barriers of formality to arrive at a naked personal strength." (We have just been told that Eliot's poetry builds up a "world of formal perfection.") Pound's translations "seem to me more original and personal than those poems in which he has only himself to rely on." Auden's weakness is that he has never written "a good personal poem." (The point is enforced by a contrasting Yeats poem.) Stevens's best poems "relax into a slighter and more personal perfection." Similar evaluations of Empson and Frost use "personal" as a term of final praise. "Personal," in short, shows Alvarez levelling an ultimate demand; so that, returning to the remark on Eliot, we must give it far more weight than the essay actually permits. I do not simply mean by this, that, like any good critic's, Alvarez's sense of value emerges from the accumulation of particular judgments. This does happen. But something else happens as well. As they accumulate, these individual judgments grow to a strength and authority which, locally, officially, the critic never recognizes. The actual judgments seem to take over from and contradict rather than support the critical procedure that seems to discover them. The left hand giveth, the right hand taketh away. It is a kind of unconscious conjuring trick.

In this connection, it is interesting that many specific evaluations of poems are made through some witty illustrative simile. Of Stevens: "he proceeds like a fashionable hostess at someone else's party; at each step he pauses for an elaborate gesture." Of Eliot: "the continued business of versification was a way of keeping the bed aired until such time as the Muse should decide to visit." Of Auden: "he has the strained almost excruciated air of a man with his arm in a hole in a dyke, who is pretending all the while that he is merely lounging there to enjoy the sun and chat with the passers-by." These occur in the midst of the ordinary critical process; so that, to adapt the trick, it is as if the sober reticent prose suddenly smiled and winked at you, only to retreat back into its seriousness as if nothing whatever had happened. The wit, that's to say, doesn't complicate or perplex the seriousness, but lies alongside it making it more sociable and engaging. Its business is not to qualify the critic's attitude towards his material, but to win the reader. You get, so to speak, a short rest from thinking. But it has another effect as well, an evaluative one. Metaphors do not really work as descriptions; their appeal is rhetorical; and these critical ones act by opening a suddenly human perspective on the poetry. They suggest a sudden release of critical energy, previously restrained. The upshot is, once more, tension between actual and declared judgment. --•

### **The intelligence of poets**

But I am making this hostility seem more explicit than it really is. In fact, one registers it more as a sense of unease, of unlocated disturbance, than as something definitely to take issue with. But in another sphere unmistakable inconsistencies arise: for instance, in the use of the word "intelligence." This means "an immediate and whole fullness of feeling and thought" rather than ratiocinative power, though the two can consort together. Both Eliot, and to choose his opposite, Lawrence, are said to show this "intelligence." But as the detailed examination shows, the intelligence of these poets was directed towards different ends, towards the affirmation of different, even conflicting affirmations of that "full humanity" all modern poetry attempts to express. Now this affects the central thesis of the essay quite seriously, for the Eliot-intelligence, and the Lawrence-intelligence typify

respectively the American and English branches of modernism. It would therefore seem that what Alvarez isolates as the difference, a necessarily conscious preoccupation with "technique" is actually a question of the American's struggling to express a different "content." In his last chapter, "Art and Isolation," Alvarez does diffidently approach this conclusion. But it remains for him within the confines of "creating a fresh difficult *language for poetry* . . . specifically American." (My italics.) And fully to characterize this language requires a much more radical departure from being able to make from such portmanteau terms as "intelligence" and "personal," and a notion of ethics so resolutely non-social. Perhaps this explains why in this closing chapter, Alvarez leans rather unexpectedly on Trilling's "Manners, Morals and the Novel."

### **English tradition?**

A similar and worse confusion occurs when Alvarez makes use of the idea of "tradition" to explain the situation in England. Unlike the American poets, the English ones live in a society where it is accepted that "the most sensitive and original (n.b.) experience can be discussed, and that discussion of it is an important and valuable tradition"; in a society that is, which does not confront the poet with a huge blank indifference to his beliefs, but which sustains in social forms and attitudes a life to which he can accommodate himself. This is certainly a new version of the English attitude to literature, but even if our advantage over American society is as great as this, any number of questions remain unsettled. How is it that "the most vital of our tradition," represented in 17th century Donne, should reappear in 20th century Yeats and Lawrence? And why is it that both these poets re-create this tradition positively in the teeth of the social reality that, Alvarez claims, was perfectly willing to receive them? and how do Auden and Empson fit in? especially the first? Even if we read "tradition" in a "literary" sense what common features unite these four English poets? except an *absence* of technical preoccupation, which may be sufficient to separate them from American poets, but is certainly not enough to describe their unity. The sketchiness of this whole idea suggests that Alvarez is really much less interested in the British poets than in the American ones. It is when talking about these in his closing chapter that he most nearly approaches a view of literature as social, a view of the poet's language as a creative variant on the language of his society, and the recognition that "personal" morality is something defined only by the complex interpenetrations of individual and communal life. But he only approaches this view in discussing poets who by his own statement have had to learn that where they live art means isolation.

However, in the last analysis, a critic's important statements are not the explicit ones, the formulated judgments, the argued claims, but exist rather in the continual flow of implication and suggestion within his actual writing. Here are the central commitments, the living morality. The tone of Alvarez's prose is in fact the important element in the book. Through it, he states his belief in ease, intimacy, a quiet off-the-cuff wit, in a kind of winning flexibility in intellectual discussion. A lot of books have been reviewed as "eminently readable." It is no small part of Alvarez's achievement that he really is. And to this pleasant tone, the techniques of reading, the perspectives of academic training, the presentation of facts, and of comment, are all submittu. He avoids at all costs, strain, over-emphasis, provocation, as fatal obstructions to the reader's receiving the poetry in the desired spirit. He creates in other words, a particular

social relationship: critic-poetry-reader. What is this relationship? essentially that of "the studious." And by that I do not mean "academic" or "intellectual," but a relationship whose underlying assumption is a devotion to intellectual things as ends in themselves; with a willingness, among friends, to be pleasant about them. The result is that underlying the sociability, there is in fact a deeper social refusal, a kind of abiding stoical acceptance of isolation and apartness. The ease of manner is, in an important sense, too readily come by. "Truth flourishes where the student's lamp has shone, and there alone." The line from Yeats is no doubt a little over-dramatic but that ultimately is Alvarez's deepest emphasis. What is missing comes out clearly by contrast with Hoggart's prose in *The Uses of Literacy*. For this perfectly sustains the easy quiet intimacy prized by Alvarez. The directness, the wit, the flexibility, the honesty . . . all are there. But there is something else as well, a deeper note, urgent in its way, making a continuous firm appeal to another notion of community than the merely personal, besides which Alvarez's imagined audience is a simple aggregation of well-disposed solitaries, an amiable seminar. (There is no room to illustrate this here, but anybody interested might compare Alvarez's chapter "Art and Isolation" with Hoggart's on "Popular Songs," and on "Sex-and-Violence Literature.")

This question of audience is the vital one. There is in *The Shaping Spirit* at least no faking, no pretence about "the common reader," *belle-lettrist* fashion. Nor are we asked to be part of that mass-audience zestfully bullied by literary journalists. (See, for instance, the latest spell-binder: *Angry Young Men* by Kenneth Allsop.) We are asked to be *persons*. And that is something nowadays. But, of course, as soon as we start being that, we at once move away from the notion of mere-person towards that of social-person. To that movement, and to the aroused complexities it forces on our awareness, Mr. Alvarez has little to say. Nor is this a question of ability either, for Mr. Alvarez is perfectly able. It is a question of the ultimate assumptions which direct the ability, whatever it is, towards the chosen area. The area Mr. Alvarez has chosen does not enclose the vital contemporary the bearing of literary on social judgment, the perspective literature provides on those dim interconnections of individual with social life, the way it both extends and enriches our conscious moral existence, the way it commits us to living. He touches on these things, but centrally he does not, because he cannot treat them. He is, so to speak, looking in another direction. That there is real strength in accepting the position that he does, it would be impertinent to forget. But just as other assumptions that he makes are open to the critic, so are other strengths.