

UNDERSTANDING POETRY
AN ANTHOLOGY FOR COLLEGE STUDENTS

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INTRODUCTION

Poetry is a form of speech, or discourse, written or spoken. To the person who is not well acquainted with poetry the differences between poetic speech and other forms may seem to be more important than the similarities, but these differences should not be allowed to obscure the fundamental resemblances, for only by an understanding of the resemblances can one appreciate the meaning of the differences. Poetry, like all discourse, is a communication—the saying of something by one person to another person. But what is that “something”? We usually identify it with information. As practical people going about our affairs, we ask directions, read road signs, order a dinner from a menu, study football scores or stock market reports. It is altogether natural, therefore, that we should tend to think the important and central matter in all discourse to be information. But, after all, we may do well to ask how much of the discourse of an average man in any given day is primarily concerned with information for the sake of information. After he has transacted his business, obeyed his road signs, ordered and eaten his dinner, and read the stock market reports, he might be surprised to reflect on the number of non-practical functions speech had fulfilled for him that day. He had told the office boy a joke; he had commented on the weather to the traffic officer, who could observe the weather as well as he; he had told an old friend that he was glad to see him again; he had chatted with his wife on some subject on which there was already full knowledge and agreement. Even when he had been at lunch with some business associates, with whom the talk ran on informational topics, the trend in the stock market, for instance, he had not intended to use the information for buying or selling. The interest in the conversation had not been finally practical. This practical man might discover that a large part of the business of discourse had been concerned with matters which are not ordinarily thought of as really “practical,” but with his relations to other

people, that is, with such elusive matters as feelings and attitudes.

That "something," then, conveyed by discourse is not necessarily information to be used for practical purposes. But even when the man in question was concerned primarily with a matter of practical interest, his discourse was colored by other considerations. If he telephoned an associate to ask a price he probably prefaced his question by saying, "How are you?" and concluded his conversation by saying, "Thank you," and "Goodbye." For even the most practical man a large part of discourse is not prompted by purely practical considerations; another "something" is present.

Moreover, even when a man is using speech for the purpose of conveying information, it may prove surprising to see how little of such discourse is pure information, and how difficult it is to make speech deal only with pure and exact information. Almost always a speaker conveys not only the pure information but an attitude toward and a feeling about that information. For example, let us consider the case of a motorist who stops a man driving a hay wagon to ask about the condition of the road ahead. The man on the wagon says, "It's a tolerable good road, you won't have no trouble on it." The motorist drives on, encouraged. But after a mile or so, having experienced a few substantial jolts, he hails another motorist and asks the same question. This new man says, "It's a devil of a road, it'll jerk your teeth out." Both the man on the hay wagon and the man in the second automobile think that they are telling the truth. Both intend to be helpful and to give exact information. And both feel that they know the road. But each man's language reflects his own experience with the road. For the man on the hay wagon the road *was* tolerably good, but for the second motorist, anxious to make time on his trip, the road was devilishly bad.

If this seems to be a fairly obvious example of confusion about information in ordinary speech, let us consider an example in which a trained scholar is trying to make an exact statement.

For sentimental pacifism is, after all, but a return-to-the method of the jungle. It is in the jungle that emotionalism alone deter-

mines conduct, and wherever that is true no other than the law of the jungle is possible. For the emotion of hate is sure sooner or later to follow on the emotion of love, and then there is a spring for the throat. It is altogether obvious that the only quality which really distinguishes man from the brutes is his reason.¹

The author of this statement is Robert Andrews Millikan, the internationally famous physicist and winner of the Nobel Prize. He is making a plea for the scientific attitude in political and international affairs, but when one inspects this statement carefully one finds some propositions about human beings that cannot be proved by Mr. Millikan, or by anyone else, in the same way that he can prove certain formulae of physics in his laboratory. Furthermore, waiving this question of whether the propositions stated and implied are really true or not, one finds that a very important part of the statement consists not in information about human beings but in appeals to the reader to take a certain attitude toward the statement. The comparisons concerning the jungle and the leap of one infuriated beast at the throat of another represent the sort of comparison one finds in poetry; for the comparisons are not based on scientific analogy—the resemblance is prompted by the emotional attitude of the speaker and is calculated to incite a corresponding attitude in the reader. But the coloring of the general statement—that is, the bringing in of an implied interpretation of the statement—extends beyond the mere use of a “poetic” comparison. In the first sentence, for example, the word *pacifism* is qualified by the word *sentimental*. Presumably it is a particular sort of pacifism here defined to which Mr. Millikan’s objections apply; but does the adjective *sentimental* really set off a “bad kind of pacifism” from a good kind? Could the reader determine from Mr. Millikan’s statement whether or not he would consider the pacifism of Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace, a sentimental or a non-sentimental sort? Since the only kind of pacifism that Mr. Millikan sets over against his sentimental pacifism is a scientific pacifism operating through an organization of sociologists and economists,

¹ Science and Modern Life, *The Atlantic Monthly*, April, 1928.

one might conceivably assume that Jesus Christ would fall into the former classification. Or, to state the matter otherwise: is the basic argument for peace to be found in the fact that war is unprofitable or is horrible, or in the belief that it is wrong to kill one's fellowman? As a matter of fact, the adjective *sentimental* is, on logical grounds, a bogus qualification: its real function is to set up an attitude in the reader that will forbid his inspection of the basis of the statement.

Whether or not the general statement is logically sound, Mr. Millikan has not stated it with scientific precision; in Mr. Millikan's defense it may be said that *the proposition is one that cannot be stated with scientific precision by anyone*. Mr. Millikan, a scientist trying to state the virtues of a scientific method in human relationships, is forced to resort to devices which we associate with poetry. We should never find him coloring a mathematical formula by referring to a "sentimental figure four," or describing a well known chemical reaction by saying that two ferocious atoms of hydrogen spring at the throat of one defenseless atom of oxygen.

LIMITATIONS OF SCIENTIFIC STATEMENT

The advantages of scientific statement are not to be had without the limitations of a scientific statement also. The primary advantage of the scientific statement is that of absolute precision. But we must remember that this precision is gained by using terms in special and previously defined senses. The scientist carefully cuts away from his technical terms all associations, emotional colorings and implications of judgment. He gives up, then, all attempts to influence the reader's attitude toward his statement. For this reason, only certain kinds of statement and certain kinds of meaning are possible to true science. Science tends, indeed, toward the condition of mathematics, and the really exact scientific statements can be expressed in mathematical formulae. The chemist describes water as H_2O —two atoms of hydrogen and one atom of oxygen. The formula, H_2O , differs tremendously from even the common word *water*, for the word *water*, neutral as it seems in connotation, still may possess all sorts of different associations—drinking, bathing, boating, the

pull of the moon to create tides, the liquid from which the goddess Aphrodite rose, or, as Keats put it,

The moving waters at their priestlike task
Of pure ablution round earth's human shores.

As with the liquid itself, so with the word: the scientist needs a distilled product.

The language of science represents an extreme degree of specialization of language in the direction of a certain kind of precision. It is unnecessary, of course, to point out that in this specialization tremendous advantages inhere, and that the man of the twentieth century is rightly proud of this achievement. But it is more often necessary to point out that scientific precision can be brought to bear only on certain kinds of materials. Literature in general—poetry in particular—also represents a specialization of language for the purpose of precision; but it aims at treating kinds of materials different from those of science.

We have already seen that science has to forego, because of its method, matters of attitude and interpretation; or that, when it does not forego them, it is so much the less science. For better or worse, certain kinds of communication are not possible to scientific statement. To return to the question raised at the beginning of this discussion, what is the "something" which is conveyed by speech? We have already seen that it is not exclusively information in the ordinary sense, and even less exclusively information in the scientific sense. The speech of that ordinary citizen in an ordinary way conveys many things, attitudes, feelings, and interpretations, that fall outside of these restrictions. These things, though they fill a large part of the speech of that ordinary citizen, are never stated very clearly or precisely by him. The specialization of speech which we find in poetry aims at clarity and precision of statement in these matters.

That the communication of attitudes, feelings, and interpretations constitutes a real problem, and indeed, in one sense, a more difficult problem than that offered by the communication of mere information, may be clearly illustrated by such an example as the

following. Suppose, for instance, that a student sitting on the front row in a class room turns to his neighbor and whispers to him the information that it is ten minutes to eleven. This information might be passed from one person to another in the same manner through a whole class to the last man on the back row, and the probability is that the last man would receive correctly the message: it is ten minutes to eleven. The communication has been a relatively easy matter. But suppose that the first man on the first row, instead of whispering a mere bit of information, had made even a relatively simple statement involving a feeling or attitude: suppose he had said, for example, "John Jones is a fine fellow, but I feel sometimes that he is a little stuck-up." In all probability the last man who received the message would get an entirely different view of John's character from that intended by the original speaker. Indeed, anyone who is familiar with the distortions which often, and as a matter of fact, usually take place in the transmission of gossip will not be surprised at whatever the version has become, by the time it has been transmitted through thirty people. One of the reasons for the error is simple. The original statement about John is an interpretation. The person who hears it, naturally, recognizes that it is an interpretation and not a statement of objective fact, and therefore, in turn, interprets the remark in his own fashion. For example, the last man makes an interpretation of an original interpretation which has been altered more or less by twenty-eight intervening interpretations. The "something" of the first piece of communication—that it is ten minutes to eleven—arrived safely at its destination. The "something" of the second piece of communication, unlike that of the first, involves feelings which each hearer has to define for himself. In ordinary life, a hearer unconsciously bases much of his definition of such pieces of communication, not on the words themselves, but on the gestures, tone of voice, and facial expression of the speaker, and on what he knows about the speaker. For instance, every one understands how difficult it is to deal with a delicate personal matter in a letter, for the letter has nothing but words—that is, symbols written on paper and divorced from the tone of the voice, gestures, and facial expression.

MATERIALS OF POETRY

The basic problem of communication in poetry is, therefore, one of a totally different character from that involved in communication of matters of fact, and we shall merely confuse ourselves about the meaning of any poetry if we do not realize this distinction. The specialization of language in poetry is an attempt to deal with this problem.

By the very nature of the human being, the ordinary citizen in the ordinary day speaks much of what we might call incipient poetry—he attempts to communicate attitudes, feelings, and interpretations. (Unfortunately, most of this poetry is bad poetry.) And poetry in this sense is not confined to the speech of the ordinary citizen. It appears also in editorials, sermons, political speeches, magazine articles, and advertisements. We have seen that Mr. Millikan's essay can be discussed as poetry rather than as science. This, of course, is not apparent to everybody. Many a person would regard as mere poetry the Biblical statement

All they that take the sword shall perish by the sword.

But such a person might, during the next minute, regard Mr. Millikan's paragraph as a sober and verifiable scientific pronouncement. Or to take another case, this person might read an avowed poem:

THE MAN HE KILLED

THOMAS HARDY (1840-1928)

Had he and I but met
By some old ancient inn,
We should have sat us down to wet
Right many a nipperkin!

But ranged as infantry,
And staring face to face,

I shot at him as he at me,
And killed him in his place.

I shot him dead because—
Because he was my foe,
Just so: my foe of course he was;
That's clear enough; although

He thought he'd 'list, perhaps,
Off-hand like—just as I—
Was out of work—had sold his traps—
No other reason why.

Yes; quaint and curious war is!
You shoot a fellow down
You'd treat if met where any bar is,
Or help to half-a-crown.

He might dismiss this as mere literature, failing to see that Mr. Millikan's paragraph is "mere literature" also—and of course, infinitely poorer literature. As has been indicated, Mr. Millikan's argument is not "science." And, as a matter of fact, it is possible that Hardy has, in his poem, put the case against war on a more solid basis than Mr. Millikan has done in his argument.

Mr. Millikan might or might not have been aware that he was using some of the methods of poetry to color the attitude of his readers and bring them to his own point of view; but any writer of advertising copy is perfectly aware of the fact that he is trying to persuade his readers to adopt a certain attitude.

POETRY AS A SPECIALIZATION OF ORDINARY SPEECH

From the examples already given we have seen that both the impulse of poetry—that is, the impulse to communicate feelings, attitudes and interpretations—and some of the methods of poetry—that is, comparisons, associations with words, etc.—appear in a great deal of our discourse that is not ordinarily considered as poetic at all. It is important to remember this fact because some people think of poetry as a thing entirely separate from ordinary life and of the matters with which poetry deals as matters with

which the ordinary person is not concerned. More will have to be said about the special characteristics of formal poetry—characteristics which set it off from this “stuff of poetry” appearing in ordinary life; but it is highly important to see that both the impulse and methods of poetry are rooted very deep in human experience, and that formal poetry itself represents, not a distinction from, but a specialization of, thoroughly universal habits of human thinking and feeling.

CONFUSION BETWEEN SCIENTIFIC AND POETIC COMMUNICATION

The distinction earlier mentioned between the communication of science and the communication of poetry is also an extremely important one. People, as we have seen, are constantly confusing the two sorts of communication. They will often accept as sober scientific doctrine what is essentially a poetic statement, or they will judge formal poetry as if it were aiming at scientific truth.

An example of the first type of confusion has already been indicated in the quotation from Mr. Millikan. Mr. Millikan does not rest his case on scientifically verifiable facts but also makes an emotional appeal for a certain attitude concerning those facts. Mr. Millikan is speaking, not as a professional scientist, but as a man, and he is thoroughly justified in using this kind of speech; but it is important that the reader know exactly what Mr. Millikan is doing. Even to the person who thinks that he has no interest in formal poetry an awareness of this distinction is valuable, for he cannot move through the mass of conversation, sermons, editorials, historical and sociological writings, and advertisements without encountering situations in which this distinction is fundamental to an understanding of the actual meanings involved. The case of advertising, of course, raises the question in an extreme form. Advertisers naturally are not content to rest on a statement of fact, whether such a statement is verifiable or not. They will attempt to associate the attitude toward a certain product with an attitude toward beautiful women, little children, or gray-haired mothers; they will appeal to snobbishness, vanity, patriotism, religion, and morality. In addition to these appeals to the consumer's most basic and powerful feelings, the advertiser often attempts to

imply a scientific validity for his claims—a validity which may, or may not, be justified by the product—by pictures of white-robed surgeons and research experts, statements of abstruse scientific formulae, hints of recent discoveries, coy references to the research laboratories of the plant involved, and very frequent use of the phrase “science tells us.” Even the man who cares nothing for “literature” will find that he constantly has to deal with literary appeals and methods while living in the hard-headed, scientific, and practical twentieth century.

The second type of confusion mentioned above—the confusion that causes people to judge formal poetry as if it were science—is the source of most of the misunderstandings of poetry and of literature in general. It is highly necessary, if one is to understand poetry, to take up some of these typical misreadings.

I. “MESSAGE-HUNTING”

“Message-hunting”—the business of looking only for the statement of an idea which the reader thinks he can apply profitably in his own conduct—is one of the most ordinary forms of this general confusion. Here is a poem by Longfellow that has been greatly admired by many people who read poetry in this fashion:

A PSALM OF LIFE

WHAT THE HEART OF THE YOUNG MAN SAID TO THE PSALMIST

HENRY WADSWORTH LONGFELLOW (1807-1882)

Tell me not, in mournful numbers,
Life is but an empty dream!—
For the soul is dead that slumbers,
And things are not what they seem.

Life is real! Life is earnest!
And the grave is not its goal;
Dust thou art, to dust returnest,
Was not spoken of the soul.

INTRODUCTION

II

Not_enjoyment,_and_not_sorrow,
 Is_our_designed_end,_or_way;
 But_to_act,_that_each_tomorrow
 Find_us_farther_than.today.

Art is long, and Time is fleeting,
 And our hearts, though stout and brave,
 Still, like muffled drums, are beating
 Funeral marches to the grave.

In the world's broad field of battle,
In the bivouac of Life,
Be not like dumb, driven cattle!
Be a hero in the strife!

Trust_no_Future,_howe'er_pleasant!
Let_the_dead_Past_bury_its_dead!
Act,_act_in_the_living_Present!
 Heart within, and God o'erhead!

Lives of great men all remind us
 We can make our lives sublime,
 And, departing, leave behind us
 Footprints on the sands of time;

Footprints, that perhaps another,
 Sailing o'er life's solemn main,
 A forlorn and shipwrecked brother,
 Seeing, shall take heart again.

Let us, then, be up and doing,
 With a heart for any fate;
 Still achieving, still pursuing,
 Learn to labor and to wait.

This poem seems to give a great deal of good advice. It tells the reader not to waste his time but to be up and doing; not to be discouraged by failures but to have a heart for any fate; not to judge life by temporary standards but to look to eternal reward. There are probably few people who would quarrel with the

moral value of these statements. But granting that the advice is good advice, we can still ask whether or not the poem is a good poem. If the advice is what the poem has to offer us, then we can ask why a short prose statement of the advice itself is not as good as, or even better than, the poem, itself. But even the people who say they like the poem because of its "message" will usually prefer the poem to a plain prose statement. If such people would reject the prose summary in favor of the poem, they would also reject certain other versions of the poetic statement. For instance, let us alter one of the stanzas of the poem, taking care in the alteration, however, to preserve the idea. The original stanza is:

Lives of great men all remind us
We can make our lives sublime,
And departing, leave behind us
Footprints on the sands of time.

An alteration might run:

Lives of all sorts of great men remind us
That we ourselves can make our lives sublime,
And when we die we can leave behind us
Noble recollections printed on the sands of time.

The fact that any admirer of the poem would unhesitatingly choose the first version proves that "something" aside from the mere value of the idea is involved in the choice.

The fact that we have just an idea in itself is not enough to make a poem, even when the idea may be a worthy one. The neglect of this principle causes frequent misunderstandings and misreadings of poems. But another type of misreading may result from the fact that the reader does not happen to agree with an idea expressed in a poem. We may treat this distinction by a concrete case: is an admirer of Longfellow's poem, even one who says that his admiration is based on the worth of the idea, disqualified from admiring the following poem, which states an idea rather opposed to some of the ideas in Longfellow's poem?

EXPOSTULATION AND REPLY

WILLIAM WORDSWORTH (1770-1850)

"Why, William, on that old gray stone,
Thus for the length of half a day,
Why, William, sit you thus alone,
And dream your time away?"

"Where are your books?—that light bequeathed 5
To beings else forlorn and blind!
Up! up! and drink the spirit breathed
From dead men to their kind.

"You look round on your Mother Earth,
As if she for no purpose bore you; 10
As if you were her first-born birth,
And none had lived before you."

One morning thus, by Esthwaite lake,
When life was sweet, I knew not why,
To me my good friend Matthew spake, 15
And thus I made reply:

"The eye—it cannot choose but see;
We cannot bid the ear be still;
Our bodies feel, where'er they be,
Against or with our will. 20

"Nor less I deem that there are Powers
Which of themselves our minds impress;
That we can feed this mind of ours
In a wise passiveness.

"Think you, 'mid all this mighty sum 25
Of things forever speaking,
That nothing of itself will come,
But we must still be seeking?

"—Then ask not wherefore, here, alone,
Conversing as I may, 30
I sit upon this old gray stone,
And dream my time away."

This poem seems to give the advice that one should neglect the "light bequeathed" by the great men of the past in favor of what one can only learn for himself; that one should not fritter away his time by being "up and doing" or by being a "hero in the strife"; and that one should learn in contemplation to cultivate that "wise passiveness" by which, only, one comes into harmony with the great powers of the universe. If the admirer of Longfellow's poem means literally what he says when he praises the poem for the "message," then he is absolutely disqualified from enjoying this poem, for its "message" is diametrically opposed to that of "The Psalm of Life." Of course, many people who describe their appreciation of poems in terms of the "messages" do not mean literally what they say; they are simply groping for some ground to justify the fact that they like poetry at all. Since they are accustomed to think of all communication as concerned with practical information, they try to put their liking on some "practical" or "scientific" basis.

As a matter of fact, the place of ideas in poetry and their relation to the goodness of a poem cannot be treated in such an over-simplified manner. We know, for example, that devout Protestants can accept the poetry of the Catholic poet Dante, or that Catholics can accept the poetry of the Protestant poet John Milton. The fact that the Protestant reader, who holds his religious beliefs seriously, may still accept the poetry of Dante does not mean that the reader regards poetry as merely trivial and unserious. This whole matter is one that cannot be dismissed in a few sentences, but requires for a satisfactory understanding the analysis of many special poems. It will suffice to say here that the "message-hunting" method of reading poetry breaks down even in the simplest cases.

2. "PURE REALIZATION"

Many readers and critics of poetry, realizing the insufficiency of the "message-hunting" approach to poetry, have adopted a view that poetry does not deal with any ideas or truths at all, but is an "expression of pure emotion," or "deals with emotion." This view is sometimes put in other terms, as when one critic says that a poem is the expression of "a moment of pure realiza-

tion of being"—that is, it attempts merely to bring vividly to the reader some scene or sensation.

When a critic trying to point out the distinguishing marks of poetry says that poetry expresses an emotion or that poetry deals with emotion, exactly what does he mean? Does he mean that a poem, about grief, for instance, would "express" the grief a poet might feel, or have felt, in the same way as a burst of tears would express the emotion of grief? Or does he mean that the reading of a poem about grief would provoke in the reader an emotion of grief in the same way as would a personal bereavement? Quite obviously, the answer to both questions is "No." Certainly, writing of a poem would be no substitute for the relief of a burst of tears; nor would the response to the reading of a poem be as intense as the experience of a real bereavement. There is some difference. On the mere ground of emotional intensity the poem does not compete with the real experience. The justification of poetry as "pure realization," like its justification on the basis of "message-hunting," breaks down even in simple cases, for the pure realization of an experience is the experience at the moment it occurs. For instance, the taste or the smell of a real apple is always more intense than any poem describing the taste or smell of an apple. The following passage from "Ode to a Nightingale," by John Keats has sometimes been praised as a moment of "pure realization":

O for a draught of vintage! that hath been
Cooled a long age in the deep-delvèd earth,
Tasting of Flora and the country green,
Dance, and Provençal song, and sunburnt mirth!
O for a beaker full of the warm South,
Full of the true, the blushing Hippocrate,
With beaded bubbles winking at the brim,
And purple-stainèd mouth. . . .

Whatever "pure realization" there is here is certainly not the pure realization of wine as such. The stanza is obviously not a substitute for an actual glass of wine: not only does it fail to give the intensity of the sensation of actual wine-drinking but it gives an effect thoroughly different in kind from the experience

of drinking a glass of wine. If there is a "pure realization" of anything it is of the poet's thinking about the wine as a thing which represents to him a certain kind of life—a warm, mirthful, carefree, healthy, pagan kind of life, which in the total context of the poem stands in contrast to his own troubled and fretful existence (See "Ode to a Nightingale" and analysis, p. 407). As a matter of fact, when we inspect the passage we discover that it is not so much a pictorial description of a beaker of wine, or a description of the sensation of drinking wine, as it is a cluster of associations with the wine—associations which suggest the kind of life we have mentioned. The poet is not saying, actually, that he is thirsty for a drink of wine but that he wants a certain kind of life, the qualities of which he implies.

We have seen that the attempt to conceive of poetry as the "expression of emotion" or as "pure realization" represents an attempt to get away from the "message-hunting" approach to poetry. But in the case which we have just examined we have seen that the experience which is "realized" or communicated to the reader is far different from the experience of a physical object (wine, in this instance), an emotional reaction, or a sensation. The experience, we have seen, really involves an interpretation by the poet, so that in so far as the term "realization" is used to imply an absence of interpretation it is thoroughly inaccurate.

3. "BEAUTIFUL STATEMENT OF SOME HIGH TRUTH"

There is another confused conception of poetry arising from the attempt to combine in a mechanical fashion the two false approaches which have just been discussed. This confused conception is variously stated. For instance, it may be expressed in a definition of poetry as "fine sentiments in fine language." Or as the "beautiful statement of some high truth." Whatever the precise manner of description may be, the basic idea may be stated as follows: poetry is a "truth" with "decorations," which may either be pleasant in themselves or dispose the reader to accept the truth.

Most often victims of this general misconception have treated poetry as a kind of "sugar-coated pill." They have justified the

characteristics of poetry—rhythmical language, figures of speech, stories and dramatic situations, etc.—as a kind of bait that leads the reader to expose himself to the influence of the “truth” contained in a poem. They value these characteristics only in so far as the characteristics lead to the acceptance of the “truth.” The final value of a poem for such people would depend on the value of the “truth” contained—which leads us back to the mistake of the “message hunters,” which we examined with reference to Longfellow’s poem.

But even if the person who regards poetry as “fine sentiments in fine language” says that he values the language as much as he values the sentiments, or “truth,” he is still using a mistaken approach to poetry. For he is apparently committed to saying that the language, quite apart from its relation to some central idea or “truth,” is valuable. He seems to be saying that certain words, or certain objects suggested by the words, are in themselves “poetic.” He would be forced to consider a poem as simply a bundle of melodious word-combinations and pretty pictures. He would probably be embarrassed if we asked him what held these things together in any given poem, making it a poem rather than simply a collection of pleasing items. And he would probably be further embarrassed if we asked him to show us by what standard he would call a particular combination of sounds or a particular set of pictures poetically fine. If he should say that he took as a standard for poetical fitness the fact that any item—let us say, for instance, a rose—was pleasing in real life, he would be making a dangerous confusion. It is certainly true that in real life various combinations of word sounds and various objects and scenes, such as the rose, the moon, the ruins of a mediaeval tower, a maiden standing on a balcony, etc., are pleasing. But poetry does not consist merely in the use of objects of this sort or in the use of agreeable word combinations. Nor does the mere presence of these things make poetry. But the falsity of this conception can quickly be demonstrated by turning to great poetry from Shakespeare or Milton where we find material that in real life would be disagreeable or mean used for poetic effect. The image of a man grunting and sweating under a burden too heavy for him is not a poetic thing if judged by

the above standard, but we will find it used in a passage of great poetry that is universally admired. In Hamlet's most famous speech we find these lines:

For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,
The oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,
The pangs of despised love, the law's delay,
The insolence of office, and the spurns
That patient merit of the unworthy takes,
When he himself might his quietus make
With a bare bodkin? who would fardels bear,
To grunt and sweat under a weary life,
But that the dread of something after death,
The undiscovered country from whose bourn
No traveller returns, puzzles the will. . . .

In fact, none of the things used in this passage would be thought of as being pleasing in itself in actual life. The passage does not give us a set of agreeable pictures that would be considered "poetic." Indeed, the more we examine good poetry the more difficult will appear the attempt to say that certain objects or situations or even ideas are in themselves poetic. *The poetic effect depends not on the things themselves but on the kind of use the poet makes of them.*

ORGANIC NATURE OF POETRY

We have seen, then, that a poem is not to be thought of as merely a bundle of things which are "poetic" in themselves. Nor is it to be thought of, as the "message hunters" would seem to have it, as a kind of box, decorated or not, in which a "truth" or a "fine sentiment" is hidden. We avoid such difficulties by *thinking of a poem as a piece of writing which gives us a certain effect in which, we discover, the "poetry" inheres.*

This is very different from considering a poem as a group of mechanically combined elements—meter, rime, figurative language, idea, etc.—which are put together to make a poem as bricks are put together to make a wall. The question, then about any element in a poem is not whether it is in itself pleasing, or agreeable, or valuable, or "poetical," but whether it works

with the other elements to create the effect intended by the poet. The relationship among the elements in a poem is therefore all important, and it is not a mechanical relationship but one which is far more intimate and fundamental. If we should compare a poem to the make-up of some physical object it ought not to be to a wall but to something organic like a plant.

We may investigate this general principle by looking at some particular examples. The following lines could scarcely be called melodious. Indeed, they may be thought to have a sibilant, hissing quality rather than that of melody.

If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well
It were done quickly: if the assassination
Could trammel up the consequence, and catch,
With his surcease, success, that but this blow
Might be the be-all and the end-all here,
But here, upon this bank and shoal of time,
We'd jump the life to come.

This is the speech of Macbeth at the moment when he is debating the murder of Duncan; the passage has been considered to be great poetry by innumerable critics and readers. We are not to consider that the passage is great poetry *in spite* of its lack of ordinary melodious effects; but rather we are to see that the broken rhythms and the tendency to harshness of sound are essential to the communication that Shakespeare wished. For instance, the piling up of the *s* sounds in the second, third, and fourth lines helps give an impression of desperate haste and breathless excitement. The lines give the impression of a conspiratorial whisper. The rhythm and sound effects of the passage, then, are poetic in the only sense which we have seen to be legitimate: they are poetic because of a relation to the total effect of the passage.

Or we may approach the general problem in another way. Here are two lines by Robert Burns which have been greatly admired by the poet William Butler Yeats:

The white moon is setting behind the white wave,
And Time is setting with me, O!

Let us suppose that the lines had been written as follows:

The white moon is setting behind the white wave,
And Time, O! is setting with me.

Literally considered, the two versions say exactly the same thing: they describe a scene and give an exclamation provoked by it. If one will, however, read the two versions carefully with an ear for the rhythm he will discover that the transposition of the word *O* has made a great difference in the movement.

But this difference is not finally important *merely* because the first version may be in itself more melodious than the second. The movement of the first version is superior primarily because it contributes to the total effect, or to what we might call the total interpretation, of the scene. The placing of the cry at the emphatic position of a line-end implies that the speaker had scarcely realized the full force of his own statement until he had made it. The lingering rhythm caused by the position of the exclamation at the end of the second line coincides with the fact that the poet sees in the natural scene a representation of the pathos of the passing of Time and of his own life. By placing the exclamation anywhere else we impair this relationship between the rhythm and the other elements involved—the image of the moonset and the poet's statement about the passing of Time. Yeats has summarized the general effect of the passage and the relationship of the parts as follows:

Take from them [the lines] the whiteness of the moon and of the waves, whose relation to the setting of Time is too subtle for the intellect, and you take from them their beauty. But, when all are together, moon and wave and whiteness and setting Time and the last melancholy cry, they evoke an emotion which cannot be evoked by any other arrangement of colors and sounds and forms.¹

The remarks by Yeats here apply, as we can see, to the elements of the scene itself as well as to the rhythm. He is not praising the lines merely because the scene of the white moon setting behind the white wave gives in itself a pretty picture. As a mat-

¹ "The Symbolism of Poetry," *Essays*, New York: Macmillan, p. 191.

ter of fact, a white moon may not appear as beautiful as a golden moon, but if we rewrite the lines with a golden moon we have lost something from them:

The gold moon is setting behind the gold wave,
And Time is setting for me, O!

The "something" that has been lost obviously depends on the relationship of the color to the other elements in the general effect. The whiteness of the moon and the wave in connection with the idea of "setting" and then more specifically in connection with the idea of the irrevocable passage of Time, suggests, even though unconsciously to most readers, a connection with the paleness of something waning or dying. The connection is not a logical connection, as Yeats intimates when he says the "relation . . . is too subtle for the intellect," but it is nonetheless a powerful one. All of this merely means that Yeats is saying that the beauty—by which he means the total poetic effect—of the lines depends on the relationship of the parts to each other.

This last point may be amply proved, as we have already hinted in discussing the passage from *Hamlet*, by considering a passage of great poetry in which the pictures used, unlike that in the lines from Burns, would be considered in ordinary life as positively ugly or at least neutral.

Time hath, my lord, a wallet at his back,
Wherein he puts alms for oblivion,
A great-sized monster of ingratitudes:
Those scraps are good deeds past; which are devoured
As fast as they are made, forgot as soon
As done: perseverance, dear my lord,
Keeps honor bright: to have done, is to hang
Quite out of fashion, like a rusty mail
In monumental mockery. . . .

(From *Troilus and Cressida*)

This is a speech which Shakespeare puts into the mouth of a character, Ulysses, who is trying to persuade Achilles to take part again in the war against the Trojans and not to rest on

the reputation for valor he has already made. The pictures given here are definitely unattractive: a beggar putting alms in his sack, a monster, scraps of food, a rusty suit of armor. The poetic effect of the passage, then, cannot depend on the intrinsic prettiness of any of the objects mentioned. If we speak of the beauty of the passage, as Yeats speaks of the beauty of the lines from Burns, we must mean the relation of the objects to each other and to the idea of the passage.

Let us try to see what these relationships are. Ulysses is saying that a reputation for good deeds is quickly forgotten. Good deeds are like alms given to an ungrateful beggar, or are like scraps of food which the beggar forgets as soon as he has satisfied his appetite. The picture is poetically good because it accurately indicates the *attitude* which Ulysses wishes Achilles to take toward his past achievements. If Ulysses had merely given Achilles the general statement that the public forgets good deeds, he could not have stirred the feelings which Achilles, the hero and aristocrat, must have felt toward beggars and broken scraps of food. He plays on this contempt and disgust. The images of the first five lines, as we have seen, are closely bound together to define a certain attitude. Then, after a general statement that perseverance is necessary to keep honor bright, the image of the coat of mail is introduced: a man who bases his claim to honor merely on a deed done in the past is like a suit of mail that, although it is hung up as a trophy of some great event, simply rusts. It is important to see that this is not a mere repetition of the general point made about perseverance, but that it also develops and adds to the idea, for it carries with it a special urgency to immediate action. There is not only the application, as it were, of the general idea in a concrete image that can be seen as a picture, but also an application appropriate to the special situation, the need for Achilles to put on his armor and return to the battle.

The use of images in this passage, then, represents not only a close-knit organization because of the relation of the images to each other and to the intention of the passage, but also a psychological development, for the images lead from one attitude and state of mind to another. One can show the closeness of

the organization of the passage even in the use of a single word. For example, take the word *monumental* in the last line. A great deal of the "meaning" of the passage is concentrated in this one word. The word *monumental* literally means, of course, the quality of something that stands as a monument. The coat of rusty mail which Ulysses uses in his comparison is one hung up as a trophy or monument to past achievement. But the word *monumental* is also used to indicate something tremendous in size. The word, then, as it appears in the present context suggests two applications to the reader: the mail is hung up as a monument and the mockery is monumental, or tremendous, in size. The fact that the word suggests to the reader these two applications gives a somewhat ironical, or sarcastic, effect to the passage—which is exactly what is intended by the speaker.

The purpose in giving the passages and comments above is to illustrate the principle that in judging the various elements of a poem or of a passage of poetry—rhythm, image, diction, etc.—one must consider not the elements taken in isolation but in relation to the total organization and intention. That is, the elements must play an organic part in the poem.

DRAMATIC ASPECT OF POETRY

It may be objected that most of the examples given above are drawn from plays and do not represent poetry as we more ordinarily find it. But the principle illustrated by these examples applies to all other poetry. It applies because all poetry, including even short lyrics or descriptive pieces (p. 171), involves a dramatic organization. This is clear when we reflect that every poem implies a speaker of the poem, either the poet writing in his own person or someone into whose mouth the poem is put, and that the poem represents the reaction of such a person to a situation, a scene, or an idea. In reading poetry it is well to remember this dramatic aspect and to be sure that one sees the part it plays in any given poem.

WHAT GOOD IS POETRY?

But even if one understands the principles by which poetry is to be read, one may still ask, "What good is poetry?" The

value of science we all know. But we have attempted in the preceding pages to show how different the organization of poetry is from that of science, and how different are their objectives. It is only fair to admit that what makes science valuable cannot be held to make poetry valuable also. Science gives us a certain kind of description of the world—a description which is within its own terms verifiable—and gives us a basis for more effective practical achievement. Science is, as Bertrand Russell has called it, "power-knowledge."

But scientific thought is . . . essentially power-thought—the sort of thought, that is to say, whose purpose, conscious or unconscious, is to give power to its possessor. Now power is a causal concept, and to obtain power over any given material one need only understand the causal laws to which it is subject. This is an essentially abstract matter, and the more irrelevant details we can omit from our purview, the more powerful our thoughts will become. The same sort of thing can be illustrated in the economic sphere. The cultivator, who knows every corner of his farm, has a concrete knowledge of wheat, and makes very little money; the railway which carries his wheat views it in a slightly more abstract way, and makes rather more money; the stock exchange manipulator, who knows it only in its purely abstract aspect of something which may go up or down, is, in his way, as remote from concrete reality as the physicist, and he, of all those concerned in the economic sphere, makes the most money and has the most power. So it is with science, though the power which the man of science seeks is more remote and impersonal than that which is sought on the stock exchange.¹

But we have seen, and can see in real life every day, how much of our experience eludes the statements science can make; and how merely practical statements or statements that approximate a scientific form satisfy only a part of our interests. One does not have to look farther than the fact that this wide domain of human interests exists to find a justification for poetry. Most people are thoroughly satisfied to admit the value of any activity

¹ *The Scientific Outlook*, by Bertrand Russell, London: Allen and Unwin, p. 86

which satisfies a basic and healthy human interest. It may be well, however, to take a few moments to remind the reader that this interest exists, and to make plain that it is this interest which poetry seeks to satisfy.

We have already seen how often talk that is apparently practical really attempts to satisfy a non-practical interest. It is easy to point out many other aspects of our experience that testify to the fact that people—even people who think that they care nothing for poetry—really have interests which are the same as those satisfied by poetry. Very few people indeed depend for the satisfaction of these interests merely on their routine activities. Instead, they listen to speeches, go to church, listen to radio programs, read magazine stories or the gossip columns of newspapers. Such people do not see any relation between these activities and poetry, but poetry does concern the same impulses and the same interests. Why and how good poetry, and good literature in general, give a fuller satisfaction to these impulses and interests is a matter which can best be stated in connection with concrete examples before us, and the attempt in this book to state this matter will be gradually developed by the study of examples. But the fundamental point, namely, that poetry has a basis in common human interests, must not be forgotten at the beginning of any attempt to study poetry.

The question of the value of poetry, then, is to be answered by saying that it springs from a basic human impulse and fulfills a basic human interest. To answer the question finally, and not immediately, one would have to answer the question as to the value of those common impulses and interests. But that is a question which lies outside of the present concern. As we enter into a study of poetry it is only necessary to see that poetry is not an isolated and eccentric thing, but springs from the most fundamental interests which human beings have.