

ARTS & LETTERS

of exuberance and adventure. Set in the estate of an endearingly comic duke, the play pits an agnostic and a socialist clergyman against a conjurer who wishes to restore Christian mystery and wonder to the world. According to Kavanagh, the play has "an intriguing vein of darkness" lacking in Chesterton's cheerful essays.

Although *Magic* was a London success, Chesterton abandoned play writing for almost two decades. His next play, *The Judgement of Doctor Johnson* (1930), shows Chesterton's disillusionment with Western society. In the play, Chesterton's mouthpiece is the 18th-century essayist Samuel Johnson, who rails against unrestrained sex, atheism, and moralizing liberalism. The play concludes with a speech, which, Kavanagh argues, expresses "a loss of belief" in any practical means of reforming society. *Doctor Johnson* closed after six performances. Chesterton's last play, *The Surprise* (1932), was a piece in which actors portrayed puppets in a toy theater. The play was never finished.

Kavanagh concludes that Chesterton's three plays deserve reviving because they reveal a dark side missing from his other writings. "For the sake of those 'moderns' who cannot trust a light unless they see it streaked with darkness," he says, "Chesterton should have written more plays."

The Poet's Task

"Responsibilities of the Poet" by Robert Pinsky,
in *Critical Inquiry* (Spring 1987), 5801 Ellis
Ave., Chicago, Ill. 60637.

Many contemporary poets, says Pinsky, an English professor at the University of California, Berkeley, suffer from a particularly modern disease—"Poetry Gloom." Faced with sparse and diminishing audiences for their work, poets have "mysterious disaffections" and "querulous doubts" about the validity of their art. To whom, Pinsky asks, should poets be responsible? The state? Posterity? The audience?

Prior to the 20th century, such questions would not have been asked. Poetry was clearly accepted as a part of civilized life, as a mirror for society to view itself. But as contemporary poetry became more abstract and austere, the traditional poet's role—as sage or tribune—faded.

But poets should not try to regain lost audiences by cheapening their art. The first task of a poet, Pinsky argues, is to "mediate between the dead and the unborn," preserving poetry as a living art between one generation and the next. That does not mean that poets should only work in forms sanctioned by the dead; their task is to ring changes on their heritage, not mimic the lifeless past. By keeping poetry energetic for the next generation, "others who come after us can have it if they want it, as free to choose it and change it as we have been."

Like journalism, poetry can be a form of social history, for both genres are observations about the way we live. But poetry is a more reflective art than journalism; poets judge as well as record. By reading William Blake's poem *London*, for example, we learn not just how poor people lived two centuries ago, but also the way civilized men viewed those unfortunate enough to have "mind-forg'd manacles."

Poetry must describe the world; pure inward abstraction, Pinsky says,

ARTS & LETTERS

results in "debilitating falseness." (Even Emily Dickinson, that most private of poets, still recognized the world she rejected—"The soul selects her own Society/Then—shuts the Door.") But neither should it be "political poetry," which plays a didactic role. Pinsky argues that poetry may *use* politics as material, as it uses family or theology. But the poet, as both advocate and judge, weaves what he sees into grand designs. Lastly, the poet should treat his art in the way first described by 17th-century British dramatist Ben Jonson: "As thou art all, so be thou all to me."

OTHER NATIONS

Red Army Resilience

"The Economic Constraints on Soviet Military Power" by G. Jonathan Greenwald and Walter B. Slocombe, in *The Washington Quarterly* (Summer 1987), 1800 K St. N.W., Ste. 400, Washington, D.C. 20006.

In his 1941 memoir *Mission to Moscow*, Joseph Davies, Franklin D. Roosevelt's ambassador to the USSR (1936–1938), wrote that the Soviet economy was on the verge of collapse. "To maintain its existence," Davies wrote, the Soviet Union "has to apply capitalistic principles. Otherwise it will fail and be overthrown."

Forty-six years later, the Soviet economy remains both socialist and relatively healthy. Although the Kremlin has "ferocious economic problems," say Greenwald, a senior fellow at the Atlantic Council, and Slocombe, a deputy undersecretary of defense for policy during the Carter administration, there is "remarkably little evidence" to suggest either that Soviet performance cannot be improved or that Soviet military spending *must* be slashed.

Soviet economic growth has slowed in recent years. The USSR's gross national product (GNP) grew, on average, 2.2 percent during the past decade, dropping from an average rate of five percent between 1966 and 1970. Consumption rates have also slowed, falling from close to four percent increases between 1965 and 1975 to 1.5 percent increases (on average) since 1976. (Food consumption *fell* by two percent in 1985.)

Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev has tried to streamline the bureaucracy by reducing the number of officials responsible for overseeing production of consumer goods, and by giving plant managers more control in such matters as investment and wages. Gorbachev's goal, the authors argue, is not to imitate the West but to shore up the system by making the Soviet economy as efficient as that of staunchly communist East Germany.

Annual increases in Soviet defense spending (which, according to the CIA, currently consumes between 15 and 17 percent of GNP) have slowed during the past decade. The authors argue that Gorbachev can achieve some cost savings without diminishing real military strength. For example, air defense and civil defense units now "produce remarkably little benefit against U.S. and allied countermeasures." Many of the 45 army divisions in Siberia now assigned to the long Chinese border could be demobilized if Sino-Soviet tensions recede.