

POETRY AND TRADITION

It can hardly be claimed that the advance in material civilization has done much for poetry. The growth of large towns has curtailed that intimate connection of man with nature which has in the past provided countless themes for song; the pressure of crowded populations fosters conventions of behavior which are inimical to the free play of imaginative impulse; the spread of standardized education does not always encourage the originality and independence which are necessary to creative work; the specialization of intellectual life diminishes not merely the desire to write poetry but the ability to enjoy it. A mass of evidence shows that poetry is far less popular in western Europe and the United States than in countries like Persia or China or India, whose material civilization is far less advanced but which have kept a traditional taste for the beauty of words. At an even lower level, in societies where conditions are still primitive and existence is indeed hard, poetry may be the main pastime and consolation of peoples like the Asiatic Tatars or the Armenians or the Ainus, among all of whom it is a truly national art practiced with a high degree of accomplishment and enjoyed by whole populations. Compared with such societies, our own mechanized, urban world is indeed feeble and uncertain in its approach to an art which has in the past enjoyed great glory but seems now in danger of becoming an esoteric pursuit of cliques and coteries.

The situation may even be worse than this. Some of our gloomier

prophets foresee a time when poetry will almost have disappeared because there will be no demand for it or, at the best, will have become a specialists' pastime like chess or an antiquated superstition like astrology. It is assumed that the analytical, scientific spirit which informs so much modern thought will have replaced the old imaginative, poetical spirit which seeks to produce a synthesis of experience and to present any given situation as a concrete whole. To these gloomy presentiments the recent history of poetry gives some support. By becoming more intimate and more difficult, poetry has lost some of its old public and has not yet trained a new public to take its place. In its desire to convey the subtler, more elusive movements of the consciousness, it tends to avoid the broad issues which have often given it strength in the past and to concentrate on aspects of experience which are sometimes so special that they can be fully understood by few but the poets themselves. In abandoning much of its old territory and relinquishing it to science or history or theology, poetry makes itself less approachable even to those who wish to enjoy it.

This contraction of poetry is a matter of grave concern. At the lowest level we may deplore that an art which has for countless centuries given pleasure to multitudes should lose much of its power and find no adequate successor, for few will claim that the novel or the drama or the cinema can do what poetry does or in any sense take its place. If poetry is really shrinking, we may well lament that a great joy is being taken from us and that the art of living will be correspondingly impoverished. But of course the loss would be far worse than this. Poetry is much more than a source of pleasure, more even than a source of joy in the highest and purest sense. It is certainly that, and for this very reason poetry is an essential element in civilization and does much to preserve and enliven it. Since any civilization worthy of the name is much more than a technical application of scientific discoveries and is of no importance unless it brings enrichment to our inner lives, it is dangerous to dispense with poetry or even to reduce its influence. A world without poetry is perfectly conceivable, but it would not be worth living in. For not only would it be bleak and barren; it would lack many valuable qualities which we do not always associate with poetry but which it discovers and keeps alive and makes essential elements in the richness and variety of life.

Poetry lives by tradition. It derives from the past not merely its consciousness of its own nature and function but much of its technique and outlook. In doing this, it not only keeps alive great discoveries made in the world of spirit but makes new discoveries of a similar character for its

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own age. The tradition of poetry is alive and adaptable in the same way as a tradition of manners. It faces new problems with well-tried instruments and secures new results from them. Though it can never repeat exactly what has been done before, since in poetry, as in all the arts, mere repetition is bound to be dead and useless, it can do in a new way the same kind of thing that has often been done, and its success lies in the new approach and the new vision which it brings to the individual event in the given, recognized field. Like all true traditions, that of poetry selects something significant from the particular scene, preserves this for posterity, and continues to make a similar selection whenever it has a chance of doing so. But traditions are delicate organisms, and, if they are treated too roughly, they cease to do their right work. So, if poetry breaks too violently with the past and conducts experiments in too reckless a spirit, it may well hurt itself. Indeed, it is difficult not to think that something of this kind has happened in our own time, which has indeed been rich in talent but has not quite produced the poetry demanded or deserved by our circumstances. However this may be, it remains true that poetry lives by tradition and that such a tradition is important not merely for poetry but for anything that may rightly be called "civilization."

One of the chief claims of poetry as a civilizing influence is that it presents in a lasting and persuasive form the discoveries which man has made about himself and his circumstances, about the possibilities and the significance of events seen with clairvoyant vision and passionate intensity. The poets whose work survives the corroding influence of time express something so important that it becomes part of ourselves, even though we may be divided from them by many centuries. In such a process the expenditure is of course enormous. For every poem that endures thousands and thousands perish, and even in the work of great poets there may be much that is remembered only because of the good company which it keeps. And this process not only reflects the capacity of poets to say something worth saying as it should be said but determines the final worth of their achievement, as time and succeeding generations test and judge it. The business of selection goes on until only what is beyond cavil survives, but this is of inestimable worth and forms an essential part of living history.

How poetry chooses and preserves experience may be seen from a glance at some great works in which the poet gives life to what has most touched or stirred him in fact or legend or belief and arms it with an appeal which moves far beyond his contemporary setting to an almost timeless world. The *Iliad*, for instance, is the last word on the heroic world of

ancient Greece. In it the concept of heroism, the idea that a man should devote his life to the display of prowess and the acquisition of glory, provides the central theme and the main setting. Achilles is a hero almost without peer. Sigurth may equal him in prowess but is inferior to him in humanity; Roland may be equally tragic but is certainly not so four-square. In Achilles the heroic way of life is presented in all its implications, its taste for action and its sense of personalities, its magnificent manners and its inevitable doom. Once Homer had composed the *Iliad*, no other poems could hope to challenge him on such a theme. It is the climax of Greek heroic society and must have been composed when that society was already beginning to be transformed into something else. But just for that reason it presents what matters most in such a world, and the wonderful paradox is that, though we have passed far from any heroic age, Homer's world is still perfectly real to us, not merely in the sense of being vivid and present, but in the sense of making us feel toward its characters what we might feel toward our own friends and acquaintances. Only our feelings toward them are less confused and less cloudy than in any ordinary existence. The art of poetry has made its selection not merely from story but from the complex mass of human nature and found in this what it thinks to be most exciting and moving. Homer gives us something invaluable just because he operates with a world which we do not know and yet, when he presents it, we see it to be somehow intimate and familiar.

What Homer does for heroic Greece, Dante does in his own remarkable way for the Middle Ages. Into the *Divine Comedy* he put not only the science, philosophy, theology, and literary criticism of his time but his own highly individual judgments on men and things. He surveys all history as he knows it from the Bible, the Roman historians, and his own chroniclers; presents its achievements through his own highly discriminating, highly critical judgment; and makes it live through the power of his poetical vision, with the result that it is difficult for us, with our far greater sources of knowledge, to see some characters except as Dante saw them. He has given the final portraits of such men as Farinata or Pietro delle Vigne, and, more than this, he presents through his art a coherent conception of life which people find relevant even today. Even if we do not accept his main assumptions, we must still feel that his is a point of view of absolute value—that, if we absorb it, we shall understand life better than we do and be aware of much which we habitually neglect. Of course the *Divine Comedy* is the work of an almost unique genius, but it derives part of its strength from the world in which Dante lived and which he ex-

amined with so sharp an understanding that what mattered most in it is still alive for us today.

If poetry preserves the continuity of civilization by passing to coming generations what matters most in its discoveries, so also it shapes the future by seeing where tendencies still obscure and generally unmarked may lead and what their fulfilment means. It is not too much to claim that, if in Achilles Homer created the exemplar of heroic valor, he created in Hector the champion of the city-state which had hardly emerged in his time and was to dominate the Greek scene for centuries. If Dante was much concerned with the characteristics of individual Italian towns, he had also a vision of a united Italy which was to dominate men's imaginations for centuries until at last it was realized in fact. Some poets do more than this. Their vision pierces into the distance and sees forms which even they themselves may not fully understand or appreciate but which, through their presentation of them, in due course come into being. Though Virgil tells of Rome as it was in the beginning, he looks forward to a future of order and peace, which was indeed to exist over the Roman world for some two centuries, and beyond this he describes less firmly but not less sincerely certain doubts and misgivings about man's place in the universe which were later to trouble Marcus Aurelius and to do much for the triumph of the Christian church. In this sense poetry is indeed a kind of prophecy, but what it foretells are not events but movements of the spirit, the emergence of hitherto unrecognized powers of the will and intelligence, stirrings in the heart which will change the texture of human life and open vast new vistas to the imagination and affections.

This power to preserve the past and to foresee the future belongs in a special degree to Shakespeare and accounts for the simple but not disreputable belief that in him all knowledge that is worth having is to be found. From one angle we see that he comes at the end of a great period, which he presents in all its richness and inner life. He is indeed the poet of the English Renaissance, which was itself in many ways the culmination of the English Middle Ages. Just as in his historical plays he presents English history from Richard II to Henry VI, so in his own thought he covers a wide range of speculation which touches at one end the ageless, ancient legends of his people and at the other the daring speculations of his own time. The crowded present which he saw and marked with such vivid discrimination provides much of the matter in Shakespeare's plays, but at the same time he follows many unsuspected clues in himself or his acquaintances until he develops themes which were new to his world and

have not yet exhausted their freshness, though they have indeed affected the course of history and created new types of men. Hamlet, for instance, may well contain much that Shakespeare knew in himself, but has enabled many men of later generations to see themselves more clearly and to diagnose their own maladies. Without him we can hardly imagine much French or Russian literature of the nineteenth century, and indeed the very type of Hamlet is established in our technique of understanding our fellows. But, of course, Shakespeare's prophetic insight was far greater than the selection of a single character would indicate. Through him, far more than through anyone or anything else, we have formed, often without knowing it, that humanistic philosophy which is the basis of our thought and holds that the only true assessment of man's worth must be made through his own experience as he finds it for himself in facing his own problems.

What these great figures do on a large scale with a prodigious success is done on a small scale by all poets worthy of the name. Any poem that succeeds in being a truly individual and therefore unique work of art preserves something which is worth preserving and passes it to the common heritage of man. Poetry's concern is with the art of life, with the means by which we can live more fully and more abundantly. Through its achievements in each generation it continually extends our imaginative consciousness and through this our whole outlook. Though it may not deal specifically with right and wrong, it deals with a whole world of values as it discovers them in human experience. A poetical tradition is much more than a habit of writing poetry, more than a written record of what men have thought and felt, more even than a vivid, concentrated awareness of the human scene; it is a living, creative force which enlarges our outlooks, quickens our sensibilities, and, by breaking down our habitual limitations of thought and feeling, acts as a powerful antidote to the specialization and departmentalism which afflict so much of organized life.

Such a tradition usually works through a single language, since a poet learns his craft from those who have preceded him in the use of his own speech. This means that it is usually confined to a single country or geographical area, not merely because such an area is the usual unit for a language, but because each country has through its history a set of common experiences which the poet assumes and exploits when he writes for his fellows. Thus, though the rich poetical tradition of Central and South America certainly owes much to Spain, each country has its special, national tradition which inevitably informs its poetry and gives to it an in-

dividual character, while beyond this there is an air of the New World which lies outside the scope of Spain but belongs to her former colonies because they are set in a different landscape with different conditions of life. Conversely, a single political unit, which embraces peoples of several languages, is likely to nurture several traditions of poetry which follow their own linguistic habits and may be quite independent of one another. Thus the old Austro-Hungarian Empire did not succeed in producing any poetry representative of its whole domains but produced instead a variety of schools and traditions in German, Hungarian, Czech, and the different branches of South Slavonic. If there is some resemblance between the romantic poetry of the German Austrians and the Czechs, neither has much in common with the heroic lays of the Serbs or even with the powerful, passionate poetry of the Magyars. What matters most is the individual tradition in which a poet works. This is indeed largely determined by local circumstances but is in the main preserved and continued by the literary qualities of a language and the uses to which earlier generations have put them.

A poetical tradition which moves on such lines throws more illumination on the true nature of a people than any record of its external history. At the least a study of it will confirm and clarify what we already know superficially but do not understand from the inside. The elegance and order of French life reach a new distinction in French verse; the vast metaphysics of Germany have a counterpart in a poetry which relies much upon *Sehnsucht* and is often in search of a *Jenseits*; the deeply rooted individualism of the Chinese permeates a poetry which has a special delicacy and subtlety in treatment of personal relations; the style and variety of Spanish life sustain a poetry remarkable for its dignity and its passion. In such cases poetry may do no more than confirm what we know already, but it makes us look at it in a different way. Something which we have seen from outside reveals its inner nature and the springs of its behavior. Instead of considering abstractions, we see concrete examples, which by their vivid appeal convey much more than any general ideas can. The best clue to the understanding of a nation's character is in its poetry, since this reflects what it has treasured from experience and thinks worth preserving.

The importance of such a study becomes more manifest when a national poetry presents a marked contrast with preconceived ideas of a national character. Such ideas are by no means to be dismissed as foolish prejudices; they are usually based on a knowledge of facts. But they are not based on all the facts, and poetry provides a salutary corrective to them. It is, for

instance, a startling paradox that England, the nation of shopkeepers and of sturdy common sense, well known for its love of sport and its love of business, suspected of an innate Philistinism and condemned for too great attention to solid comfort, has nonetheless maintained an unbroken tradition of poetry since the fourteenth century. Nor is this poetry such as we might expect from a people of merchant adventurers and colonial captains. It is intimate and solitary, tender and delicate. It is not even, as it might well be, insular. It is always ready to learn from abroad and to adapt Continental inventions to the native idiom. Nor does the notorious English love of convention hamper it. It is indeed governed by rules, which are part of its admirable style, but it is nonetheless uncommonly generous in its understanding and its sympathies. A man who had studied English history and then turned to English poetry would certainly be greatly surprised by what he found and have to admit that here was something which altered his whole conception of the English character.

Another paradox can be seen in ancient Athens. Perhaps we see it too much through its literature to estimate the appearance it must have presented to other Greek cities. The Athenians were the most ebullient, reckless, adventurous of peoples, always making experiments or trying to impose their will on others or to win everlasting fame through some prodigious exploit, even if it meant incurring universal hatred. Nonetheless, in their poetry they proclaimed and dramatized the all-importance of moderation and the Mean. With all their insatiable appetite for life they would suddenly say that man is but a shadow in a dream and all his desires are dust. This was no mere insurance against the wrath of incalculable gods, no mere conventional tribute to some dim or guilty respect for order. It was part of the Athenian nature and provided the background against which they played their proud and reckless parts. If Athenian tragedy was born from this quarrel with themselves and reflected it in the presentation of superhuman characters coming to appalling dooms, it is also the best means by which we can understand what these men were when they were alive, what swift currents ran in their blood, and how, even if dimly and halfheartedly, they tried to control them.

Though a poetical tradition is essentially national and derives much of its strength from being so, it may at times become international and perform a task between peoples. Sometimes the art of one country will spread its influence abroad and, through translation and adaptations, touch thousands of people whose way of life is alien to it but who nonetheless assimilate it and change their outlook through it just because it appeals to some-

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thing in themselves which they have not hitherto recognized or opens up new and attractive fields of sensibility. In Asia, Persia was for some centuries the center of such an influence, which spread not only to the Moslem and Hindu peoples of India but to distant mountaineers and pastoral nomads in Georgia, Armenia, and Bactria. In Europe more than one country has played such a role. The rebirth of lyrical poetry in the twelfth century was largely the work of Provence. A highly specialized poetry born in the courts of Languedoc and Aquitaine spread its power to northern France, Germany, Portugal, Sicily, Italy, and England. The local poets took up the Provençal themes and measures and adapted them to their own tongues. But though there is a real community both of technique and of spirit between the songs of Guillaume of Aquitaine and such poems as the English "Alison," or the Portuguese "Leonoreta," or the dawn songs and spring songs of Heinrich von Morungen and Walther von der Vogelweide, this is no case of imitation or of mere adaptation to the local idiom. In each case the Provençal seed falls on a rich, almost prepared ground, in which an indigenous tradition of song has taught men what poetry is and made them ready to accept new forms. The schools of poetry gain a new strength from abroad but lose little of their local color in doing so.

What Provence did for the Middle Ages, Italy did for the Renaissance, Germany and England for the Romantic Age, and France for the end of the nineteenth century. In the sixteenth century, France, England, Spain, and Portugal looked to Italy both for their verso forms and for their main subjects, but in each country we forget the Italian models when we read this lively and varied poetry of the emotions. In the Romantic Age, first Goethe and then Byron carried their own kinds of poetry across Europe, until there is little in France or Russia or Spain which cannot be connected with one or the other of them. In the binetics the French Symbolists and especially Mallarmé evolved a new vision of pure poetry which passed to young poets everywhere and inspired a generation of sublime achievement. Of course in most of these cases such extensive changes would not have taken place if they had not been initiated by men of remarkable originality, but these men would never have had so great an influence if they had not appealed to something which lay hidden in most European countries and responded vigorously to new methods for its expression. In such situations national and European influences combine to produce a notable result. But this itself suggests that divisions between countries hide great similarities between men and that it is the task of the arts to ignore the divisions and explore the similarities. Though poetry cannot ever be so

international as music or painting, it can exert a powerful influence in making men of different countries conscious that they have much to learn from one another because they are after all fashioned from the same clay and inspired by the same breath of life. Any system of politics which denounces internationalism in the arts as a heresy is bound in the end to impoverish its own poetry and to lose much which any wise system of government ought to welcome.

The study of poetry is an important element in the study of civilization, just as the writing of poetry is itself a great civilizing force. In such study we should not underrate the value of two techniques which may not look very important but are indispensable to it. First, there is translation. Though it can never be a wholly adequate substitute for the original words, translation is nevertheless a potent influence in spreading new outlooks and ideas, in showing to one people what kind of poetry is written by another, and in suggesting what may be gained by an exploitation of new techniques. The poetry of ancient Rome may almost be said to have begun its mature life when Livius Andronicus translated the *Odyssey* from Greek into Latin and showed how poetry could tell a complex story on a large scale. To a people accustomed to little else than short lays about the doings of their ancestors this was indeed a revelation and started the series of epics which is one of the glories of Roman literature. Less obvious but no less powerful is the influence which Shakespeare has had in countries not his own. The translations of his poetry into German and Russian are indeed works of true poetry, and the result has been his acclimatization in Germany and Russia, whereas in France and Italy, where he has been far less fortunate in his translations, his popularity and influence have been correspondingly less. Our own century has realized the use of translations and benefited greatly from them. Much, for instance, of the modern approach to Chinese civilization has been determined by gifted men who have conveyed in their own tongue the charm and grace of Chinese poetry. Its form is indeed almost impossible to reproduce in any polysyllabic language like English or French, but its matter, at once so different from that of our own poetry and yet so friendly and ultimately so familiar, has passed into our experience and touched not only our poetry but our lives.

A second important instrument is the anthology, especially if it is truly representative of some national tradition of poetry. It provides the right means to start the study of such a tradition, since through it we form some idea of the complex and yet somehow homogeneous experience which has gone to the making of a nation. This is equally true of a tradition which is

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old and rich like English or Italian or relatively modern like American. In either case the unfolding panorama of poetry reveals to us what a nation has seen and felt through the vicissitudes of its history and what characteristics it has developed. Such a picture cannot fail to excite our curiosity and engage our attention as we see a civilization growing in variety and responding to new challenges. As we do this, we can hardly fail to enjoy not merely a historical spectacle but chapters of spiritual experience which have their own special color but are nonetheless related to much that we know in ourselves. Just because it is in some respects different from our own, the unfamiliar culture, by exciting our interest in it, enables us at the same time to shift our familiar point of view and to look at our own tradition with fresh eyes. And that, after all, is what anyone desires who believes that the art of life is to be as alive as possible and that for this task poetry is an indispensable means of refreshment and renewal.