

POETRY:

A Modern Guide to Its Understanding and Enjoyment

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Contents

Foreword 9

PART I. THE POETIC PROCESS

1. Poetry and the Poet 13
2. Poetry and the Reader 25
3. Sound Patterns 35
4. Imagery 51
5. Words 68
6. The Design of Poems 84

PART II. POETRY AND THE HUMAN CONDITION

7. Time 101
8. Death 119
9. Frustration and Loneliness 134
10. Social Satire 148
11. Nature 170
12. Love 190
13. Humanism 215

- 14. Religion 234
- 15. The Poets on Poetry 254

APPENDIX

- Meters and Verse Patterns 275
- Bibliography 283
- List of Poets 286

Poetry is the earliest and remains the most concentrated and intense form of communication among the arts of language. Its uses of words are finer, richer and more powerful than those of prose, and it has played a larger part in the whole literary tradition. Today the pessimists are very gloomy about the state of poetry. They point out that, like the behavior of the younger generation and of the weather, it isn't what it used to be. They complain that poetry is written only for a small and specialized audience; that it has become a private cult; that it is unintelligible to the ordinary reader; and that as a result, the appreciation of poetry by the public has dwindled to a shadow of what it once was.

No one could argue that poetry has the importance it once had in the life of the whole community. The classical epics and dramas appealed to all classes among their peoples. The same is true of the medieval romances and the Elizabethan plays. Yes, poetry has lost its public entertainment value and its mass appeal, though this is largely because all its old narrative territory has been taken over by prose. As far as lyric poetry is concerned the public for it has never been large, and the pessimists forget or ignore how much of the now familiar and admired poetry of the past was private when it was first written. Literary history is strewn with examples of poetry written in new forms that has had to establish itself slowly, and which proves the truth of Wordsworth's remark that the revolutionary poet must himself create the taste by which he is judged. He will be recognized by the public only when the public has recognized itself in the work of the poet.

The only cause for pessimism would be if men and women ceased to write poetry, and they don't. In spite of all we hear of the sterilizing effects on the arts of our mass civilization and materialistic standards, there is no slackening of artistic output. Poets write, just as painters paint and musicians compose, because they possess the creative urge within them. What this strange impulse is may remain mysterious, but it is clearly an instinct common to certain individuals in all ages, which will always

2. Poetry and the Reader

“Blood, imagination and intellect
running together.”

W. B. Yeats

“Art is a human activity consisting in this, that one man consciously, by means of certain external signs, hands on to others feelings he has lived through, and that others are infected by those feelings and also experience them.” Tolstoy’s definition is simple, but comprehensive. The creative act may be mysterious and complex in origin, but its aim is communication. The poet is a man speaking to men; a man striving passionately to find “the best words in their best order” to make his own experience live again for others. Here again it is a “double” activity. When the poet is at work, says Eliot, “he is no more concerned with the social consequences than the scientist in his laboratory—though without the context of use to society, neither the poet nor the scientist could have the conviction which sustains him.”

Poetry has been put to some strange uses. I have heard of a teacher whose class was reading *The Ancient Mariner*, who sent the children to the Museum of Natural History to learn the wing-span of an albatross; and of an instructor of Greek who smacked his lips over the treat in store for his students of Sophocles’s *Oedipus at Colonus*, telling them that they could look forward to “a veritable treasure-trove of grammatical peculiarities.” But what are its real uses to society, or to the individuals who make up society? Are they important or superfluous? central or peripheral?