The Study of Poetry

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I. "Poetry is the suggestion by the imagination of noble grounds for noble emotions." This is Ruskin's definition. The final purpose of poetry is to arouse noble emotions. I accept this definition as being entirely sound, and what I shall have to say will be based upon it.

Let us look into it a little. And I must ask your attention first to some principles generally known and accepted. Poetry has four elements—emotion, thought, imagination, and form. That emotion is the very substance as well as the very end and purpose of poetry may be seen by any careful student. If thought were the chief object it could be attained more directly and much better in prose. There would be no need of poetry.

Imagination is the instrument by which the emotions are aroused. It becomes, therefore, a means and not an end.

Form, which for the present purpose may be considered as including style and manner, is also an instrument and a means. Paraphrase Shakespeare's sonnet on "Consolation" or Tennyson's "Crossing the Bar" or Shelley's "The Skylark," and the result will not be able to arouse any worthy emotion, unless it be the emotion of indignation that so sacred a thing has been so profaned. Paraphrase the "Ode on a Grecian Urn" and you shatter the urn that holds the incense. Poetry, in short, must have its own form or it cannot produce the desired effect, viz: furnish noble grounds for noble emotions; but form is not the result, you perceive; it is a means, an instrument.

And what are the human emotions—this material and substance of poetry? They are of course love, hope, aspiration, joy, the

sense of beauty, pleasure, peace, awe, doubt, despair, grief, and the like. Consider them:

1. They are the greatest things in the world. That this statement is true may be made clear by a personal appeal to anyone among you. No other argument is necessary; no other could avail.

2. They are the only unchanging things in the world. Grief is the same today as when Hagar wept in the wilderness or when David uttered that deathless lament for Absalom. Love is the same today as when Leander swam the Hellespont for the smiles of Hero; the same as when cities were counted as nothing against the love of Helen of Troy; the same as when "Troilus sighed his soul away toward the Grecian tents where Cressid lay that night." The emotion of patriotism was the same with Nathan Hale lamenting that he had but one life to give for his country as it was with Horatius

at the bridge. The cry of Walt Whitman over Lincoln is the cry of David over Saul and Jonathan. They are the same yesterday, today, and forever.

3. They are the same to all classes of people. The mother by the side of her lifeless babe feels the same emotions whether she live in a cabin or in a mansion. Love in a by-way is the same as love in a high-way. Wealth and poverty, culture and ignorance, are alike toppled over when love or grief comes bowling along. And whether they live under the northern pine or under the southern palm, there is no difference.

These facts explain why it is that poetry (or literature in its strict sense) makes so profound appeal to the human race,—why a little poem like "Lines to a Girdle" or "To Lucasta on Going to the Wars," lives through centuries, while the knowledge of the world, its science and its facts, as contained in the encyclopedias, must be recast every ten years at most.

II. We may then, I think, safely make the following statements:

1. The nobler the emotions aroused, the greater the poem. Examples, Milton's sonnet on his blindness, Emerson's "The Concord Hymn," Kipling's "Recessional."

2. The more universal the emotions aroused, the greater the poem. Burns' "Highland Mary," Wordsworth's "Lucy," Tennyson's "Crossing the Bar."

3. The more thought there is accompanying the emotions, the greater the poem. Emerson's "The Problem."

For an example of all of these characteristics combined, study Wordsworth's "Intimations of Immortality."

III. Now to illustrate the place of the emotional element in poetry let us take Tennyson's "Crossing the Bar." The thought of the poem is this: "I hope to meet my Master when I die, and I hope that my

death hour may be calm and undisturbed." Now while this is a worthy thought it is of course not striking and not the main thing. If it were, then every sermon preached in the Morgantown churches would become a classic. It doesn't take a Tennyson to say "I want to meet my Master when I die." No emotion is aroused by that statement; neither is the intellect stirred. But read the poem:

Sunset and evening star,
And one clear call for me:
And may there be no moaning of the bar,
When I put out to sea.

But such a tide as moving seems asleep,
Too full for sound and foam,
When that which drew from out the boundless deep
Turns again home.

Twilight and evening bell,
And after that the dark:
And may there be no sadness of farewell,
When I embark.

For tho' from out our bourne of Time and Place
The flood may bear me far,
I hope to see my Pilot face to face
When I have crossed the bar.

You perceive first that certain familiar facts of nature and life are treated imaginatively — the sunset, the twilight, the evening bell and the evening star, the tide moaning on the sandy bar and the tide full and calm and deep, the uncertain dark, the welcome call from the farther shore, and then the glorified face of the Master and Pilot. Not a word about old age, not a word about death; it is all treated imaginatively. And what is the result? Three noble emotions aroused—first, beauty; for any genuine poem or any genuine piece of art whatever will arouse the emotion of beauty; second, pleasure; for beauty wherever seen and felt gives pleasure; and, third, trust. This last is, in this particular poem, the predominant emotion.

Notice also that the form of the poem, its language, its cadences, are not ends in themselves but that their purpose is to arouse the emotions of beauty, pleasure and trust.

Now every poem, particularly every short poem, has for its final purpose the arousing of some emotion, and that emotion may be recognized as the predominant emotion, however many and various may be the subordinate emotions. Take Wordsworth's "The Childless Father."

"Up, Timothy, up with your staff and away!
Not a soul in the village this morning will stay;
The hare has just started from Hamilton's grounds,
And Skiddaw is glad with the cry of the hounds."

Of coats and of jackets grey, scarlet and green,
On the slopes of the pastures all colors were seen;
With their comely blue aprons, and caps white as snow
The girls on the hills made a holiday show.

Fresh sprigs of green boxwood, not six months before,
Filled the funeral basin at Timothy's door;
A coffin through Timothy's threshold had past;
One child did it bear, and that child was his last.

Now fast up the dell came the noise and the fray,
The horse and the horn, and the hark! hark away!
Old Timothy took up his staff, and he shut
With a leisurely motion the door of his hut.

Perhaps to himself at that moment he said,
"The key I must take, for my Ellen is dead."
But of this in my ears not a word did he speak,
And went to the chase with a tear on his cheek.

Here the predominant emotion is unquestionably grief—grief in the mind of Timothy and in the mind of Wordsworth; in the reader's mind it may be either grief or sympathy, depending upon how fully the reader is able, by means of his imagination, to experience the emotions of the author. But the subordinate emotion of joy is also revealed in the first and second

stanzas and in the first couplet of the fourth stanza. Of course the emotion of beauty with its accompanying emotion of pleasure is here, if we recognize the poem as a work of art at all.

Or take Walt Whitman's "O Captain! My Captain!" and notice the imaginative treatment of the theme, and the resultant emotions. The thought of the poem set down in prose would be this: "This nation has just gone through a terrible civil war, and in the midst of the rejoicing over the result, Lincoln is shot down." This is a tragic fact of history, but as a mere fact it does not stir the hearts of mankind. As a fact of history it can no more produce a rapture or awake a tear than can the historical fact that Julius Caesar was stabbed by Brutus. But read the poem:

O Captain! my Captain; our fearful trip is done;
The ship has weather'd every rack, the prize we sought is won;

The port is near, the bells I hear, the people all exulting,
While follow eyes the steady keel, the vessel grim and daring:
But O heart! heart! heart!
O the bleeding drops of red,
Where on the deck my Captain lies,
Fallen cold and dead.

2

O Captain! my Captain! rise up and hear the bells;
Rise up—for you the flag is flung—for you the bugle trills;
For you bouquets and ribbon'd wreaths, for you the shores acrowding,
For you they call, the swaying mass, their eager faces turning;
Here Captain, dear father;
This arm beneath your head;
It is some dream that on the deck,
You've fallen cold and dead.

3

My Captain does not answer, his lips are pale and still;
My father does not feel my arm, he has no pulse or will;

The ship is anchor'd safe and sound, its voyage closed and done;
From fearful trip the victor ship, comes in with object won:
Exult, O shores, and ring, O bells!
But I, with mournful tread,
Walk the deck my Captain lies,
Fallen cold and dead.

You perceive that Whitman conceives of the nation as a grim and daring ship with steady keel returning from a fearful trip (the civil war) with Lincoln as captain on the deck and that as she nears the shore of safety and success with object won, the captain is shot down. It is a poem about the war and the assassination of the great president, but the war is never mentioned, Lincoln is never mentioned. The whole subject is treated imaginatively. Familiar objects of nature and life—ship, and shore, and flag, and bells, and ribboned wreaths, the surging cheering crowds, drops of a hero's blood—are converted by the magic of imagination

and the gift of form into a lyric to stir the souls of men. The chief emotion of course is personal grief, with the joy of patriotism subordinate.

Or take Shakespeare's famous 29th sonnet, the greatest sonnet in the English tongue. The thought is common enough. He simply says: "When I am the most terribly despondent I remember your love for me and then I am as happy as I can be." Thousands of men have had the same thought and yet could not make a sonnet to save their lives. The mere statement of the thought of the poem will not arouse a shadow of an emotion or stir the intellect in any degree whatever. But read the poem:

When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes
I all alone beweep my outcast state,
And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries,
And look upon myself, and curse my fate;

Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,
Featured like him, like him with friends possesst,

Desiring this man's art, and that man's scope,
With what I most enjoy contented least;

Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising,
Haply I think on Thee—and then my state,
Like to the lark at break of day arising
From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven's gate;

For thy sweet love remember'd, such wealth brings
That then I scorn to change my state with kings.

You observe that it contains no great fact of science or theology or sociology. He has simply taken one of the common experiences of life, a few simple phenomena of nature and human life, treated them with marvelous imagination and perfect art, and the result is the matchless sonnet before us. The emotions are beauty, dejection, despair, love, aspiration, and joy—and the greatest here is joy—joy that sings hymns at heaven's gate. And these fourteen lines live through the centuries because they appeal to a universal emotion.

These four poems must serve as illustrations.

IV. Now if emotion is the cheif essential of poetry, if the purpose of poetry is to furnish noble grounds for noble emotions, and if imagination and form are but ministers to this purpose and end, then I beg to offer this suggestion concerning the study of poetry:

In the study of any poem, seek to find first of all what its predominant emotion is; secondly, what its subordinate emotions are; thirdly, how imagination and form contribute to the main purpose of the piece.

I have observed that many students and many teachers set about their study of a poem by asking such questions as these:

What is the thought of this poem?

What figures of speech are used?

Is the verse dactyl or amphibrach?

What is its "phonetic syzygy?"

What proportion of the words begin with the letter h and what proportion with the vowel o?

How did the poem come to be written?

Was the author standing, sitting, or leaning against a tree when he wrote it?

What was the color of the author's hair, and why?

What were his domestic habits, and did he go to Sunday-school?

These and a hundred more may be answered and still the heart of the matter remain unrevealed. The purpose of poetry, let me repeat, is to furnish noble grounds for noble emotions, and our chief business in the study of it should be to ascertain and experience these noble emotions; and our second to inquire how imagination and form are able to convert the words of common speech into the raptures of the soul.

Do not understand me to say or to think that I consider this attempt to determine the emotional element of poetry the only desirable method. It is only one method. Personally I am also fond of the historical method — the attempt to see the

relationship between the author and the life of his country and his time, to see how that every writer is in some sense the product as well as the spokesman of his day and place. There is to me no more fascinating phrase than this: Literature and the Meaning of Life; for I hold with Barrett Wendell that "Literature is the lasting expression in words of the meaning of life," or it is nothing. And certainly in the undergraduate study of literature one of the most useful things to do is to find out the relative importance of a poem in the poet's own work and the relative importance of the poet himself among other poets—in other words to get a proper literary perspective—to learn that Ella Wheeler Wilcox and Sappho are not in the same class and that Will Carleton and Will Shakespeare are perceptibly different. I recognize that English philology is the very foundation of literary scholarship. I am also aware that

the study of form and manner may serve to bring forth an appreciation of the spirit —for poetry, like its sister art, painting, must be understood to be appreciated, and there is a language of poetry which must be learned just as there is a language of colors which must be learned. A comprehension of poetry must be an intelligent comprehension else there is sure to be sentimentality rather than sentiment. All of these things I recognize, but still I beg to insist that if the purpose of poetry is to arouse noble emotions our chief concern should be to find the source of its power and its appeal.

Of course it is not always easy and perhaps not always even possible to state in definite terms just what emotions are aroused, for the reason perhaps that emotions do not come singly. There is doubtless a blending and often a blurring of emotions—but it still remains true that in most cases some emotion or group of emo-

tions will be revealed as characterizing the poem studied.

V. It is not only true, I think, that we may profitably study individual poems in this way, but the whole body of work of an author may be taken up for the purpose of finding out what emotions appeal most to him. In my judgment no other method of approach to the genius of an author is quite so profitable as this. As illustrations of what some of the results of such a method would be, take three or four poets with whose works you are all familiar.

In Edgar Allan Poe you will find that the controlling emotion is grief with the emotion of beauty holding also a conspicuously high place. In "The Raven," "Ulalume," "Anabel Lee," "Lenore," and nearly all of the rest that have contributed to his fame, grief is the predominant emotion. "To Helen" is the only exception worth mentioning, and it deals with beauty pure and simple. "The

Bells" is a clever experiment in rhyme, rhythm and the music of words, and is in no other sense an important poem.

With Robert Browning the controlling emotion is aspiration. Take up a dozen of his poems, long and short, at random from any part of his work, and through at least ten of them will breathe the aspirations of the Browningized soul of some man or woman.

With Wordsworth the emotion most constantly present is the emotion of joy—joy chastened and subdued by the spirit of man and nature and interfused with the light that never was on sea or land, but still joy, for even joy may lie too deep for tears. It is perhaps worthy of mention that the emotion of love is never revealed in Wordsworth, so far as I have been able to study him—not even in a single poem. Admiration often, but never love, not even in the poems to his wife. Certain lines to his sister Dorothy might seem

to be exceptions, but they contain rather the joy of friendship than the rapture of love.

With Keats, as all men know, the characteristic emotion is beauty—beauty and its sister pleasure.

With Matthew Arnold resignation seems to me to be the controlling note.

If this method of study is applied to our chief American poets we shall be able to see, as perhaps in no other way, why it is that the critics persist in saying that Longfellow and Whittier and Holmes and Bryant and the rest are inferior to the great English masters of song; whole pages of Longfellow, for example, do not contain the material for a single rapture—and the rapture is the test.

VI. The emotion of the writer is not always, perhaps not often, transferred completely in kind and quantity to the reader. The poet may be thrilled with grief and yet

the reader's emotion may be sympathy rather than grief. The poet may be stirred with joy and the reader with pleasure only. The poet may be in a fine frenzy and yet be able to give his readers only a rapture. But the more completely the writer is able to transfer his own emotion to the reader, and the more fully the reader is able to experience and live over for the moment the emotion of the writer, the greater the poem becomes as a work of art. Moreover the imagination of the reader would have to be equal to the imagination of the writer in order to enable him to re-create—to create for himself—the situation which the poet had conceived.

When Shelley cried:

O world! O life! O time!
On whose last steps I climb
Trembling at that where I had stood before;
When will return the glory of your prime?
No more—oh, never more!

Out of the day and night
A joy has taken flight;
  Fresh spring, and summer, and winter hoar
Move my faint heart with grief, but with delight
No more—oh, never more!

he uttered a lamentation reflecting a mood which none of us can experience or recreate unless we have an imagination equal to Shelley's or have gone through the soul experiences that were his and which made him say in another poem:

I could lie down like a tired child
  And weep away the life of care
  Which I have borne and yet must bear,
Till death like sleep might steal on me,
  And I might feel in the warm air
My cheek grow cold, and hear the sea
Breathe o'er my dying brain its last monotony.

The emotion in both of these poems of Shelley's is despair. I wish that we might have imaginative power sufficient to feel this same emotion as we read them, but perhaps it is not to be expected.

On the other hand take Wordsworth's little poem "To a Butterfly:"

I've watched you now a full half hour,
Self-poised upon that yellow flower;
And, little Butterfly! indeed
I know not if you sleep or feed.
How motionless!—not frozen seas
More motionless! and then
What joy awaits you, when the breeze
Hath found you out among the trees,
And calls you forth again!

This plot of orchard-ground is ours;
My trees they are, my sister's flowers;
Here rest your wings when they are weary,
Here lodge as in a sanctuary!
Come often to us, fear no wrong;
Sit near us on the bough!
We'll talk of sunshine and of song;
And summer days, when we were young;
Sweet childish days, that were as long
As twenty days are now.

Here the emotion of the writer is of course peace; and a corresponding emotion is perfectly reproduced in the reader—the emotion of peace—accompanied, as always, by the emotion of beauty and of pleasure.

VII. Finally, this method makes the reading of poetry an individual, personal, private affair. Emotions cannot very well be aroused and raptures experienced in the class-room, though they may be discussed there and the means by which they are aroused—the imagination and the form used by the poet—may be analyzed. Let me confess that Wordsworth's "To The Cuckoo" holds within its simple lines a rapture for me like the joys of morning or like the memory that hangs about the footprints of childhood, and whenever I read them I can "lie upon the plain and listen till I do beget that golden time again," but if I were to read the lines to you tonight neither you nor I would feel that stirring of the heart, because we must be alone to yield ourselves to their power and their mystery.

Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach," while I do not agree with him at all that the sea of faith is

> Retreating, to the breath
> Of the night wind down the vast edges drear
> And naked shingles of the world,

still fills me every time I read it with unutterable sadness, such as a picture of marvelous beauty and pathos might give; and when I get hungry for that particular emotion I read "Dover Beach." But if I were to try to read it in a crowd or for critical analysis before a company, some of whom are likely to be Philistines, the emotion would be faint indeed. It would be like making love in a crowd.

And Browning's "Prospice"—today I read it for the fortieth time no doubt, and for the fortieth time I felt the fog in my throat, the mist in my face, as I approached the post of the foe for one fight more, the best and

the last; then peace out of pain, then a light —and the lines had done their work and Browning had had his will with me. And yet "Prospice" read to a company of twelve might not create a ripple on the placid soul of a single hearer; indeed it may be read only to yourself and one.

VIII. To summarize:

1. The purpose of poetry is to furnish "noble grounds for noble emotions."

2. The substance of poetry is emotion and thought, but thought is not the chief thing, otherwise it could better be expressed in prose.

3. Imagination and form are the means and instruments by which emotions are aroused.

4. An important way to study poetry, therefore, is to inquire, first, what are the chief emotions dealt with; second, what subordinate emotions, remembering that beauty and its sister, pleasure, must always be present;

and, third, in what way imagination and form are used to produce the result.

5. A study of the complete works of any poet will reveal the fact that some particular emotion appealed most to him.

6. The more fully the emotions of the writer are experienced by the reader, the more perfect on the one hand is the art of the poet and the greater on the other hand is the imagination of the reader.

7. This method of study is necessarily personal and private or in the company of kindred spirits.