MAXWELL ANDERSON -- A CONSCIOUS ATTEMPT FOR IMMORTALITY

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MAXWELL ANDERSON -- A CONSCIOUS ATTEMPT FOR IMMORTALITY

Maxwell Anderson, of all the artists of the "Lost Generation," has attempted most consciously in his writing to remain apart from his age both in form and content. Anderson has never been content to write of his times or in the language of his times, but has attempted in the majority of his dramas to write on, what he considered, a higher artistic level. Thus, his plays cannot be judged for their ability to interpret the age or for their historical value, but must, in the final analysis, be accepted or rejected according to their intrinsic value -- their value for all time.

In writing his tragedies, Maxwell Anderson has not been guided by chance. He has consciously gone back to the great tragedies of the past and has attempted through them to discover a formula for the writer of tragedies, or, in Anderson's words, to discover "the essence of tragedy." Through his research, he has formulated this prime rule: the hero, who is imperfect, must make a central

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discovery in the play; through this discovery, he must change for the better. In a tragedy, although he suffers death for his fault (and this fault may be merely an unawareness), he dies a nobler person. The theater, Anderson feels, is a "religious affirmation"; it is the reassurance of man's constant search for a higher morality and a greater wisdom. Man's life on earth is drab, discouraging, unidealistic, uncertain; his present existence and his past and future are, to the great extent, incomprehensible. The artist's faith is a faith in the human race and in its gradual improvement. And it is the artist's duty to portray this striving of men.

Not only is Maxwell Anderson apart from his times in his attempt to write according to the method of classical tragedy, but also in his use of dramatic poetry. Anderson feels that dramatic poetry is man's greatest achievement; the best prose is inferior to the best poetry and is incapable of conveying the deepest feelings. Prose is the language of information, of journalistic social comment, of a scientific age of reason. Poetry, on the other hand, is the language of emotion and a faith in things unseen, a faith which Anderson feels is necessary and which he hopes man will regain. At the moment, living in a scientific

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age, men have become conditioned to plays which are primarily social comment and to prose which is the language of these plays; however, men will turn again to the drama which is prophetic and idealistic rather than descriptive and thus to poetry which is the language of this drama.

Maxwell Anderson's plays in verse, therefore, are unrealistic, and, in sharp contrast to his contemporaries, he ignores or treats very lightly the social and economic problems of his times. He is not a social reformer; while his contemporaries turned to Socialism and Communism, Anderson continued to believe in a minimum of government interference and in the maximum of individual freedom. "If the millions of workingmen in this country who patiently paying their social security dues could glimpse the bureaucratic absolutism which that act presages for themselves and their children they would repudiate the whole monstrous and dishonest business overnight."[1] Anderson shows a basic distrust of all government and strong tendencies toward a belief in anarchy.

Although Maxwell Anderson does not consciously interpret his times and thus may seem, superficially, to be completely apart from them, he has been greatly

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influenced by the period in which he lives. An outstanding feeling of insecurity, futility, pessimism pervades his writing, as it does the writing of his contemporaries. Although in his essay, _The Essence of Tragedy_, Anderson expresses the more optimistic hope for the ultimate improvement of mankind, his plays leave the reader with a feeling of futility and resignation. There is nothing for one to believe in. The world is essentially evil; a few men may show heroism in an attempt to struggle against it and rise above it, but these men are ultimately defeated by the overwhelming evil which surrounds them. It is useless to try to mold a better world.

There is a definite feeling of fatalism underlying all of Maxwell Anderson's plays. It is difficult to determine whether he has been influenced by modern Psychology or by Greek tragedy, but, the conclusions, in either case, are valid according to modern Psychology. Man has little individual will and is helpless before a stronger power. This stronger power is no longer embodied in the gods of the Greek tragedy; it is now represented by the influences of heredity and environment. The principle, however, remains the same.

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The period of the Twenties and later was characterized by a wish for escape. Anderson, too, seems to have been influenced by this feeling. His plays often fail to meet and answer basic problems and remain in a cloudy unreal atmosphere. The historical subject matter of most of the plays greatly adds to this mood of escapism; Anderson makes no effort to apply past to present problems. And, greatly magnifying all these unreal characteristics, the poetry adds its dreamlike quality to the plays.

Saturday's Children was Maxwell Anderson's first independently written play and was written before he began his series of poetic tragedies. It is a realistic comedy about the problems of a young married couple, Bobby and Rims O'Neil, who want the romance of marriage without the responsibilities, or, as Bobby says:

> "What we wanted was a love affair, wasn't it? Just to be together and let the rest go to hang -- and what we got was a house and bills and general hell. Do you know what I think a love affair is, Rims? It's when the whole world is trying to keep two people apart -- and they insist on being together. And when they get married, the whole world pushes them together, so they just naturally fly apart. I want my love affair back. I wanted hurried kisses and clandestine meetings and a secret lover. I don't want a house. I don't want a husband. I want a lover."[2]

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Bobby gets her lover; she sets up house alone at a boardinghouse and Rims visits her as the forbidden lover.

If Saturday's Children is regarded as a romantic humorous comedy, Maxwell Anderson has written a lovely play. The dialogue is natural, charming, and humorous, if not witty. The play is definitely typical of its times; the problems are practical realistic ones, and include two which are so typical of Anderson's age -- the financial struggle and the growing independence of women.

Although the problems are realistic, Anderson's solution is romantic and impractical, and he avoids any clear investigation into the economic problem which is basic to the play. The artistic impact of the play is not dulled, however, for the beauty of its effect depends not on a serious sociological investigation into the economic problems of the day or the difficulties of adjustment of the young married couple, but on a lightly impossible, romantic atmosphere.

The avoidance of economic and social problems which can be easily excused in a play like Saturday's Children can not be so readily ignored in Winterset.

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The story of <u>Winterset</u> is the fictitious story of Mio Romagna, the son of Sacco and Vanzetti united into one character. Mio's father was electrocuted for a robbery and murder which he denied having committed. Now, many years later, a college professor has begun new investigations of the case, and Mio and others feel that his father was condemned, not for any crime, but because he was an anarchist. The play is based on the outstanding problems of Anderson's time -- poverty, corruption, distrust of foreign people and of foreign political ideas. However, Maxwell Anderson is not interested in commenting deeply upon the social injustice.. He presents poverty, but expresses no opinion about it; he gives evidence of gross unfairness in legal trials, but delves no further into the matter than to state in several passages that this injustice is ashame. Judge Gaunt, who is greatly responsible for the injustice is not an unsympathetic character, and even Mio, at the end, gives up his life long desire for revenge. A dramatist is certainly under no obligation to delve into social injustice in his drama *if* he has not chosen social injustice as the basis of his drama. But Maxwell Anderson has made the problem the foundation of the play and has then completely failed to answer it.

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This ignoring of social problems does have one advantage -- it lifts the play out of its immediate environment and places it on a more universal level with the emphasis on characterization. Maxwell Anderson, with a lack of interest in the masses, excells in individualism. In Winterset, he has created some of his most interesting characters. Mio strives, as do all Anderson's heroes, for something higher than the usual mundane existence. The one drive of his life has been to prove that his father was innocent; the climax of the play occurs when he makes his discovery, which is vital according to Anderson's concept of classical tragedy. In this discovery, Mio understands who the true murderer is. Mio, however, makes a second discovery, which adds unique interest to his characterization. He discovers when he is very near victory that revenge, as a prime motive in life, is not a very worthy ideal to strive for. This reversal does not weaken the character, as many feel, and although it does weaken the action to some extent, it adds a unique quality to an ancient story of revenge. Love is a decisive factor in Mio's new outlook; the object of his love is Miriamne, the colorless sister of one of the criminals.

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Esdras, Miriamne's father, expresses the resignation which is evident in Maxwell Anderson's attitude. Only the young search for truth, and they search in vain. The world will not improve. It is best to die young before the hopelessness and futility are realized. The following, spoken by Esdras, symbolizes his philosophy and the philosophy of the author to a great extent:

"Oh, Miriamne,
And Mio -- Mio, my son -- know this where you lie,
this is the glory of earth-born men and women,
not to cringe, never to yield, but standing,
take defeat implacable and defiant,
die unsubmitting. I wish that I'd died so,
long ago; before you're old you'll wish
that you had died as they have. On this star,
in this hard star-adventure, knowing not
what the fires mean to right and left, nor whether
a meaning was intended or presumed,
men can stand up, and look out blind, and say:
in all these turning lights I find no clue,
only a masterless night, and in my blood
no certain answer, yet is my mind my own,
yet is my heart a cry toward something dim
in distance, which is higher than I am
and makes me emperor of the endless dark
even in seeking! What odds and ends of life
men may live otherwise, let them live, and then
go out, as I shall go, and you. Our part
is only to bury them."[3]

The most interesting person in the play is Judge Gaunt. Gaunt is the judge who presided at the unfair trial. He is obsessed with feelings of guilt and remorse and is losing his sanity. At times, he demands respect as a venerable judge and self righteously defends all he has done; at other times, he breaks

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down and condemns his actions. He has thought about the case so long that he can no longer remember himself whether or not he judged it fairly; he knows, subconsciously, that he did not; he is trying to convince himself that he did. Although the reader might completely dislike everything the judge stands for, he cannot help feeling sympathy for him. Maxwell Anderson has done a perfect job in following the stumbling and often incoherent mind of Gaunt. The following scene is an example of one of the pitiful breakdowns of the judge who still demands respect:

> GAUNT. You will hear it said that an old man makes a good judge, being calm, clear-eyed, without passion. But this is not true. Only the young love truth and justice. The old are savage, wary, violent, swayed by maniac desires, cynical of friendship or love, open to bribery and the temptations of lust, corrupt and dastardly to the heart. I know these old men. What have they left to believe, what have they left to lose? Whorers of daughters, lickers of girls' shoes, contrivers of nastiness in the night, purveyors of perversion, worshippers of possession! Death is the only radical. He comes late, but he comes at last to put away the old men and give the young their places. It was time.
>
> (*He leers.*)
>
> Here's one I heard yesterday:
> Marmaduke behind the barn
> got his sister in a fix;
> he says damn instead of darn;
> ain't he cute? He's only six!

down and condemns his actions. He has brought them and case so that there can no longer remain himself whether or not he judged it rightly; he knows, subconsciously, that he did, but he is trying to convince himself that he did. Although the reader might completely realize everything the judge stands for, he cannot help feeling sympathy for him. Maxwell Anderson has done a perfect job in following the stumbling and often incoherent mind of Gaunt. The Judge here is an example of one of the pitiful breakdowns of the minds who still demands respect.

> GAUNT. [illegible] An old man makes a good judge, being calm, clear-eyed, without passion. But this is not true. [illegible] The old are corrupt. [illegible] [illegible] [illegible]

(Cont.)

[illegible]
[illegible]
[illegible]
[illegible]
[illegible]

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HOBO. He, he, he!

GAUNT. And the hoot-owl hoots all night,
  and the cuckoo cooks all day,
and what with a minimum grace of God
  we pass the time away.

HOBO. He, he, he -- I got ya!

(<u>He makes a sign with his thumb.</u>)

GAUNT. (<u>Sings</u>)
And he led her all around
and he laid her on the ground
and he ruffled up the feathers of her
  cuckoo's nest!

HOBO. Ho, ho, ho!

GAUNT. I am not taken with the way you laugh.
You should cultivate restraint.4

In <u>Winterset</u>, Maxwell Anderson has written a modern play in blank verse. Poetry, traditionally, has been the style of historical drama, but in <u>Winterset</u>, Anderson has experimented with poetry for the modern play. The use of blank verse and of the classical tragedy form gives the play an unreal atmosphere. It is difficult for the reader to realize that he is reading about contemporary events. <u>Winterset</u>, however, is beautiful to read, for in this play Anderson has written some of his simplest and best poetry. His use of the intellectual introspective long speech is especially effective in <u>Winterset</u>:

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GAUNT.

Suppose it known,
but there are things a judge must not believe
though they should head and fester underneath
and press it on his brain. Justice once rendered
in a clear burst of anger, righteously,
upon a very common laborer,
confessed an anarchist, the verdict found
and the precise machinery of law
invoked to know him guilty -- think what furor
would rock the state if the court then flatly said
all this was lies -- must be reversed? It's better,
as any judge can tell you, in such cases,
holding the common good to be worth more
than small injustice, to let the record stand,
let one man die. For justice, in the main,
is governed by opinion. Communities
will have what they will have, and it's quite as well,
after all, to be rid of anarchists. Our rights
as citizens can be maintained as rights
only while we are held to be the peers
of those who live about us. A vendor of fish
is not protected as a man might be
who kept a market. I own I've sometimes wished
this was not so, but it is. The man you defend
was unfortunate -- and his misfortune bore
almost as heavily on me. -- I'm broken --
broken across. You're much too young to know
how bitter it is when a worn connection chars
and you can't remember ---can't remember.[5]

In contrast to Winterset, Maxwell Anderson has usually used a historical theme for his poetic drama. Elizabeth the Queen is one of his typical and also one of his best historical plays. Anderson wrote the historical drama for its own sake, not to have very much connection with modern times; his interest is with the individual. The plot describes the mixed desires of Elizabeth and Essex in their love

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and in their ambition for the Kingdom. The conflict within the two individuals and between them is dynamic and complex. At one moment their love for the other comes first; at the next their ambition for control of the kingdom predominates. They alternately love, deceive, help, trust, fear, destroy the other. Essex will not give up his desire for a position equal to or higher than Elizabeth's; Elizabeth will not yield. The characters of Elizabeth and Essex and the interplay between them are psychologically fascinating.

The play has dynamic action and fast moving dialogue; there are fewer long philosophical speeches than in Winterset. Thus, the poetic is not so predominant. Always in the background of the play is the bitter feeling that corruption controls government. Elizabeth's advisors all scheme for power and help cause the downfall of Essex. "The rats inherit the earth,"[6] Elizabeth says, when she must accept her advisor's help against Essex.

Although others do contribute to the downfall of Essex, there is the constant fatalistic feeling that because of the nature of Essex and Elizabeth, his destruction is inevitable. To struggle is futile. Essex realizes his character:

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"I have loved you, love you now, but I know myself.
If I were to win you over and take my place
As it used to be, it would gall me. I have a weakness
For being first wherever I am. I refuse
to take pardon from you without warning you
of this. And when you know it, pardon becomes
Impossible."7

In Mary of Scotland, Maxwell Anderson has written a similar type historical drama, but one which is distinctly inferior. The plot concerns the conflict between Elizabeth and Mary; Elizabeth is determined to keep Mary from the throne of Scotland. Elizabeth and the Protestant church represent unredeemed evil; Mary and the Catholic church represent unblemished good, and Scotland becomes the symbol of religious freedom! Elizabeth maliciously weaves her plans to destroy Mary; Mary is powerless against her. Good is defeated by evil. The character of Mary and her love affair with Bothwell are surrounded with sentimentality. The poetry is often trite and empty. The best passages are those spoken by Elizabeth who realizes the methods she is using and the psychological effect her deceit will have on Mary:

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"We live in a world of shadows, my lord; we are not what we are, but what is said of us and what we read in others' eyes. More especially is this true of queens and kings. It will grow up about her in whispers that she is tainted in blood, given over to lechery and infamous pleasures. She will be known as double-tongued, a demon with an angel's face, insatiable in desire, an emissary of Rome, a prophetess of evil addicted to lascivious rites and poisonous revenges. And before all this her own mind will pause in doubt and terror of what she may be that these things should be said of her -- she will lie awake in torment in the dark -- and she will lie broken, nerveless there in the dark. Her own people will rise and take her sceptre from her."[8]

In Valley Forge, Maxwell Anderson breaks from his usual theme of futility. Washington, fighting against the tremendous odds of starvation, desertion, the British, and the Continental Congress, must decide whether or not to continue the war. With the support of his men and his advisors, he heroically determines to continue the fight. Thus, Valley Forge is more optimistic than most of the other plays. Washington is certainly under no false illusions about government -- any government--, but he does feel that it is possible to improve the world:

"Then it may be you're in error, and the sooner you discover it the better.
You'll get death and taxes under one
government as well as another. -- What
I fight for now is a dream, a mirage,
perhaps, something that's never been

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on this earth since men first worked
it with their hands, something
that's never existed and will never
exist unless we can make it and
put it here -- the right of free-
born men to govern themselves in
their own way. -- Now men are
mostly fools, as you're well
aware. They'll govern themselves
like fools. There are probably
more fools to the square inch in
the Continental Congress than in
the Continental army, and the
percentage runs high in both.
But we've set our teeth and
trained our guns against the
hereditary right of arbitrary
kings, and if we win it's curfew
for all the kings of the world.
-- It may not be worth
the doing. When you deal with
a king you deal with one fool,
knave, madman, or whatever he
may be. When you deal with a
congress you deal with a
conglomerate of fools, knaves,
madmen and honest legislators, all
pulling different directions and
shouting each other down. So
far the knaves and fools
seem to have it. -- So far
our government's as rotten as
the sowbelly it sends us. I hope
and pray it will get better. But
whether it gets better or worse
it's your own, by God, and you
can do what you please with
it -- and what I fight for is
your right to do what you
please with your government
and with yourselves without
benefit of kings. -- This is your
fight more than mine. -- If you desert
they may catch you and they
may not, but the chances are
they won't, for the sentries are
men as you are -- hungry, shivering,

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miserable and inclined to look
the other way. Make your
own decision. But if we
lose you -- if you've lost
interest in this cause of yours --
we've lost our war, lost
it completely, and the men
we've left lying on our battle-
fields died for nothing whatever
-- for a dream that came too 9
early -- and may never come true."

The long speeches and the shorter dialogue in Valley Forge are both excellent. There is the earthy clever talk of the soldiers and the more serious conversations of Washington and his associates who discuss the realistic and idealistic aspects of the war. Both are extremely well written.

Is Maxwell Anderson's immortality secure? Probably not. But certainly there is much intrinsic value in his work. His high points can be found in dramas like Winterset, Elizabeth the Queen, Valley Forge, with their excellent characterization, dialogue, poetry. His weaknesses are symbolized in a play like Mary of Scotland with its poor characterization and trite verse. Maxwell Anderson's poetry is best in the simple long speeches in blank verse in which the hero expresses an intellectual concept. It is least effective when it expresses the sentimental. Anderson's writing often verges

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on melodrama and some of his weakest poetry can be found in the love scenes.

Maxwell Anderson's plays often ignore modern problems. The fact that this is due in part to his feelings of pessimism and futility cannot be denied. However, it is also due to the fact that Maxwell Anderson's aim is high. He wishes to rise above the social problem drama and to reach poetic and classical heights. He is an experimenter, and his experiment is highly interesting and worthwhile. Because of the high standards he has set for himself, he is under a disadvantage. His reader automatically compares his plays with the greatest classical tragedies of the past, and against these, Anderson's often suffer. The average modern play in prose has only to be compared with another average play in prose, and the competition is not nearly so great!

It is his high ideals, however, that have been responsible for Maxwell Anderson's greatest work. He has always aimed above the average and unoriginal, and has believed that in poetry and tragedy, the best can be found. His devout attachment to his art is very perfectly expressed in <u>The Essence of Tragedy</u>:

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"The authors of tragedy offer the largest hope for mankind which I can discern in the great poetry of the earth; a hope that man is greater than his clay, that the spirit of man may rise superior to physical defeat and death. The theme of tragedy has always been victory in defeat, a man's conquest of himself in the face of annihilation. The last act of a tragedy contains the moment when the wheel of a man's fate carries him simultaneously to spiritual realization and to the end of his life. The message of tragedy is simply that men are better than they think they are, and this message needs to be said over and over again in every tongue lest the race lose faith in itself entirely."

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"What savage disciplines, what devotion to the arts and sciences, what birth and death of races and race moralities must intervene between us and that far consummation, no man can guess or estimate. But when the race gets there, if it does, the poets will still be ahead of it, examining a still more distant future. For what the poets are always asking for, visioning, and projecting is man as he must and will be, man a step above and beyond his present, man as he may be glimpsed on some horizon of dream, a 10 little nearer what he himself wishes to become."

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FOOTNOTES

[1] Maxwell Anderson, The Essence of Tragedy, p. 45.

[2] Marion S. Tucker, Modern American and British Plays, p. 627.

[3] Maxwell Anderson, Eleven Verse Plays, pp. 133-134.

[4] Ibid, pp. 93-94.

[5] Ibid, pp. 98-99.

[6] Ibid, p. 121.

[7] Ibid, p. 127.

[8] Ibid, p. 24.

[9] Ibid, pp. 23-25.

[10] Maxwell Anderson, The Essence of Tragedy, pp. 51-53.

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