

# THE POSSIBLE IMPORTANCE OF POETRY

BY

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POETRY desires to be interesting; or it should. By tradition it has a great right to this desire, for there have been times when nothing was more interesting than poetry. If this is not such a time, the reason may be simply that we have lost our desire; or if not so, that we have lost touch with tradition. The present fact would seem to be that people do not consider poetry either interesting or important—two words for the same thing; and the people are the judge. So have they always been, in spite of every appeal to something beyond or above or beneath them. There is no appeal. It is to people that poetry must be interesting.

When they do not find it so, the fault conceivably is theirs: they have forgotten how to read. It is they, and not the poets, who have lost touch with tradition. But it is dangerous for poets at any time to make such a charge. In our time it is a plausible charge, for we can suspect, and indeed we are often told, that universal literacy has depressed literature. When the only aim is that everybody should be able to read something, no matter what, and when mass production of printed words has become the business of cynics who despise the very audience by which they profit, the outlook for distinguished thoughts and feelings

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would appear on the face of it to be poor. The contemporary poet, however, cannot afford to rest here. His job is what the job of poets has always been: to think and feel as deeply as he can, and to assume the existence of persons who will be glad that he has done so. And he had better assume that these are more than a few—ideally, he had better assume that they are all of us. He had better not count the number, at least beforehand; for if he does, he will end by limiting himself. "I am always made uneasy," Emerson wrote in his Journal, "when the conversation turns in my presence upon popular ignorance and the duty of adapting our public harangues and writings to the mind of the people. 'Tis all pedantry and ignorance. The people know as much and reason as well as we do. None so quick as they to discern brilliant genius or solid parts. And I observe that all those who use this cant most, are such as do not rise above mediocrity of understanding. . . . Remember that the hunger of people for truth is immense. The reason why they yawn is because you have it not."

If Emerson sounds optimistic, one should remember his reputation in his time. It was a popular reputation, not incompatible with the fact that Matthew Arnold and other young aristocrats of the mind in Oxford of the 1840's thought they heard nowhere else so high and fine a voice as this of the American prophet who assumed that everybody could understand him. It was a remarkable time, that generation before our Civil War. Lewis Mumford has called it The Golden

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Day, and F. O. Matthiessen called it a Renaissance. It was full of writers who said great things and sang great songs, and they wanted multitudes to hear them. Walt Whitman, who had no illusions about the average American, addressed himself nevertheless to the normal American for whom

subject without which life cannot be comprehended to its depth. I have never heard that Whitman believed he would not be understood by more than a few friends and fellow poets. His faith was simpler and broader than that; and it has been vindicated.



MARK VAN DOREN, THE 1951 HOPWOOD LECTURER  
*From a photograph by Pach Brothers, New York*

no subject was too noble. The subject, for instance, of death. A great people, he decided, would have great poems of death; and he proceeded to write some—proceeded, and all of his life continued, so that his two masterpieces, "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" and "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," have that for their

**W**HENEVER poetry has been good, it has had good subject matter—good for anybody, and it has not agonized about numbers. Today, I think, we do not hear enough about the subject matter of poetry. Criticism tends to ignore the question altogether. Poets are damned or praised for their way with language, as if language

were the aim and end of all their art. Language is a lovely thing, and only human beings have it; but they have it, presumably, for something better still, and the greatest poets are those who have best understood this. There is no lord of language like Shakespeare; he could and did do everything with it; but what finally moves us as we read him or watch his plays is the knowledge he has of us, on a level deeper than words. We adore Shakespeare because he is wise, and because the world of men is given its right value in his works. It was for the same reason that the Greeks all but worshiped Homer, whom they knew by heart even though they knew nothing about the world of which he had written. The truth was, of course, that they did know his most important world, for it was the human world, and as such it was not different from theirs. Again they had in him a lord of language, but they noticed this less than they noticed how well he understood the passions, the ideas, and the absurdities of men. They watched Achilles learning what honor means; they watched Odysseus coming home; and they saw the soul of Hector reflected in the love of those around him—his family, his comrades, and his friends among the gods. By the same token, what is it that in modern times convinces a true reader of Dante that his reputation is deserved? His verbal cunning, and the peculiar fitness of his rhymes, his syntax? These of course; but at last it is the knowledge of the man, and the pity; the power of his feelings, the unwearied work of his thought, and the deep lake of his heart. Without these he would merely be ingenious, as without them Homer would be sound and fury, and Shakespeare nothing but incessant bustling in the scenery.

But those three are the greatest poets, one of you may say—the very greatest; and what can we learn from them? They are too far removed, they are monsters of perfection, they are studied more than they are read, they are statues whose pedestals only may be approached. I do not doubt

at all that one at least of you is saying these things now. And nothing could be more mistaken. Yet it is the custom of our time. We do not believe that we can learn from the greatest things. They are not for us. Which is why so few discussions of poetry today, even among those who ought to know better, even mention the names of Shakespeare, Homer, and Dante; and why the poet is defined in terms that exclude those masters; and why the impression is abroad that it is somehow bad taste for poetry to be interesting to people. Subject matter is itself an embarrassing subject, from which quick refuge is sought in the techniques of rhythm and image, of caesura and ambiguity. Those things all have their fascination, but it is secondary to the further fascination of the art when ultimate demands are made upon it. The ultimate demand is that it be faithful to its ancient trust; that it treat of human truth, and more wisely and movingly than most men treat it even when they know, as ideally all men know, the content of such truth.

POETRY today means lyric poetry; it means the short poem; and that too can be a great thing, but it is not the greatest. It is as great as it can be when its author has wisdom and passion, and when it is clear that if there were an occasion he could convey his understanding in the more complex forms of narrative and drama. The Greeks never forgot that lyric poetry is but a third of poetry itself, and perhaps the least third. The big things are done in narrative and drama, for poetry's chief business is the business of story—of mankind in motion. Philosophy and science give us knowledge of men in the aggregate, or in essence; poetry commits individuals to action, and follows them through careers. It conceives beginnings, middles, and ends, and is perhaps the only thing that can conceive them. Nature does not, and neither may philosophy or science; but poetry must. And it is the test of any poet—that is, of any storyteller—whether or not he

can finish the story he has started. The beginning is fairly easy, as any young writer knows; even the middle sometimes charts its own course; but the end—for that, alas, experience and penetration are required. And in addition to those, a familiarity with the forms in which all human conduct finally manifests itself, the two forms of tragedy and comedy.

Tragedy and comedy are forms, not statements; or it may be that they are forms of statement. But any statement which they make is as far from platitude as the most sophisticated poet could desire. Poetry today despises platitude, and it is right in that. The pompous homilies, the "affirmations" and hymns of self-praise that pass in times like these as the sort of thing we ought to love in preference to the dim poetry we do on the whole have—I for one will take the dim poetry, since at least it is not hollow. But it must be clear that I would rather have something better than either of these. I would rather have story, and I would like to see it well grounded in the tragic and the comic visions which embrace all the knowledge we have yet accumulated concerning the significance of man's life.

Man's life is never good enough, and only men can know what this means. It means more than that the world of any given moment is a poor thing for even the best persons in it. Contemporary literature spends too much time, perhaps, and certainly too much effort, in proving by documentation that the twentieth century is not what some people thought it was going to be. What did they think it was going to be? An earthly paradise? Heaven itself? But if they thought this they were children, and poetry is not for children. Neither can it be written by children. It is the product of long seasoning and of bittersweet experience, neither of which things we have any right to expect in the very young. We do not think of Homer as very young; or Dante, or Shakespeare, or Sophocles, or Milton, or Hardy, or Yeats. Or Chaucer—

who sounds in every verse he wrote as if he had been born with quizzical old eyes, and perhaps the small beard we cannot think of him without. The great poet knows the world, and how to live in it—also, how not to live in it. He is not surprised because it has failed at being heaven, or because most people in it fall grotesquely short of being angels. He seems to have expected this, and to have been prepared. The current notion of the poet as young, ignorant, helpless, and complaining is more recent than many of us think. Through most of human time the poet has been thought of in terms that suggest the old man of the tribe—the one who has lived longest and seen most, and whose voice nevertheless has retained its original sweetness. Even in our day we have been witness to examples of this: Thomas Hardy, beginning to write poetry at fifty-five and ceasing only with his death at eighty-eight; William Butler Yeats, turning at middle age into the great poet he was at last to be; Robert Frost, unheard of by the world until he was nearing forty, and proceeding after that to become better with every advancing decade. We have these examples, and still we go on thinking of the poet as knowing less than we do—less, not more, which immemorially has been the assumption.

**T**HE POET knows how to live in the world and how not to live in it. That is to say, he locates the good life where it actually is—in the mind that can imagine and believe it. The mind of man not only sees worlds but creates them; and the worlds it creates are not here. This does not mean that they are illusory worlds, made up for solace and thin comfort. They are more substantial than the one we move through every day; but they are not here, and they cannot be verified by those who think this is the only world there is. Those who think that are either deceived or disillusioned, and chronically so. The poet is not deceived, for he has sharp eyes. But neither is he disillusioned, for in one very

important sense he has never suffered from illusion. He has not thought that heaven was in cities—or in the country, either, if that is what you think I mean. It is where it is, and only the mind can travel there. Shakespeare must have known contemporary England very well, but his mind traveled elsewhere in search of persons, stories, tragedies, comedies. It traveled to that region where all men's minds are at home, and it brought back news that made this world seem somehow a foreign place, as indeed it must always seem to the uncompromising imagination. It is the only place where we have addresses, but it is not where we chiefly live. Nor need we hate it because this is true. Dante, traveling also into heaven and hell, took his memories with him and used them there. Homer, dropping back several centuries in time, found heroes—which was what he wanted, and he knew he should not look for them in his next-door neighbors; whom nevertheless he did not despise. They had not disappointed him, because he had never counted on them for more than they could deliver.

Poetry, in other words, takes it for granted that the world is not good enough for its best men. But all it can do with these men is to make them tragic or comic heroes—to show them as defeated by the very world to which they are superior. What if they succeeded? Poetry asks this question; asks it again and again; and at last decides that the answer is for no man to give. The poet is a man too, laughing and crying with other men. He certainly is not God. So he does not know the answer. But he knows the question, which he asks over and over in such a way as to suggest the extreme distinction of man's predicament. Man wants to change the world and cannot do so. The world will punish him if he tries, just as gravity will operate upon his body no matter how light he thinks it is. Hamlet is inconceivably brilliant, but he must die like any other man, and for the commonest reason—he has not survived his crisis. Don

Quixote is the greatest gentleman we know, but the world cannot tolerate one who tries to teach it to be other than it is. The world is indeed a tough place. But what man could make it tender? No man, says poetry, no man at all; and sacrifices King Lear on the altar of the unchangeable. He learned, but learned too late. There is no appeal from the ways of the world, which must continue on its own terms or take us all down with it into chaos and confusion. Which does not mean that we should think it a nice thing. It is a terrible thing; or if not terrible, absurd. So tragedy and comedy say; and salvage out of the wreck the best ideas we have, the ideas that certain men could become heroes by expressing, even though they failed.

What if they had succeeded? The question is meaningless; or rather, we cannot imagine what it means, nor does the poetry. What if Socrates had succeeded in making all Athenians think well? What if Jesus had succeeded in making all Jerusalem over into the image of his Father? What if Don Quixote had persuaded all of Spain that knights were more real than merchants and monks? What if Hamlet had cleansed Denmark of its sin? What if Oedipus' finding of the truth had made him free? For one thing we should not now have the books of which these persons are the heroes. Or if we did have them, we could not believe them. We believe them as it is because they falsify nothing in their report of the world. Their report of the human spirit—well, that is another matter. Neither do they falsify that by minimizing the dangers it must undergo, or by denying the supreme courage it inspires in those who properly possess it. The world is what it is, and the human spirit is what it is. And somehow they live together: ill-sorted companions, but the only companions there are for poetry to watch disappearing down the long perspective of life. The final distinction of the author of *Don Quixote* is that he both put them in perspective and personified them as two men.

THE POSSIBLE importance of poetry is immense at any time. And why not now? I would make no exception of our time, though there are those who do. They are the ones who persist in identifying poetry with short poems, and who even then do not remember how great a short poem can be—for it can be dramatic too, and somehow narrative; it can imply careers, for ideas and for men. The short poem is better in those ages when the long poem is better; or, at the minimum, when it exists. The forms of literature reinforce one another, as tragedy and comedy do, which are the forms of thought. When fiction is good, then poetry can be good; and vice versa. Fiction indeed *is* poetry; or as I have put it here, poetry is story. This is not my idea, as you very well know; it is at least as old as Aristotle, and it has prevailed whenever poetry has been important to people.

But when I say fiction do I mean merely narratives or dramas in verse? Not necessarily. The ancient categories of lyric, epic, and dramatic poetry were not conceived in terms of verse alone, and it is fatal for us to suppose so. What we call prose fiction today is in fact the most interesting poetry we have; Aristotle would think so if he were alive, and he would be justified by the interest we show. Our movies, our westerns, our detective tales—he would wonder, perhaps, why so many of us failed to recognize those things too as contributions, however bad or good, to the poetry of this age. I have already spoken of Cervantes as if I thought he was the great poet of his age, along with Shakespeare his contemporary. That is exactly how I regard him, and I am not prevented from doing so by the fact that he wrote his greatest work in prose. He was a versifier too, but as such he does not interest us; whereas his vast poem called *Don Quixote* is among the glories of the world. Shakespeare wrote both verse and prose—sometimes, it would seem, indifferently, as if convenience alone dictated his choice; and his prose, unlike the verse

of Cervantes, was itself a great thing, there being no better prose I think in English. But the question does not greatly matter. The vision was the thing in either case: the vision, and the knowledge that backed it up. The wisdom of these men is what makes them poets, as it is the wisdom of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky and Chekhov that makes us think of them, when we are serious, as Russia's poets. Is Dickens not a poet? Consider his passion and his joy as he contemplates humanity and sets it moving. He is among the very great, and we are missing more than we know if we think of him merely as one of six hundred English novelists. The possible importance of poetry includes the chance that such men as these should continue to appear, and that we should have the generosity to recognize them as belonging to the highest class.

That we do not do so is perhaps the fault of our education, which keeps first things separate from one another. We study literature as if it were a thing by itself, and not only literature but English literature—even American literature, God save the mark. When American literature is good it is *literature*, as English or Greek literature is. And when *literature* is good it is a part of all we know. Not the only part, or even the best part, but certainly a part; and it is well that we should remember this. It is more likely to excel when the society that produces it considers neither it nor science, nor mathematics, nor philosophy, nor theology, nor medicine, nor law, nor mechanics, nor politics, nor economics, nor history as the central subject matter of its thought. The central subject matter for any great age is life and truth; or perhaps it is justice and mercy. At any rate it is something that all arts and studies serve, and serve, we may suppose, equally. The Greeks were at one and the same time supreme in poetry, in philosophy, in science, and in mathematics. But this was not a coincidence, I suspect. They were great in each of these things because they were great in all the others, and because they thought

that each of them but testified to a vision which itself was the central thing. Their education, that is to say, was not specialized. All arts for them were finally one art, and the name of it was living well. Nor did they set the fine arts of poetry, painting, music, and sculpture above the practical arts and the intellectual (we should say liberal) arts. There was no hierarchy of importance among them, because there was none of them with which serious men could dispense. The carpenter made a house, the logician made a syllogism, and the poet made a poem. Each was doing what he could and therefore should, and nobody doubted the benefit.

We specialize, with the paradoxical result that no one knows for sure what it is that he is doing. Where there is no connection there can be no comparison. What is the difference, for instance, between the poet and the philosopher, or between the poet and the scientist? We do not state it well, because we do not think of all three men as artists. If they had that much resemblance in our minds, then they might have differences too, and we could measure these. We tend to assume that the differences are absolute; but this means in the end that they are absolutely small; or that the men themselves are. We often talk, as I have said, as if the poet were very small. He might grow larger if he knew, or if we knew, what sphere he works in as distinguished from any other man; and if we thought of him as working in that sphere for our benefit; and if we thought of all men in their spheres as working in them for our good—our knowledge, our happiness, and our wisdom.

**T**HE POET has his subject matter as well as his skill; and his skill increases as he realizes what his subject matter is. If poetry has made any advances in our time—in, that is to say, the twentieth century—we should wonder what new subject matter it has found. I for one think it has made advances; but I am not in sympathy with

those who say that these are merely technical. The concern, the conscious concern, has often been with devices of language and principles of diction. So was it in 1798, when Wordsworth called for poetry to adopt the language that men use. But Wordsworth had something to say in his new language; he needed the language, in fact, so that he *could* say what he thought and felt. The situation is no different now. With the new style of 1912—if that is the year from which we date a certain renaissance—there came new stuff; and I think the stuff explains the style. Wherever we look in that time we discover poets who themselves have discovered, or rediscovered, something worth saying in human speech. Irony returned, and the sense of tragedy; the sense of comedy, too, and even the sense of sin. Edgar Lee Masters dug up the Greek Anthology; Ezra Pound ransacked the older poetries of Europe and Asia; and E. A. Robinson attempted again the difficult art of story. T. S. Eliot experimented, to be sure, with stanzas and free verse; it is quite important that he did so; but it is still more important that he restored to poetry the stuff of theology, long absent and all but lost. What explains the peculiar interest of his verse plays? Their verse? I do not think so. I think it is rather the serious concern he has been able to manifest with some of the oldest and deepest ideas that men have had—ideas of martyrdom and salvation. What he has done with these ideas is another question, not especially relevant here. The relevant point is that he deals with them at all, and thereby makes poetry once more interesting to people. They may say that they do not know what his poems mean, but they do not talk as if they were about nothing. They are about something indeed, as poetry at any time had better be.

Robert Frost, if he has done nothing else, has rediscovered Job, whose wife says in *A Masque of Reason*:

Job says there's no such thing as Earth's becoming  
An easier place for man to save his soul in.

Except as a hard place to save his soul in,  
A trial ground where he can try himself  
And find out whether he is any good,  
It would be meaningless. It might as well  
Be Heaven at once and have it over with.

There we have the accent of great poetry,  
and it is inseparable from the subject Frost  
has found. He found it where it waited  
for him, as the world waits for any man  
to recognize it. For any man, and for any

poet. For there is nothing more important  
about a poet than that he is a man. He may  
not know more at last than all men do, but  
what he does know he knows well, and  
perfects himself in the art of expressing.  
What he knows, and what we know, is that  
the world is a hard place to live in at any  
cost, but that the cost is prohibitive only  
for those who make the mistake of think-  
ing it is heaven—or should have been.