

P O E M S
A N D
P O E T R Y

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Prefatory Note

The arrangement of this book rests upon two convictions, the first a belief that it is both desirable and possible to employ a critical and largely inductive approach to poetry without losing sight of chronology altogether, the second a conviction that while ultimately the object of attention is the individual poem as a self-contained work of art, much is to be gained from seeing the poem in relation to other poems written by the same author. As with a one-man exhibition of paintings, the separate work becomes both more intelligible and more memorable through the presence of others wrought in the same idiom. For this reason the long final chapter is devoted to groups of poems by a number of writers whose special idioms render this kind of treatment particularly advantageous. The representation is unequal, Donne and Yeats, for example—and in an earlier chapter the sonnets of Shakespeare—being more fully represented than others that may be thought comparable. The justification is—or so one hopes—that the interested reader, seeing how much a few writers gain from a moderately generous sampling, may go on to explore the work of these and other poets for himself.

The Text and Notes

I have followed the texts of standard editions, some of which do and others of which do not modernize spelling and punctuation; and I have not altered these for the sake of consistency within this volume. To tamper with standard texts without in all cases consulting the early printings and manuscript versions is to court at least an occasional gross error. The reader will therefore find here some sixteenth-century poems in modern dress and some not. In a few of the older poems only, where the best text reproduces spelling so archaic as to hinder smooth reading, I have modernized the spelling.

Brief notes explaining unfamiliar words and allusions are printed at the foot of the page, extended notes and discussions at the end of the volume. Many of the latter are integral parts of the chapters to which they refer and are applicable to other poems besides the single one to which they are attached; but even so it has been thought best to subordinate them to the poetry by retiring them rather than to risk printing a volume in which the poems float in a sea of pedagogical prose.

No notes are provided for words and names that are adequately explained in standard collegiate dictionaries. On the other hand, believing that a volume of this kind does not further the reader's interest in poetry by being made an exercise in library reference work, I have tried throughout to provide necessary information not readily available in the average reader's own library.

The critical notes vary in dimension, some poems being treated rather fully, others briefly, with hints for further study. Some poems are left for the reader to explore independently. It has seemed best to furnish detailed discussions throughout the volume wherever particular poems seemed to call for them or where special points called for illustration. After careful consideration, this course has appeared preferable to an arrangement by which the reader receives close guidance in the first part of the book and none at all later.

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E.W.S.

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Introduction

Written language is commonly classified as either prose or verse. Most of it is prose. When words are combined in such a way as to produce a noticeable rhythm, they become verse, either "free" or metrical. This may also be poetry, or it may not, for the term "poetry" implies a judgment of value about verse, an implication that the words are not only rhythmically arranged but have become in some degree a work of art. Beyond this point it is probably best to abandon definition, because the terms "art" and "value" lead into problems of aesthetics and philosophy upon which men have always differed, as they do about religion, the "meaning of life," and other fundamental questions.

Many of the most famous "definitions" of poetry have been in fact not so much definitions as assertions of value or interesting, often enlightening, descriptions of the poet's experience in creating his work. To say that poetry is "the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge," as Wordsworth did, or "the best words in the best order," as Coleridge did, is to assert its superiority rather than to define it. Wordsworth also said, "Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity: the emotion is contemplated till, by a species of reaction, the tranquillity gradually disappears, and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind. In this mood successful composition generally begins, and in a mood similar to this it is carried on. . . ." This is a description, derived from introspection, of the way in which Wordsworth's own poems were produced and which he believed to be other

poets' creative process as well. Some, but not all, poets have agreed with him.

It may be possible to construct a definition that could be agreed upon as accurate—"a work of art consisting of language arranged in verse form" might do—but this would not tell us anything we did not already know, and it could therefore be of little use. Here it will be more profitable to assume a rough everyday understanding of general terms and to attempt rather to describe what goes into the making of poetry and so perhaps arrive at a more precise working idea of what it is.

Subject and Meaning

Poetry has no subject matter distinct from that of prose. Within even the limited range of this volume there are poems dealing with religion, philosophy, war, death, murder, astronomy, athletics, history; with love, flirtation, happiness, character, success, and failure; with flower, snail, ant, house, machinery. Conceivably, anything of interest to man may be the subject of a poem. Love or sex inspires statistics in Kinsey, fiction in D. H. Lawrence, sonnets in Shakespeare. The distinction lies not in the subject but in the attitude of the writer, in his intention and feeling and, ultimately, in what he does with his subject.

When we decide to read an article or almost any book that is not fiction, we do so primarily to find out what it says. It may contain factual information that we require or find interesting; it may convey opinions which persuade or fail to persuade us. In any case, *what it says*—its substance or direct meaning—is usually what we are after. This is not true, or it is true only in a radically modified way, of poetry. Nearly all, perhaps all, good poems have a meaning. But a "good" meaning does not make a good poem, nor does a "true" meaning, for the poet is not trying to teach the reader facts he did not know or persuade him to support a cause the poet believes in; rather, he is creating something with words that he himself wishes to create, something that did not exist before and that

provides men with an extension and deepening of their experience or adds a new dimension to it. A religious reader therefore may quite properly like and approve a gloomy, atheistic poem by Housman, in the first place because it is a good poem, and in the second place because it makes one aware in a vivid, living way of what it is really like to live in a world without hope; and a profoundly skeptical reader may appreciate, without in the least being persuaded by, a poem by Hopkins that is founded on Roman Catholic doctrine.

For most people, the unforgettable moments of life are as incommunicable as they are unforgettable. The very words someone spoke, the tone, the room, may be imprinted with utmost vividness in one's memory, along with the feeling that made the occasion unforgettable. The moment of pride and excitement of the athlete carrying the ball for his greatest achievement may be relived in his memory, sensation for sensation. But rarely can he transfer this experience whole and alive into the mind, emotions, and sensations of another person. As Yeats once observed, a man may work the conversation around till he can casually introduce the name of the woman he loves in order to say it and to hear others talk of her; but the result disappoints him: his companion merely looks abstracted, "as if another name ran in his head." The poet, however, through his power over language, succeeds in communicating the otherwise incommunicable. He does more, for he makes the ever-transitory moments of life permanent—at least for the duration of the language. The passing experience that he has "immortalized" becomes an experience shared with others, with men present and future, illuminating their own experience. It is there on record, to be recaptured, revisited at will.

This is one function of poetry—communication, as we say nowadays, "in depth." Its second and perhaps greatest function, which has to do with form, can best be considered after some account has been given of the primary formal element of verse: rhythm.