



Poetry and criticism

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What shall we required of poetry? Delight, music subtlety of thought, a world of the heart's Desire, fidelity to comprehensible experience, a glimpse through magic casements profound wisdom? All these things all different, yet not all contradictory have been required of poetry. What shall we require of her? The answer comes it seems, as quick and as vague as the question. We require the highest. All that can be demanded of any spiritual activity of man we must demand of poetry. It must be adequate to all our experience; it must be not a diversion from, but a culmination of life, it must be working steadily towards a more complete universality.

It was Matthew Arnold, the great Victorian poet, who stated that, poetry would replace religion, when faith would be abolished from the world. Through poetry, he says, life can be criticized, and these poems must be high poetry.

The person who ceases to care for its literary inheritance becomes barbaric; the person who ceases to produce literature ceases to move in thought and sensibility. The poetry of a people takes its life from the people's speech and in turn gives life to it; and represents its highest point of consciousness, its greatest power and its most delicate sensibility. Criticism, of course, never does find out what poetry is, in the sense of arriving at an adequate definition; but I do not know of what use such a definition would be if it were found. Nor can criticism ever arrive at any final appraisal of poetry. But there are these two theoretical limits of criticism: at one of which we attempt to answer the question 'what is poetry?' and at the other 'is this good poem?' No theoretic ingenuity will suffice to answer the second question, because no theory can amount to much which is not founded upon a direct experience of good poetry; but on the other hand our direct experience of poetry involves a good deal of generalizing activity.

The rudiment of criticism is the ability to select a good poem and reject a bad poem; and its most severe test is of its ability to select a good new poem, to respond properly to a new situation. The experience of poetry, as it develops in the conscious and mature person, is not merely the sum of the experiences of good poems. Education in poetry requires an organization of these experiences.

Great lyrical poetry has always been an incidental achievement, Paragon of great poets, and great poets have always been those who believed that poetry was by nature the worthiest vessel of the highest argument of which the soul of man is capable.

Poetic theory such as this seems Bound to include great prose, and not merely the prose which can most easily be assimilated to the condition of poetry, If we insist that rhythm is essential to poetry, we are in danger of confusing the accident with the essence, and of fasting upon what will prove to be in the last analysis a merely formal difference. The difference we seek must be substantial and essential.

The most marked characteristic of the present age is a continual disintegration of the consciousness; more or less deliberately in every province of men's spiritual life the reins are being thrown on to the horse's neck. The power which controls and disciplines sensational experience is, in modern literature, daily denied; the counterpart of this power which envisages the ideal in the conduct of one's own or the Nation's affairs and unflinchingly pursues it is held up to ridiculous.

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Poetry can exist without criticism, but criticism cannot exist without poetry, it makes sense to view criticism as dependent. ... "There is no need of any theory for what gives pleasure through the ear, music or poetry

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