**Al Alvarez – Big Medicine**

As a media event, A. Alvarez’s The Savage God has turned out to have a lot in common with the all-star expedition to Everest, which to a great extent was insured against failure through being heavily pre-sold. Bits of the book have been trailed in Partisan Review,NewAmerican Review,the Atlantic Monthly,the Listenerand finally the Observer,where heavy static was kicked up by the intervention of an interested party and by the editor’s inexplicable desire to print the author’s photograph at an even greater angle of tilt than puzzled the world on the front cover of Beyond All This Fiddle:at this rate the lay reader might soon get the idea that Alvarez has adopted the supine position as a matter of course. And just as it is doubtful whether the majority of mankind really knows whether the polyglot assemblage of climbers got all the way up there or not, it is doubtful whether the intelligentsia really knows about The Savage Godor not — the publicity and free samples probably used up most of the available response, and the task of reading a dozen polite reviews perhaps exhausted what was left. To rub the point home, Weidenfeld have made the book only slightly less expensive than a Ferrari Dino, thereby ensuring that the smooth curve of its commercial success shan’t be dented by too many poor clucks actually trying to get hold of it and read it.

Some eager beaver at Weidenfeld must have turned out a pilot study on The Intellectual as Productand fingered Alvarez as the fall guy. I hate to break up the party, but feel bound to announce that quite apart from its hit-parade status The Savage Godis an important contribution to recent criticism. Alvarez has been one of the key literary intellectuals of the last decade and in this new book certain components of his thought have been pushed to their limits. In my view this mainly serves to demonstrate the contradictions which have at all previous stages obtained between them, but that doesn’t mean that the book lacks the excitement (the real excitement, not the media excitement) and the gravitaswhich we associate with an intellectual venture. And the best way to pay tribute to these qualities is to trace within Alvarez’s total argument those subsidiary lines of argument which have hit an impasse: to locate and examine the points at which discourse has ceased and forceful assertion (and there isn’t much assertion more forceful than his) has taken over. There will then be a chance for discourse to begin again — and it needs to do that. In The Savage GodAlvarez’s critical effort has finally revealed its false emphasis in full clarity, but this only means that his critical effort has now reached the point where it canbe valued exactly and so retained. There is no question of sweeping over the path he has taken and forgetting about it. To put it briefly, Alvarez since the late fifties has been occupied with the central question about the relationship of poetry to contemporary reality. I think it can now clearly be seen that he has got the wrong answer: but he has also helped clarify the question.

As many will by now have heard, the book takes the form of an anti-sandwich: a hunk of bread between two slices of meat, the bread being a long study of suicide through the ages and the two slices of meat being accounts of suicide attempts by Sylvia Plath and the author, the first unhappily successful, the second fortunately a misfire. These two sections on Plath and himself are the stretches of Alvarez’s writing most likely to be widely remembered: they have the muscular narrative drive of the ‘Shiprock’ essay in Beyond All This Fiddle — which is to say, they draw you forward into regions where it seems at least plausible, if not natural, for a man to pit himself against extreme conditions as a necessary part of some kind of mental exploration. I for one am never going to understand why Alvarez should want to cling by his fingernails to a vast slab of naked geology while vultures stagger past with one wing folded over their eyes, but I can’t deny that such experience gives his narrative writing a certain edge: he seems to go about with his nervous system worn externally, and I suppose it is true that if you conduct your life in this way you will face and resolve problems that most people shirk, and restrict the range of their sensibilities by so shirking. But I can suppose this without supposing that it is better to push things to the limit: in fact it seems clear to me by now, having lasted this long, that limits are dangerous things which a wise man best avoids, since he is more likely to lose than find himself when he gets near them — and very likely to lose his wisdom.

But obviously for Alvarez it is not like this. Basic to both the Plath chapter and the chapter on himself is the assumption that something was being found out, and such is the seductiveness of the writing that the assumption gains great weight. Without, however, being clarified. If Alvarez is right about Plath’s suicide not being meant as a real attempt, then plainly it is nonsensical to suppose that her last writings are tangible products of the supposedly special mental territory opened up by deciding not to live. And from his own attempt, Alvarez apparently gained no special insight beyond a definite experience of whatever it is that pulses and throws off rays in the fiery centre of a king-sized hangover. That, and this:

...when death let me down, I gradually saw that I had been using the wrong language; I had translated things into Americanese. Too many movies, too many novels, too many trips to the States had switched my understanding into a hopeful, alien tongue. I no longer thought of myself as unhappy; instead, I had 'problems’. Which is an optimistic way of putting it, since problems imply solutions, whereas unhappiness is merely a condition of life which you must live with, like the weather. Once I had accepted that there weren’t ever going to be any answers, even in death, I found to my surprise that I didn’t much care whether I was happy or unhappy; 'problems' and 'the problem of problems' no longer existed. And that in itself is already the beginning of happiness.

I don’t think it is, but it’s certainly the end of adolescence. Here at the finale of his book, as with Plath at the beginning and with all the historical data in the middle, Alvarez is commendably scrupulous about attaching the suicidal impulse to events in the exterior world of the suicide: eventually, he seems to suggest, suicide is a question of what formative conditions obtain in the irreducible self, and must always retreat beyond simply sociological understanding. Whole races have suicided under the threat of oppression, but others have not; people who had ‘everything to live for’ have chosen to die; people who had every reason to die have striven to live. If there is already an inclination to suicide, circumstances might bring it out: if there is not already an inclination to suicide, circumstances tend not to put it in.

Alvarez has been more scientifically minded — more objective, more resistant to easy mental patterning — than suits him as a critic. For his own major critical assumption is still there, but now looks shakier than ever in the face of his own arguments. He is saying that the casualty rate among modern artists has been, and has had to be, unusually high, but one of the salient conclusions of his historical investigation is that the 'rate' must be dependent on statistics and the statistics dependent on the deed being declared for what it is — on his own terms, he has not satisfactorily established the previous casualty rate among artists as being low. He is saying (as he has always said) that contemporary evils take unique forms and that the pertinent artistic reaction to them, since it must be extreme, will look suicidal and in a disturbing number of cases may end suicidally: but he is also saying that a correspondence of the suicidal impulse to a perceived deterioration in the external world is problematical and tends to retreat beyond investigation.

As an 'extremist' Alvarez has made the disarming tactical mistake of being too reasonable. It would have been too much to ask that he should go on to demolish his own critical base — but that is the way his arguments tend, and a reviewer with any sense of the high comedy of intellectual affairs ought to evince, momentarily at any rate, a proper delight at being presented with a treatise so honestly done that it contains within itself all the material necessary for its own correction.

If Alvarez had not pinned his 'casualty rate' to suicide, his famous death-roll in the title chapter could have been a lot longer. As it is, the death-roll has already been subject to fluctuations within the chapter’s own short lifetime, and might well be altered again before the book comes out in paperback — Berryman is now fully eligible and Mishima needs at least a mention. On its first appearance (as ‘The Art of Suicide’ in Partisan Review) Albert Camus was numbered among the missing: 'Camus died absurdly in a car crash.' It must have crossed the author’s mind that either everybody who dies in a car crash dies absurdly or else nobody does. Anyway, Camus now out and Joe Orton is in, and the point this time is that although Orton was murdered, hismurderer suicided, so it qualifies as a pretty suicidal scene. Alvarez still clings to his list of painters: Modigliani, Arshile Gorki, Mark Gertler, Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko. It’s hard to see how Gertler qualifies at that level of achievement (if he does, then Carrington ought to as well) but it’s all too easy to see that at some point Alvarez was unimpressed with his own casualty list and felt compelled to pad it out a bit. He has widened his preoccupation from suicide to extreme self-neglect, and beyond that to ordinary carelessness, shading finally into the area where people just happen to be standing around when a hunk of twentieth-century technology goes haywire. If he had widened his definition of ‘artist’ to include the jazzmen, he could legitimately have pushed his casualty rate up to something staggering: the fatal car-crashes began with Bessie Smith and included Clifford Brown, who conceivably might have been a more important trumpeter than Dizzy Gillespie and Fats Navarro combined. The drug casualties have included Navarro, Bud Powell and pre-eminently Charlie Parker, whom I would put without hesitation among the two dozen most important twentieth-century artists in any medium. It’s been a massacre, and of necessity a peculiarly modern one. But for the jazz casualty-list you would be compelled abinitio to take account of the informing sociological conditions — Jim Crow, insecurity, and the constant, tired travelling from job to job by road.

Having left jazz out of account, it’s not surprising that Alvarez ignores rock music too, although it has already supplied several exemplary figures who would fit well into his sad gallery. If ever three young artists had 'everything to live for' they were Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix and Jim Morrison — quite apart from the fact that on the material plane they were among the richest artists the world has ever known. If Alvarez doesn’t want to cover this shady part of the waterfront he’s well within his rights, but the point is that in jazz and rock, precisely because their connection with the grand flow of modern events has no wide intellectual acceptance, it can more easily be seen that the casualty rate has something intimately to do with the way the life is lived. Taking the received 'high' art as his field, Alvarez finds it all too easy to connect the casualty rate with the 'collapse of values' which in his more thoughtful moments he is careful to present as a stimulus to creation rather than as an invitation to end it. Prematurely and fatally, he subsumes and denatures a multiplicity of sociological changes within a notion of total historical change — the one thing historical change can never be.

But a simple point emerges: before the twentieth century it is possible to discuss cases individually, since the artists who killed themselves or were even seriously suicidal were rare exceptions. In the twentieth century the balance suddenly shifts: the better the artist the more vulnerable he seems to be. Obviously, this is in no way a firm rule. The Grand Old Men of literature have been both numerous and very grand: Eliot, Joyce, Valéry, Pound, Mann, Forster, Frost, Stevens, Ungaretti, Montale, Marianne, Moore. Even so, the casualty rate among the gifted seems out of all proportion, as though the nature of the artistic undertaking itself and the demands it makes had altered radically.

There are several objections that can be made to this crucial passage. First, Alvarez hasn’t been able to assemble an overwhelmingly impressive list of twentieth-century artists who 'killed themselves or were even seriously suicidal' — certainly there aren’t enough of them mentioned to convince us that they are any less the rare exception now than they were then. Second, a galaxy might produce smooth and homogeneous light as you look back through it from its perimeter, but it is still made of individual stars, and properly examined is seen to be very violent. If Dylan Thomas is on the modern list because he drank too much, Mozart ought to be on the older list because he ate too little. Nobody knows what happened to Masaccio, and we only know a little more than nothing about Giorgione: what we can be sure of is that their loss was cataclysmic at the time. Masaccio may very well have been the most talented painter ever born but the point is that history absorbed the shock and continued. The shocks in all these cases were tremendous, but history absorbed them and continued. That is one of the things that makes history look different from now — it contains these explosions and continues. Nor does history very well remember lost promise.

As Alfred Einstein suggested, frühvollendet— 'too early completed' is a misleading term for the musicians who died young. In retrospect we see them whole and tend to forget that their premature deaths were crushing deprivations. Mozart, Weber, Purcell, Pergolesi, Mendelssohn, Chopin, Vincenzo Bellini, Schubert — nearly all of them died within a single half-century. Or consider the Elizabethan age in poetry: Marlowe never saw thirty, Greene, Peele, Nash and Kyd all died before they were forty, and Shakespeare only just made it past fifty. They drank to die in those days — Dylan Thomas would have looked like a piker. (Exercise: think of an artistic era free of visitations from the Savage God.)

Third, Alvarez’s qualifying list of Grand Old Men might well have been extended — the one thing the modern era hasgot that previous centuries were short of is creative longevity. Masaccio never reached thirty, Raphael never reached forty, and in their day they were not exceptional: it was Leonardo, Michelangelo, Giovanni Bellini and Titian who were exceptional. In literature alone (Alvarez’s chosen field in this passage, although elsewhere he sweeps outward without warning to take in such other arts as suit his book) the last two centuries are stiff with senescent masters, a Tolstoy or a Wordsworth paired off against every Keats, just as there is a Monet or a Renoir paired off against every Seurat. But none of this means that Alvarez has got things backwards and that history has taken the opposite turn from what he thinks. It means that history has taken no turn at all. All wars and revolutions aside, what it means is that medically speaking these are far safer times to be alive. Unless you happen to be dwelling in the vicinity when a political crisis bursts, there are incomparably fewer effective forces operating to nail you. It is one strand of history, not history itself; but it is an important strand, and Alvarez is forced into some elegant high-stepping in order to avoid it. If he had been content to stick with the genuine disaster areas of modern history his casualty lists would have retained real weight. But by spreading his field of argument to the whole literate world he forces himself towards mysticism: he vaguely puts it about that there is something dangerous in all this safety. The liberal-humanist tradition can’t cope with modern events. It takes extremism to do that. And extremism is especially required when modern events, with their ineluctable cunning, have carefully contrived to leave one sitting safely on one’s duff in England or America instead of getting boiled down for soap or freezing to death above the Arctic Circle.

Eventually Alvarez’s whole argument depends on the twin assumptions that modern evils are unique and that, being so, they require a unique artistic response. Not only are these assumptions separately questionable, their connection is questionable too. The first assumption is, I think, entirely without useful meaning. The second, however, has the advantage of not being so vulnerable as the first: since its connections with it were tenuous in the first place, to some extent it can break free, and in fact Alvarez’s formidable critical value is dependent on the paradox that though largely wrong about what has happened he is to some extent right about what art should do about it. But to begin with the first assumption.
If anyone contends that there was nothing which happened in the concentration camps which did not happen in the Thirty Years War, he is likely to be informed that he cannot imagine what a concentration camp was like. It’s a failure of imagination, but not necessarily on the contender’s side: it’s far more likely that the informant has failed to imagine what the Thirty Years War was like. History has been one long holocaust. Most arguments for the uniqueness of our own age in this department are based on the way in which technology has inflated the scale of operations while reducing the blood-heat of the people conducting them. Certainly there is a lot to this, but there is no reason to think that pre-twentieth-century life was any more readily intelligible, or tolerable, for the victim just because he was able to look his executioner in the eye — then, as now, the innocent were likely to be chosen as the very people to be slaughtered first. The true change from previous centuries to our own has been not in the way evil manifests itself, but in the way we react to it. For large-scale crimes to look so shockingly unnatural in our own century, it first had to be widely assumed that history had grown out of them — and this, broadly, was what the nineteenth century strove to assume. The nub of the matter is that the nineteenth-century enlightened mind — the mind that had studied history in a way that history had never previously studied itself — was simply not expecting these things to happen. ‘The twentieth century began with a very widely diffused belief in progress. The heritage of Hegelianism was Great Expectations, and they were greatly disappointed. The systematic, developmental philosophies (the philosophies which governed the study of history and, by extension, of literature too) were optimistic. Either they turned to pessimism in the face of the new twentieth-century events, or else lived on as virulent dogma.

The intellectual consequences of enforced pessimism may be seen at their most poignant in the culminating works of the European panoptic scholars — Huizinga, Curtius, Auerbach. Eventually the tuition of cultural break-up was everywhere, and in one form or another its concomitant was too: if unity had been shattered, unity must oncehave existed, somewhere back when Christendom was still integrated, sensibility had not dissociated, society was still organic. Pessimism is the driving force of most of the finest scholarly work in our century, which means the finest there has ever been. But pessimism is no better than optimism at being realistic about history. A view of history is either pluralist or it is unreal, and on a pluralist view of history civilization and evil were never so mutually exclusive that the first could give way to the second in so complete a way. Prisoners were worked to death in the Spanish galleys while Titian painted at court; his pictures didn’t make their suffering less horrible, their suffering didn’t make his pictures less beautiful; the unity was never there, it was always conflict. For anyone with the imagination to sense what life has always been like, and always will be like, it must seem almost miraculous that civilization can be so tenacious — that values do notcollapse, and that even when a whole race is driven to the wall there are forces left which unite to condemn the crime.

Alvarez doubts the capacity of the liberal-humanist intellectual tradition to act in the face of modern events, but I doubt if it is obliged to act. (I should note that Alvarez in fact uses the term 'liberal-humanist' mainly to describe what came about in New York after the intellectual defeat of Marxism in the thirties. This is to debase the term and I feel entitled to snatch it back again.) It is obliged merely to give an account of what takes place. To the extent that it got itself attached to the optimistic philosophies, it was taken for a ride: but then, it was the liberal-humanist tradition which eventually mounted the decisive critique against the optimistic philosophies. Evil, barbarism, liberalism and inhumanity have done such a precise job of defining themselves in this century that the liberal-humanist tradition was never better placed to do its part (the intellectual part, which is not the only one) in preserving and furthering civilization. That it withdrew from compromising positions — positions it was tempted into by the promise of extra- intellectual action — ought to redound to its credit. But Alvarez is a man of action all the way to the roots, and for him it was a logical progression to ask of art what intellect had failed to do — act in the world as a strategically contending power.

It’s from this desire that Alvarez’s second basic assumption springs: a unique artistic response to the unique contemporary evils. The desire itself is part of a feeling for history that gets history wrong art is certainly in conflict with other forces but is not compelled to allow for the way those forces move, and might well choose to ignore them. The assumption is wrong to the extent that it is governed by the desire. But it is right to the extent that while art might choose to ignore other forces it cannot presume to be unaware of them. Alvarez was incorrect about contemporary evils being unique but was correct about them being there,and his critical requirement that the artistic intelligence should take account of what had been going on was the key critical requirement as the fifties shaded into the sixties. The 'end of ideology’ had given the artists a dangerous opportunity to relax into insularity, withdrawing their work not just as a contending power but as any kind of force at all.

Unfortunately Alvarez phrased his warning as an invitation to get out there and fight — not just to take account of modern events, but to incorporate them, holding the mirror up to the A-blast and the torture cell. If his powerlessness in the face of modern events had driven the artist to desperation, that desperation was what he ought to express; was what the best artists were already expressing. It followed that anyone who kept a contemplative equilibrium was somehow suspect. And it was never questioned that extremist expression would have (when properly controlled) an ameliorative effect. Alvarez was far too experienced to place any value on possible therapeutic effects for the artist, but like all theorists of art as a contending power, he was obliged merely to assert, without demonstrating, the probability of a beneficial effect on the recipient. Finally it all came down to the assurance that Lowell, Berryman, Plath and Hughes were good for you.

If the realization of what has happened in modern history forces a sensitive man towards breakdown, then a poet who does not transmit such turmoil has to be fibbing. That, crudely, was the big idea. It started as a footnote to a few sentences on Lowell in the Art and Isolation’ essay which closed The Shaping Spiritin 1958. The footnote didn’t go in until the 1961 edition: Alvarez had been reviewing recent poetry regularly for theObserverin the interim, and during that time Life Studieshad come out — at which point his criticism crossed the Rubicon with a mighty clashing of shields.

Not all these poems are successful. There is a certain air of poetic therapy about them which encourages looseness and makes some seem almost prattling. But apparently they produced the necessary results: by writing them Lowell seems to have set his house in order and so assured himself of a firm, known base from which his work could start afresh. So in the poems which endLife Studiesand in those which have followed it — particularly his superlative version of Villon’sTestament— Lowell handles themes quite as personal and exacerbated as those of his earlier work, but now he does so with a control and clarity which greatly add to their power. In the process, he has also opened up a fresh area of verse — the dispassionate artistic use of material salvaged from the edge of breakdown — which several talented young writers, such as Anne Sexton, have begun to develop. He has given poetry a new impetus.

The emphasis on 'personal’ poetry had been there since The School of Donne,most of which had been written in 1958. But to salvage material from the edge of breakdown — this was a new requirement, and gradually through the sixties it became a requirement which divided the good from the bad in modern poetry as decisively as Metaphysical poetry was divided from the Renaissance. In 1962 Berryman and Lowell were placed at the head of the pugnacious Penguin anthology The New Poetry,for which Alvarez wrote an introduction that committed him firmly to a rejection of the gentility principle. As well as giving an account of what was happening, it is quite possible that his editing of this anthology helped shape what happened later — at any rate here was intellect in action and no mistake. In 1965 Alvarez placed it on record, in Under Pressure,that he had seen at least one of the dangers a personal poetry of breakdown might conceivably run into.

But when artists begin to internalize everything — nature and society, art and life, intimacy and response — they have to face a simple but overbearing difficulty: beyond a certain point, the self is also boring. Extremism in the arts — the cultivation of breakdown and all the diverse facets of schizophrenia — ends not so much in anarchy as in a kind of internal fascism by which the artist, to relieve his own boredom, becomes both torturer and tortured.

This essay ('America and Extremist Art’, the final chapter of Under Pressure)was his last chance to get out of his own aesthetic before it trapped him. But faint heart never won fair copy, and it must have seemed more interesting just to push on up the tunnel and see where it led. Finally it led him to those four figures — Lowell, Berryman, Hughes and Plath — and a formulation of extremism (in the title essay of Beyond all this Fiddle,1968) calculated to neutralize the objections he himself had already thought of.

Perhaps the basic misunderstanding encouraged by Extremist art is that the artist’s experience on the outer edge of whatever is tolerable is somehow a substitute for creativity. In fact, the opposite is true; in order to make art out of deprivation and despair the artist needs proportionately rich internal resources. Contrary to current belief, there is no short cut to creative ability, not even through the psychiatric ward of the most progressive mental hospital. However rigidly his experience is internalized, the genuine artist does not simply project his own nervous system as a pattern for reality. He is what he is because his inner world is more substantial, variable and self-renewing than that of ordinary people, so that even in his deepest isolation he is left with something more sustaining than mere narcissism. In this, of course, the modern artist is like every other creative figure in history: he knows what he knows, he has his own vision steady within him, and every new work is an attempt to reveal a little more of it. What sets the contemporary artist apart from his predecessors is his lack of external standards by which to judge his reality. He not only has to launch his craft and control it, he also has to make his own compass.

So there has to be a steadiness inside the turmoil, and all the control necessary to control the uncontrollable. ('It is an art like that of a racing driver drifting a car’ he said of Plath in the same essay: 'the art of keeping precise control over something which, to the outsider, seems utterly beyond all control.’) By this time Alvarez had got his Extremist aesthetic into shape, with all the loopholes plugged: the result was that it was critically inapplicable. As Lowell, Berryman, Hughes and Plath became elevated uniformly to exemplary status, it became increasingly difficult to criticize their work in any way beyond the simple assertion of inner resources (deduced from the outer resources, i.e. the poems) and control. It’s almost a Leavisite fix. The Leavisite fix runs something like this: 'This is great writing and the reason it’s great writing is you can seeit’s great writing and if you can’t see it’s great writing you’re not a fit reader.’ The Alvarez fix runs something like this: 'This poem manifests control through not looking quite uncontrolled enough to be out of control and somehow implies inner resources sufficiently complex to justify the presence of the material being presented as salvaged from the edge of breakdown.’ At this rate criticism was bound to become a matter of trusting a favoured poet to go on being serious. Alvarez was up to his neck in a revised version of the intentional fallacy, continually referring the work back to the mind supposedly behind it and referring the mind supposedly behind it sideways to the supposed state of the world. His initial response to the quality of the language on the page was still operating, but it had precious little room to move. The trouble can be traced to the primal requirement of incorporating extreme experience. Despite the disclaimers he steadily built into his aesthetic over the ten years or so it took him to develop it, this requirement remained fundamental. It wasn’t enough merely to mention an H-bomb or a concentration camp, they had to be inthere somewhere: somehow the contemporary violence had to be reflected.

When a writer tries to hitch a ride from these themes, he usually ends only by exposing the triviality of his responses. What is needed is that extreme tension and concentration which creates a kind of silence of shock and calm around the images:

I have done it again.
One year in every ten
I manage it —

A sort of walking miracle, my skin
Bright as a Nazi lampshade,
My right foot

A paperweight,
My face a featureless, fine
Jew linen.

Consider how the penultimate line-ending is cannily used to create a pause before the epithet 'Jew’. The effect is twofold: first shock, then an odd detachment. The image is unspeakable, yet the poet’s use of it is calm, almost elegant. And this, perhaps, is the only way of handling such despair: objectively, accurately, and with a certain contempt. (Beyond all this Fiddle,title essay.)

I have never been able to accept unquestioned the rightness of Sylvia Plath assimilating such infinities of torture to her own problems. I admire her late work but not this aspect of it, and would argue that it was herdistancefrom these events that made her so appallingly free with them, and that this propensity for absorbing history into the self (and being under the impression that it fits) is the biggest and best of the very good reasons for not going to the limit. The shock around those images is the shock of sentimental excess, as the poet tries to embody what boozy old Saroyan used to call the Whole Voyald. I don’t mean that there is material which poetry can’t by its nature encompass — only that there is material which the poet can’t by the material’s nature render personal. It just can’t survive the scaling down. Where such stuff works at all in Plath, it works because of the pathos of the attempt.

Trapped in his intentional fallacy, Alvarez is betting everything on he artist’s sincerity: even if the artist hasn’t actually been scarified by the perception of some external event, he will possess, it is hoped, the internal equipment to justify the pretence that he has. But pretend or not, the material presented needs to be judged with some view towards the external world and away from its creator’s supposed mental condition. It’s possible to gesture too blithely, whatever the motivation. Here, for example, is Lowell, in a recent sonnet about Sylvia Plath. The immediate occasion for this poem seems to have been an article on Lowell in The Review24 by John Bayley, who favoured Plath with an epithet Lowell found objectionable.

A miniature mad talent?Sylvia Plath,
who’ll wipe off the spit of your integrity,
rising in the saddle to slash at Auschwitz,
life tearing this and that, I am a woman?

Hannah Arendt once said that finally these matters can be understood only by the poets, but when you scan a piece of journey-work like this you start wondering if she was right. A lot of rhetoric had to go over the dam before all the concentration camps in the Reich and the occupied territories got whittled down to that one word 'Auschwitz’ — hundreds of journalists and television anchor-men had to do their stuff. And at last, after the whole infinitely ramified nightmare had been trimmed to that one stub and the stub itself had been crushed to powder, it was time for Lowell to come along and toss off a line suggesting that in Sylvia Plath theEndlösungfinally met its implacable opponent. Carrying a sword. Riding a horse.
In such moments of rarefied bathos from his key poet Alvarez is confronted with the limitations of his critical position: what apparently escapes him in Crowought to seize him by the throat here. Lowell’s internal condition presumably being one of routine agony, the material has undoubtedly surfaced with all the correct credentials. Nor does the technical control seem much lower than average. What is wrong is the sheer, shrieking inadequacy of the event as cited to the event as it happened. For anyone who has an inkling of what the Third Reich was like, these lines will look pitiful. For anyone who has no inkling, the notion might take flower that some German character called Auschwitz finally got pinned to the mat by Sylvia Plath. Either way, small reward. These lines are part of a closed circuit, and I might add as a conjecture that they seem to me to adumbrate a whole new kind of complacency which Alvarez has unintentionally done his share of bringing into the world: full-frontal solemnity.

Thinking of the work and the mind as a complete circuit, Alvarez is hindered from seeing what ought to be plain on the page — the actual interior weaknesses that his four front-runners are fighting, as all men must fight their own psyches at some point. He is good on Plath’s problems but light on the fact that her poems are a problem too: even at their powerful best they do violence to stretches of vanished time which have had so much violence done to them already the extra flourish is simply an irrelevance, like flying a Frisbee in the Colosseum. In Berryman the magnificent multiplicity of personality — the pluralism of the mind, all out there on the paper — is continually invaded and falsified by a consciously ‘creative’, All-American ego making its belligerent claims. In Lowell there is the determination, growing ever more obvious, to write major poetry or nothing: there is so much significance going on you can hardly hear yourself think, and the steady clangour is split by the squeal of straining verbs. As for Hughes, it’s as though the Nazis had killed everybody and only the animals were left. It’s part of the business of criticism to run a constant check on the intellectual component of an artist’s work and help keep it from calcifying. There are large penalties to be paid if we accept without question schematic interpretations of reality which vitiate what is best in an artist’s work and say nothing of interest about reality.

One absence bulks large in The Savage God— Solzhenitsyn. Experience doesn’t come more extreme than that, and it’s a token of the retrogressive nature of Soviet history that if he hadn’t been a mathematician he would never have even got onto a casualty list of the young cut down in their gifted prime — he would simply have been blotted out. As it was, he lived, and wrote novels in which life lived right to the dizzy limit is contemplated and reordered by a mind detached, cool, balanced, integrated and classical. It would be interesting to see what vocabulary Alvarez would employ in dealing with his achievement. It’s a safe bet that he’d have to dismantle his ownaesthetic before starting work, or at least loosen it to the point where the flexibility of response in Under Pressure(where it wasn’t required of an artist who had actually had extreme experience imposed upon him that he should imitate the action of Ted Hughes) could quietly be regained.

By turning against Movement poetry and developing his Extremist aesthetic Alvarez brought the relationship of art to reality into closer question than it had been subject to for a long time. It was the right move atthe right moment, since the emergence of a right little, tight little, know-nothing English poetry was a clear and present danger. But for Alvarez as a critic the move had damaging consequences, not the least of which was a permanent ability to undervalue Philip Larkin, who had never been 'immortalizing the securities and complacencies of life in the suburbs’ (in The Savage GodAlvarez is still saying that the Movement poets were doing that) but had been projecting a personal despair which fulfilled every one of Alvarez’s requirements except for an adequate supply of globally apocalyptic referents. A life ending in boredom, fear and age might not seem much in comparison with the larger instances of modern frightfulness, but it’s the way that most of us will get ours, when it comes. (And to that one point at least in The Savage GodAlvarez incongruously seems to agree.) Larkin’s treatment of death-in-ordinary will go on being frightening — extreme, if you like — when the slain millions have gone back into time with all the other millions, out of range of the casually significant evocation. In the teeth of all the evidence, Larkin has apparently decided that he might as well live. It’s hard to see this as a drawback. The suicidal frame of mind isn’t adequate to the understanding of history: it is under the delusion that its own destruction might be an appropriate response to events.

Alvarez is far too ready to assess the spirit of the age. Probably the last thing he would want is to be pigeon-holed with George Steiner, but there are times when he is not too many pigeon-holes away, particularly with his picture of civilization getting into a terminal crisis and art flailing around in search of new means to do its duty. My closing quotation takes us back a decade or so nearer to one of the main events, World War II. It is from Pieter Geyl — a paragraph from one of his replies to Toynbee collected in Encounters in History.

In any case I know full well, as do all who live sincerely by our tradition, that the ideal of Western civilization we try to serve has not made angels of us. It is an aspiration, hallowed by the labours of many generations, even though they, too, have frequently gone off the track. It is an aspiration which has always been and is still exposed to reactions from inside. If these at times seem menacing, this must only incite us to be prepared and to persevere. At the time of the national-socialist aberration there were too many in my own country as well — I mention only Huizinga — who treated us to gloomy admonitions as if the evil was in fact the culmination of a process of decay of which they imagined to detect the symptoms all around them. Toynbee now admits, in one of those apologetic concessions which drop from his pen so frequently in his new volume [A Study of History,vol. XII — C.J.], that since he cried alarm (not against Hitler, but against ourselves) the menace had been warded off, and yet even now it suits him to dub 'the cold-bloodedness and high-powered organization’ of the totalitarian movements 'typically modern-Western’.

A. J. P. Taylor named Geyl as the modern historian he venerated most. Certainly Geyl deserved a medal for self-effacement. While arguing this point with Toynbee it apparently didn’t strike him as relevant that it was he, and not Toynbee, who had been in Buchenwald. One more the Savage God missed.

(The Review, 1972)

Reading this piece now, I am relieved to find that it transmitted, in some intelligible form, ideas that I was never to give up on about the relationship of personality to history, and of both to art. There are sentences in it that I could not have written better. Unfortunately there are also sentences that I could not have written worse. 'Some eager beaver at Weidenfeld must have turned out a pilot study on The Intellectual as Productand fingered Alvarez as the fall guy.’ It sounds like the dialogue they gave Leslie Nielsen to say in Police Squad. 'I hate to break up the party. . .’ But obviously I loved tobreak up the party. That’s what the souped-up style was doing: loudly announcing a late arrival. Only acceptance can cure that brand of obstreperousness, but I might have occupied myself straight away with doing something about a bad habit of giving clauses a shock start as pseudo-sentences whose lack of a main verb screamed for attention. 'Without, however, being clarified.’ The aim was speed but the effect was the opposite. Nor was it wise, in a style bent on compelling the audience to address its workings, to make statements which would start a separate debate if challenged: 'among the two dozen most important artists in any medium’ begged the question of which artists I was leaving out so as to make room for putting Charlie Parker in — Balanchine? Balthus? Berg? The argument was revealed as a fandango before the alphabet had barely started, and a reasonable suggestion about Charlie Parker’s stature was lost in a self-defeating exaggeration. Time cooled my fevered brain, helped by the example of more poised elder colleagues. Alvarez was one of them: though I went on finding his arguments provocative — and especially this one, which he never abandoned — his prose was always a model.

In this piece and others there are far too many fleetingly slighting references to Ted Hughes. One should always substantiate a dismissal, especially if judging someone on his own terms, and what I meant about Hughes was that his late poems about animals were dwarfed by his earlier poems about people. Hughes, too, was tolerant: the last time I met him was at Buckingham Palace, and I thought he was gazing down on his erstwhile tormentor with that benevolence which suffuses us when we see a gadfly tamed by time. George Steiner was another name I was far too fond of sniping at in parentheses, and who also generously put up with me instead of sending his seconds. Robert Lowell, on the other hand, took exception to being mentioned. Later on I followed up this insult by composing some parodic sonnets in his manner. Even at the time when he was being worshipped I found his posturings absurd. Later on everybody did, but it should be emphasized that this change of heart wasn’t all due to a change in fashion: he buried his own reputation under a towering pile of later work which as an endorsement of its author’s historical significance had the same effect as Ferdinand Marcos’s monumental statue to himself. Two names glaringly missing from this piece are Paul Celan and Primo Levi. I hadn’t yet read Celan, whose example would have bolstered my argument; or even, apparently, heard of Levi, whose eventual fate, could it have been foreseen, would have provided material for Alvarez — unless you think, as I do, that what counted about Levi was his will to live and speak clearly despite his personal experience of the twentieth century at its lamentable worst.

(1994)