Études littéraires

Séance du 7 septembre 1967, à 15 heures (Président Shi-Hsiang Chen)

Shi-Hsiang Chen

Volume 1, Number 3, décembre 1968

Le Poète dans la société contemporaine

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/500039ar
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7202/500039ar

See table of contents

Publisher(s)

Département des littératures de l'Université Laval

ISSN

0014-214X (print)
1708-9069 (digital)

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Cite this article

Chen, S.-H. (1968). Séance du 7 septembre 1967, à 15 heures (Président Shi-Hsiang Chen). *Études littéraires*, *1*(3), 383–397. https://doi.org/10.7202/500039ar

Séance du 7 septembre, à 15 heures

***LE PRÉSIDENT:* SHIH-HSIANG CHEN**

LE PRÉSIDENT (*Chine*):

Ladies and Gentlemen: — Having the privilege of being the Chairman of the third session, which happens to be the middle one of the sessions, I first of all will use this privilege to express my personal appreciation of the hospitality of the Committee of our host country, which makes it possible for poets from such far distances to gather here, and gives us this opportunity of expressing our views, exchanging opinions, and furthermore, to work toward a rapport of feelings, if not of thoughts. It is a rapport of the feeling of the great importance of poetry in the world of man, which is most pertinent in the present time of so many crises. And by crises we do not mean the political ones only. But they are in our human values faced with the overpowering development of technology accompanied by modern social management and statecraft, and in the diverse cultures asserting or adjusting themselves. One of our hopes for maintaining and advancing human values to make the world fitting to be the World of Man is in the arts.

Today, I must first remind the audience that we shall have a shorter session than earlier, because of the opera to which we are invited this evening. We are supposed to adjourn at 4:30 instead of 5:00 p.m. This cutting short of the session, however, I will take not to be so much a loss as a reminder of the closeness of the arts, when our poetic performance, so to speak, will be so immediately followed by the opera performance.

I will just say a very few words in the hope of setting a keynote of this session, where midway in our Conference some new varieties will be played by the speakers, and in which I hope also the distinguished audience will participate. We may recall first that during the past sessions we spoke much about the important concerns of poetry such as on the one hand the solitude of the poet and his pursuit in loneliness and anguish after the truth he sees himself, so that his very individual, unique perceptions become universal when his art is shared. On the other hand we deliberated on issues of commitments in very broad areas, which were brilliantly pointed up by speakers with varied views and experiences.

The question of freedom was discussed by each according to his conscience and conviction. And whether the question of good cause or bad cause in relation to good or bad poetry can be conclusively determined, I believe, however, our main concern is still good poetry.

This session, I hope, will offer some variety of approach, though of course some of the earlier subjects and issues can still be pursued. What I want to do is to bring in another dimension of approach which I am sure has been in the mind of most of the speakers as well as among the audience. Yet let me point it out very succinctly. For the sake of succinctness I will only examine very briefly the basic meaning of the word poetry in some different cultures. I will cite only two or at most three. We know perhaps the most prevalent term used in European languages, in many if not all, for poetry or *poésie* is derived from the Greek word ποίησις. While it is familiar knowledge that the basic meaning of poetry in the western tradition indicates the action of making, the Chinese counterpart, *shih*, is from a very different semantic root, and sets out, we might say, a different tradition. The basic meaning of *shih* is not « making » but represents a composite entity, consisting of words, music, borne by the rhythm of dance.Therefore the basic meaning of the Chinese word for poetry actually implies an essence, whereas the Greek word, if I might infer, is rather an unpredicated term, indicating a process, the process of the activities of making. All kinds of concerns about the process of making seems to at the basis of the western tradition of criticism. Aristotle therefore spoke so much about plot, about characterization, in short, about both the craft of writing poetry and the meaning of poetic creation. And as such poetic criticism forms a part of western philosophy. It has resulted, we may suppose, in even our modern practice of discussing poetry in terms of its making, in terms of poetry as action, and every so often as social action.

But the Chinese basic concept of poetry being an integration of song-words, music and even dance, tends to produce for the tradition that undifferentiated idea of poetry as a concrete entity that has long since suggested, if I may quib in the words of Mr. MacLeish, that poetry is something that « be but not mean ». Now I am not lecturing on Chinese poetry, but am attempting to present another perspective. If I should go into Sanskrit or Indian poetry, there would be more to be said. But my purpose is just to introduce another point of view by reminding ourselves of the original meaning of poetry in different cultures. And I hope this might induce the participants today not only to continue the early

discussion of poetic ideas in terms of action, and in terms of craftsmanship, but also to approach poetry or make presentations of it more in its concrete being in itself.

It is appropriate in this connection therefore to announce that after I have introduced the three speakers who will have spoken, we shall at least have one more great pleasure to look forward to. It is that Mr. Robert Lowell has graciously promised that he will read for us his poetry at this session. Mr. Lowell has to leave tomorrow morning, but we shall not miss the opportunity to hear him. Another thought I shall take one more short minute to express. It is my impression that our Canadian poets of the host country have so far been generally too modest. A few of them did speak. But I hope more of them, such poets as Dr. Earle Birney, will speak or read today.

Communications

ADAM WAZYK (*Pologne*) :

Il me semble que, pour un poète, et surtout pour un poète âgé, quand il veut dire quelques mots sur la poésie, il vaut toujours mieux s'appuyer sur sa propre expérience, sur l'expérience vécue, plutôt que sur les spéculations abstraites. Je dois avouer que c'est la première fois que je traverse l'Atlantique. Cela m'est arrivé très tard, mais à l'âge de 18 ans, j'ai écrit un petit poème sur les voyages transatlantiques. Souvent, les visions et métaphores se transforment en réalités, mais souvent dans des circonstances imprévues. C'est la première fois que je touche le sol du Canada. Je me souviens que, dans mon enfance, j'ai lu des livres sur le Canada, des romans d'aventure dont j'ai oublié les titres. Les personnages de ces romans étaient des gens braves et laborieux. Je ne puis les nommer non plus, mais je pense que leur plus grande valeur morale était de trouver un accord constant entre la nature et la culture, une harmonie parfaite dont nous tous sommes avides. Je le pense, aujourd'hui, après tant d'aventures spirituelles vécues, mais je suis presque sûr que cette question m'a obsédé depuis ma jeunesse. Je me demande si je dois juxtaposer la poésie et la Terre des Hommes ou bien la poésie et les hommes de la terre. La question de cette harmonie entre la nature et la culture se pose de nouveau, et je crois qu'elle est sous-jacente à cette exposition de 1967. Jadis, j'ai été attiré par le mouvement futuriste qui m'amusait beaucoup. Cela ne me donnait pas l'envie de faire de la futurologie sérieuse, sans humour, cette connaissance de l'avenir dans lequel je ne trouve ni l'attrait de la science, ni le charme de la

poésie. On a annoncé autrefois des prophéties sur le plan social, et on s'est toujours trompé, moi y compris, mais puisque nous sommes réunis ici pour nous pencher sur l'avenir de la poésie, il faut le faire en exerçant avec prudence cet art douteux.

Mesdames et messieurs, je viens d'un pays où la grande poésie est toujours fascinée par l'Histoire, par le mystère du destin historique, tantôt en forme dramatique, comme chez Mickiewicz, tantôt en forme ironique, comme chez Norwid, et la Terre des Hommes est toujours, pour moi, la terre qui change, et tout ce qui se passe entre le sens et le manque de sens de ses métamorphoses. Elle change aussi bien aux yeux d'un aviateur que d'un laboureur ou d'un homme persécuté.

Or, nous savons bien qu'à chacun de nous a été donné un segment de temps pour vivre. Ce segment est l'axe de notre destinée, et, simultanément, un trajet de l'Histoire bien défini, quoiqu'ouvert, un lieu de changements de mœurs et de la culture, de recherches significatives dans le domaine de la science ou du savoir et une course fermée de notre propre temps biologique. Je pense à la poésie dynamique qui est liée à l'expérience multiforme de ce segment du temps. Je crois qu'elle nous plonge dans toutes les contradictions que notre époque nous apporte. Nous sommes obligés de vivre dans une réalité où tout optimisme est conditionnel, à condition qu'un fou, ou le hasard, ne déclenche une tempête atomique. Les grands succès de la technique sont susceptibles d'augmenter les différences de niveau de vie qui séparent les nations, d'aggraver la disparité visible entre le génie humain et la vie sociale. Le développement énorme de la science aiguise, en même temps, sa crise permanente. L'inquiétude, que nous lions souvent à la poésie vivante, n'est pas une inquiétude de l'âme séparée de la raison, ou bien révoltée contre elle. C'est l'inquiétude de la raison, l'angoisse répandue à tous les niveaux de la conscience et, si l'on veut, de la subconscience. L'effort poétique, que je vois jaillir de cette source, est, peut-être, difficile à définir. Essayons de le faire par négation. Admettons que sensible à la science contemporaine, elle ne soit pas sa parente pauvre, que s'approchant de la religion, elle ne soit pas son pâle reflet, que suivant les suggestions de la linguistique, elle ne soit pas un jeu de mots, ou un Narcisse qui se regarde dans de multiples miroirs, qu'en descendant, une fois de plus au fond de l'être humain, elle ne soit pas une répétition anachronique du thème de la solitude primordiale, thème qui est bon pour le mauvais cinéma. Mais si elle ne cherche pas le merveilleux sur la Terre des Hommes, quand bien même l'évoquerait-elle par des paroles sombres, elle nie sa vocation. Et nous qui avons l'audace de nous distinguer des autres par le fait que nous écrivons

quelquefois des poèmes, nous sommes condamnés à chercher des merveilleux terrestres qui changent, et à explorer la vérité qui s'envole. Mesdames et messieurs, je vous remercie d'avoir écouté ces divagations disparates. Je serais très heureux si vous y trouviez une ou deux pensées dignes d'attention.

The Chairman thanked Mr. Wazyk and introduced Mr. Harindranath Chattopadhyaya[1].

EUGÈNE GUILLEVIC (*France*) :

Le poète est homme puisqu'il est un homme. Et donc, il est comme les autres hommes, comme tout le monde. C'est évident — et ce n'est pas tout à fait vrai.

Car le poète est celui qui a le pouvoir de faire avec la langue de son pays certaines combinaisons dont les autres hommes ont besoin pour se trouver, pour trouver le monde, — pour vivre.

D'où lui vient ce pouvoir singulier ? Mystère sans doute. Mais, assurément, il n'aurait pas ce pouvoir s'il n'était pas doué d'une grande sensibilité à l'égard de tout ce qui constitue la langue nationale : aux mots, à la syntaxe, aux usages.

C'est à cause de cette sensibilité qu'il peut, avec les éléments de sa langue, faire un langage, ce langage qui lui permettra d'en dire plus que les éléments de la langue et leurs combinaisons ne consentent généralement à dire.

J'incline à croire qu'une telle sensibilité ne va pas sans une égale sensibilité aux choses autres que le langage. À vrai dire, je crois que le poète est un homme d'une sensibilité de fleur et de feuille à tout ce qui fait le monde extérieur et intérieur. Je crois que c'est cette sensibilité qui lui permet les rapports qu'il a avec le langage ; c'est elle qui l'oblige à ces rapports.

Cette explication est-elle suffisante ? Montre-t-elle pourquoi le poète est un homme chez qui l'exigence de bonheur pour lui et pour les autres est si forte ? Montre-t-elle que pour les poètes, en tous temps et en tous les lieux, je crois, nous vivons comme dans la doublure de la vie ?

Pour les poètes, il y a quelque chose à faire pour arriver à vivre du vrai côté de la vie, dans sa face enfin avouable, celle qui ne se voit

[1] The Editor deeply regrets that the recording of Mr. Chattopadhyaya's remarks was so poor in so many places that it was not possible to transcribe the text for publication. Efforts to obtain from Mr. Chattopadhyaya copy of his text were also unsuccessful.

jusqu'ici que dans les moments exceptionnels et, en particulier, pendant l'écriture et la lecture du poème.

Je croirais volontiers que cette position du poète par rapport à la vie est liée à ses rapports avec le langage, car son matériau, la langue de son pays, est tissé à travers les siècles comme à l'envers de la vie, avec les besoins, les aspirations, les rêves, les certitudes des hommes. C'est dans leur langue que les hommes rêvent à ce que devrait être leur vie.

C'est sans doute pourquoi la parole du poète devient sacrée pour son peuple et pour les autres peuples. Après, le plus souvent, des avatars, de l'incompréhension, des refus, certes. Mais pour ce qui nous occupe ici, l'important est le fait qu'un jour ou l'autre la parole du poète devient et reste sacrée, que confiance est faite au poète.

Il ne me paraît pas contestable que ce sont notamment et surtout les poètes qui apportent aux hommes les *valeurs* sur lesquelles ils fondent leur vie. C'est ainsi, par exemple, que l'amour est vécu au cours des siècles par les couples innombrables tel qu'il a été chanté par quelques-uns.

Cela est vrai de nos jours où, selon le mot de Nietzsche, « Dieu est mort », mais cela l'a toujours été plus ou moins, et je pense que c'est plus qu'une boutade de dire que les fondateurs de religion sont des poètes qui ont bien, trop bien réussi.

N'est-ce pas le rêve de chaque poète d'apporter aux hommes, non pas une nouvelle foi, une nouvelle religion, mais quelque chose que je ne peux appeler autrement qu'une nouvelle assise du sacré, d'introduire dans la vie quotidienne, dans les rapports des hommes entre eux, dans leurs rapports avec les choses de tous les jours, ce frisson, ce tremblement, ce respect, cette crainte et cet amour que donne l'approche du sacré ? Est-ce aimer qu'aimer autrement ? Et cela peut et doit être vrai de toute chose : du moineau dans la cour, de la marée qui monte, d'un enfant qui balbutie.

Je rêve devant vous à voix haute : j'entrevois un monde où l'homme, affranchi des servitudes, des impératifs économiques, passera ses jours à faire sa joie des choses qui font le monde. Je rêve à ces temps où l'homme vivra le monde. Il sera parvenu à cet état où tout événement — la pierre qui roule, le visage entrevu, le jeu du soleil sur un toit — sera pour lui décisif, engagera sa vie, héroïquement, tragiquement, car toute fête n'est fête que si elle est tragédie, si celui qui la vit risque ce qu'il est.

« Il faut rêver », disait Lénine. Bonne référence. Rêvons.

Ce dont je rêve, cet état futur de l'homme dans le monde sera, bien sûr, le résultat d'une longue évolution à laquelle participeront

activement les forces révolutionnaires et des hommes très divers, mais pour moi il est clair que le rôle du poète sera essentiel, en raison même de ce que j'ai dit, car il contribuera plus que quiconque à former la sensibilité de ses semblables, à fonder leurs valeurs. Devant vous, poètes éminents du monde entier, j'aurais mauvaise grâce à insister.

Si ce que je dis est vrai, il en découle, certes, des conséquences quant aux relations entre le poète et la société de son temps. Je ne m'étendrai pas sur les modalités de ces relations — on l'a d'ailleurs fait avant moi ici. Tout cela peut se résumer en peu de mots : il faut que le poète soit libre de dire, et il faut qu'il parle avec une conscience constante et sourcilleuse de sa responsabilité. Dans ce domaine rien ne sera jamais dit une fois pour toutes. Ce n'est pas si simple. Et toutes les résistances ne sont pas nuisibles.

En un mot, s'il y a quelque chose qui crie contre la déshumanisation, contre la robotisation, s'il y a quelque chose qui crie pour les besoins permanents, essentiels de l'homme, c'est la poésie.

Écoutez-la, vous tous qui avez pouvoir et ne voulez pas être maudits par vos descendants privés d'eux-mêmes.

Discussion

ROBERT LOWELL (*États-Unis*) :

All the other poets are reading tomorrow ; otherwise I would be embarrassed giving this solo performance. I will be very brief. I will read three poems. Two are short, and one is very short. This conference is very interesting in many ways, but it is to me something new. After an hour and a half, I discovered that no two people speaking French are alike. That is my Scotch-English-Jewish-American background. I think the war, the Vietnam war, has done something to my country, and we are in a sort of a miasma, depression about it. It seems horrible to us, yet the conditions are not very different from what they were like before. This has been a sad century, and it is changing and, like Mr. Guillevic, we are looking to the future in the hope that it will be different from what we have now. Maybe worst, maybe better, thank God, different. It will change, and we don't know how. It is a terrible period.

Of the three poems I am reading, one has something to do with the bomb ; the others are love poems and one is a war poem, which is out of character for me. It's a metaphore. I think that what we look for in poetry — the last speech put it very much better than I

could — occasionally something sacred happens in poetry. This is not getting into Theology but it happens very rarely, and it happens to very few poets, and it happens very rarely to those it happens to. But it is always there as a possibility, and it is there for all its readers. Now, you won't hear it in my words. This is called *Fall 1961*. This is the year when the Berlin crisis got very acute and it looked as if we were going to war with Russia. And living in New York you would hear an aeroplane go over the city and you would wonder, you would shutter where it came from and what it meant. And then that blew off, and we had other crises, of different kind. The poem begins with the image of an old clock, an old grandfather's clock with the sun moving across it. It ends with the image of a little bird, the Baltimore oriole, orange and black and it has a swinging nest. That's the nature that the bomb will send us back to.

(*Here Mr. Robert Lowell read* « *Fall 1961* »[2].)

This other poem is called *Water* and the setting is a little Maine, a New England fishing town, a professional fishing town, a lobster town. It's two people sitting, watching water, and they get a certain solace of each other. It's a love poem and they go their separate ways, and as you know the water in Maine, as in Canada, is so cold that you can't swim in it often.

(*Robert Lowell then read the poem entitled* « *Water* »[3].)

This is called *Epigram* and it's six lines long; it is modelled on the famous Epitaph on a Spartan. There is a queer story — I think it is in Herodotus — that the Persians saw the Spartan infantry before the battle at Thermopylae and they had long yellow hair like the hippies, although they were rather masculine characters. They combed this hair, they combed it and the Persian king Xerxès thought they would be very easy to destroy, that they were effeminate; and then he was told that these were the best soldiers in Greece. And this is what they did when they went into the battle. This is a very simple little poem.

(*Here Robert Lowell read* « *Epigram* »[4].)

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2 *For the Union Dead*, Farrar, Straus, Giroux, New York, pp. 11-12.

3 *Ibid.*, pp. 3-4.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 23.

LE PRÉSIDENT:

It behooves me to be back at the podium, first to thank the three speakers for their scheduled speeches, and secondly to express my spontaneous feelings after having heard Mr. Lowell's reading. I do not pretend to speak for the responses of each individual in the audience. For each would respond in his own way. And if you would forgive my very cryptic statement, my response can be summed up most briefly. But if it is too cryptic, I shall explicate it in a few more sentences. It would sound very cryptic indeed if I say that my response to Mr. Lowell's reading of his own poetry is that it's so like Chinese. But my explanation is that all of us as poetry lovers from different cultures of different nationalities gathered here, listening to this reading will be moved to recall the best poetry he has remembered in his own tradition. That is the reason why I say that to *me* it is like Chinese, because I know Chinese best. And some images and cadences struck me with power very strangely as if they were from a Chinese poem which I knew. Just to induce the audience to produce their responses when the floor is open, I will recite my Chinese poem, and also observe the traditional way of chanting some lines. It also happens to be a poem of anguish, on account of love, personal love. But it was rendered into such a world-wide, universal concern when the poet singing of his love couldn't help presenting a universal vision, in terms of metamorphosis in the whole world of being through the pang of death and rebirth. The Chinese poem begins by referring to time. As Mr. Lowell's poem does to the tick-tock of the clock, the Chinese poem refers to the mysterious time that happens in the intervals of music, compared with the many vagaries of life. And then the Chinese poet introduces those images, of the mermaid, of the sea, of land and of tears as in Mr. Lowell's poems. There the tears are as pearls bred by the mermaids. Pearls having no life but through transformation by the pang of love would be as tears of the vast sea. And then the land which produces precious jade would yield up smoke, jade would evaporate into smoke and mist in the heat of eternal passion. For the Chinese metaphors of land and sea when juxtaposed as interchangeable terms allude to metamorphosis in infinity. I shall first recite the poem, and then chant four of the lines. The whole poem is only eight lines long:

Chin se wu tuan wu shih hsûan
Yi hsûan yi chu ssu hua nien

Chuang-sheng hsiao meng mi hu tieh
Wang-ti ch'un hsin t'o tu chüan
Ts'ang hai yueh ming chu yu lei
Lan t'ien jih nuan yû sheng yen
Ts'u ch'ing k'e tai ch'eng chui yi
Chih shih tang shih yi wang jan.

After having called attention to the similarity of imagery in this poem to that of Mr. Lowell's, and its dominant feeling likewise conveyed, I feel there is no need to translate its meaning. Indeed let it « not mean but be » as it is recited and chanted. So I would hope the music of its language in recitation may sympathetically echo the music of Mr. Lowell's reading of his own poetry.

FRANK SCOTT (*Canada*) :

Mr. Chairman, after the breath of fresh air that the reading of a real poem introduces in our discussion, I decided that I should try not to produce any more abstract ideas about poetry. But I must say I am frightened that some poets are scared of science, frightened of technology, and can think of nothing better about it than that it is going to produce a conformism against which they must immediately arm themselves. Surely science is enlarging not restricting the function of poetry. The conformism which threatens is not that aspect of Technology which we should be looking at. We should be looking at the enormous new powers which men have, the marvelous doors opened to the understanding of our universe and the tremendous images presented to us by the scientist. I don't want the poet to allow the scientist to become the man of widest imagination. What greater invention, what more poetic image than the concept of antimatter, filling the entire universe ? What more marvelous opportunity is given us than those opportunities which modern travel, communications, chances of meeting people, holding conference like this provides ? And the poet must not turn back into his little particularism. I was a little frightened at Mr. Holthusen's reference to the anthology of sixteen poets, the purpose of which was to show some common factor in which he found, he said, that they all preferred to rely upon their own culture, traditions, languages, and rather emphasize those factors. I hope that the poet will not be the last of the nationalist. I said that I wasn't going to say things like that but I have ; so, I will end by quoting an even shorter poem than that of Mr. Lowell, a two line verse which I wrote at the time of an

eclipse of the sun in Montréal. The papers were filled with warnings to people not to look at the eclipse: it would ruin your eye-sight, it is dangerous, be careful, and so on. I answered with these lines:

I looked the sun straight in the eyes
He put on dark glasses.

JAMES MASON COX (*États-Unis*):

I just wanted to mention a few points. One would be the poet and publication. This relates to the new poet. We were talking this morning of the younger poets, and primarily seem to be omitted the possibilities, the chances of publication. I know the United States, and this seems to apply also to all other countries, except the Socialist Republics where governments control publications. A study by the Rockefeller Foundation, pointing to 50 or more publishers, showed that of this number probably 20 would publish poetry and of those publishers only one or perhaps two would have two or three poets. This will give you an idea of the possibility of publication for a new poet in a country of one hundred and ninety eight million. I should like to say that I myself was on the editorial staff of three newspapers and a Director and organizer of a radio station, so it gave me somewhat of an entry into publishing, so I was published in the Congressional Record and I was published in some other sources. But it happens to be a matter of contact, I think, as well as of craftmanship. I am speaking of structure style and composition. I noticed today, at the luncheon we were discussing the meaning of poetry and we found it rather difficult even to define it, and I don't think I can; I would not attempt. Those who did had varied definitions. So I think the primary question to consider is what can we do for the young poets, for the newer poets, the youthful poets, those in the colleges and universities, not where they will find the audience but how they will get published. And this is a major question not only to discuss but what concrete action we can take. And I think this situation prevails in all countries where capitalism prevails, because it is a matter of how many books will sell. Will poetry sell? What is the population reading? How many books? Publishers are primarily concerned in the monetary aspects; dollars and cents. Will this be profitable? Is it commercial? This is something that the International Pen should consider, something

that the World Poetry Conference should consider, in terms of thought as well as in terms of action. And I think that this would give us a wide spread audience and it will advance the cause in which we believe.

DENISE LEVERTOV (*États-Unis*) :

I am sorry but I have to disagree with Mr. Cox. I worked as poetry editor of a national weekly, *The Nation* for three or four years (I am not there now) and I have also worked as adviser to a couple of publishers as well as informal adviser to other publishers sometimes. And I also receive from younger poets a considerable number of little magazines in the mail. I really think that, in the United States in any case, there is no poet who is a really good poet that doesn't get published. I think it must be very, very rare. There are different levels, circles of publications. There are so many magazines — I am talking for the moment not of books but of magazines — that there is really a place, a « home » for everybody, including people who write very badly ; they produce their own little magazines, and sit in each other's laps, and are also happy as far as publication is concerned. This is what I have observed. As far as book publication is concerned, it is true that publishers have profits in mind, with a few exceptions. However, because of the great prevalence of poetry reading in the colleges in the United States and the paperback books of poetry which are produced, poetry has actually become a fairly profitable business in the United States today. I would say that there are more books of poetry being published in the United States each year than ever before, and more are being sold. You talk to any publisher today and to every poet — no I would not say every poet, but to many poets — and you ask them about their royalties, and so on and so forth. It is flourishing for the moment. I don't know whether it is flourishing in a healthy way — I don't know — but I think it is really behind the time to speak as though poets were struggling desperately to be published. I really believe that you are mistaken in saying that.

SHIH-HSIANG CHEN :

We now have heard both sides of this question and it could certainly be further discussed, in our gatherings, both private and public. Now, Mr. Layton.

IRVING LAYTON (*Canada*):

My name is Irving Layton. I think that I am a Canadian poet. What I was afraid of has really begun to happen in a very nightmarish way. It has been my feeling for a long time that poets have replaced the discredited rabbi, priests and ministers and that it is for them to dish out the uplift and the sermonizing that the educated middle class audiences can no longer endure. So, they come to poetry readings or to poetry conferences and are dished out the same kind of uplift, the same kind of self adulation. It is a strange thing that I have not heard one single word of abuse for the poet today. And we find ourselves talking not about poems but about poetry. It has long been my feeling that you don't talk about poetry: you write it, unless you are a critic, any more than that you talk about lovemaking: you make love, unless you are eunuch. Therefore, to come to a poetry conference such as this and to find the poet replacing the priest, the rabbi and the minister, is a rather unpleasant experience but not one which I did not have several times before. The mood is always the same: solemnity, pomposity, grandiosity, big words hurled making me think of the high-school teacher which I had, who would get up in front of the class, tiptoe as if she was an hysterical female-teacher of poetry, around Keats' *Ode to a Nightingale*, or *Autumn* and in a hushed tone try to persuade the poor suffering children about the glories of poetry. But, for heaven sake whom are we trying to convince? I mean most of us are poets or semi-poets, and the rest of you would not be here if you didn't feel that there was something in poetry. After all, what is the point of all these speeches about what poetry is and who the poet is, what the role of the poet is. Who gives a damn about all these things?

UNE VOIX:

I do!

IRVING LAYTON:

That is very nice, and there must be some limitation in your education, if at this point you still feel that you should hear something about poetry or the role of the poets. My own feeling is that a conference like this should have gotten down to some serious concerns about what the poet can do in a world that is menaced by totalitarianism, in Russia or Poland or Czechoslovakia. The

other day I brought up the problem of the 128 Czechoslovakian writers who have appealed to the West most urgently to help them in any way whatsoever. This thing was not taken up at all.

There is the credibility gaps, so to speak between the poet and the audience. There is the fact even that a conference like this was not at all sufficiently advertised. This appears to be more a conference of thieves rather than one of poets — and unsuccessful thieves at that! What is the point? I mean if you are going to have a conference like this, give it to the world, give it in the form of dance or music or some kind of an excitement. Don't let the High School solemnity and pomposity settle down like a terrible gray curtain on what should have been a happy and gay festival.

I suggested yesterday that this is the first poetry conference since the days of Homer. I would suggest in all seriousness that no other such a festival is held until at least another Homer is born, and I would furthermore suggest that if such a conference is held, for heaven's sake don't ask the poets to get up and make these utterly ridiculous self congratulatory speeches about themselves and poetry and the nature of poetry, and so on. Don't you see that we are all frightened children speaking out of a terrible solitude and a terrible anxiety. To this extent perhaps there is some justification in a conference such as this for the poet in Bombay or in London or Montréal or New York who knows the pain of this solitude and this anxiety. I was glad to meet with others who are fellow sufferers, to know that they exist, even though we cannot really communicate with each other, because the truth of the matter is that every poet is a closed canister of energy and can only get out of that kind of hell by writing the poem, and not by speaking to you, even though I am at the moment.

At least I am trying to do so. But I know it is a failure and cannot be done. No one ever wrote a poem who did not want to get out of hell in some way and the process is not altogether a happy or a graceful one. But here again, you see, I am talking about how to write a poem and even that suits a purpose. And you see how readily and easily one is tempted to do this sort of thing, and how easily these words come to us. So for the future may I make a plea for all future conferences of poets? When you have them, when you have these children as Plato called them, put a garland on their heads, but unlike Plato's recommendation do not send them out of the City. On the contrary welcome them with all great honours, have nice rooms for them, not at the Bonaventure Hotel — it is a hideous fortress — but at the Laurentian perhaps — I have no favourite — give them a room, give them a lot of wine, and a beautiful woman.

MITCHELL GOODMAN (*États-Unis*) :

My name is Mitchell Goodman. I am from the United States. I am a writer. Denise Levertov has indicated that there is a large and growing audience for poetry at least in the United States today. This is a very important phenomenon. I think that one of the things we can do for each other in this conference, and I think that Mr. Layton has underestimated the possibilities of the conference — I think that one of the things we can do for each other is to bring each other's news, because we are terribly cut off one from the other by national boundaries; and one thing we can do is very simply to bring these news to one another, as well as bring the sounds of our voices and possibly the difficulties of communicating. The fact is that in the United States, in the twentieth century a renaissance in poetry has occurred. This is our news. Led by William Carlos Williams, Wallace Stevens and Ezra Pound, there has been an important renaissance, and it is continuing. But this is a terribly important part of the history of the United States right now. And I just want to say one more thing about this, much as could be said. It is not a simple coincidence that a revolution is also now occurring in the United States among the rising generation. I mean in the most literal sense, I mean in the sense that these kids growing up today no longer say « I will go along with the State when the State tells me to kill ». They say « I will not ». This is a revolution, and this revolution has directly to do with the renaissance of poetry in the United States today. These people's language, their possibilities of expression have been brought back to life by William Carlos Williams, Wallace Stevens, Ezra Pound, Allen Ginsberg, Denise Levertov, and so on. This is the news from the United States. Thank you.

LE PRÉSIDENT :

Thank you very much Mr. Goodman. You end on a cheerful note and it also gives us much hope and confidence. Thank you. The meeting is adjourned until tomorrow morning.