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G. Rostrevor Hamilton

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## Chapter I

### POETIC EXPERIENCE

#### *The Sphere of Poetics*

Many different things happen when we look at a picture, or listen to music, or read a poem. The happenings are often especially complex in the case of a poem, since the medium is that of words—words, which we use for all the debate and business of life. Poetry, more extensively than the other arts, may provide matter for discussion outside the aesthetic sphere.

We have to ask, then, What is the true subject-matter of poetics? With what particular happenings is the theory of poetry concerned?

On such questions, simple only in appearance, much thought has been expended. It has sometimes been shallow, sometimes profound. Sometimes it has been expressed in beautiful prose, and has gained thereby in persuasive power: at other times it has been veiled in oracular obscurity, which has created an impression of deep learning and significance. But the total result is disappointing, for the tangle in aesthetic matters has never been greater than it is to-day. We need to begin again from the beginning, and to advance, as best we may, without prejudice and without pretence, step by step.

First of all, let us take note of a simple truth, namely that we come to a poem, as to any work of art, with all sorts of pre-disposition: each with his own kind of sensitiveness, his own degree of culture, his own opinions and attitude to life. The different make-up of each reader

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vitality affects the quality of experience which he can get from poetry. This fact—the diversity of experience—hardly receives proper attention. We are inclined, when we reflect, to dismiss it as obvious, and, when we do not reflect, to pass judgment as if it were untrue.

Most people recognize that they have a blind spot somewhere. A particular reader, for example, may admit that the work of Landor, with his ‘guests few and select’, is in some way beyond him. He is unable, perhaps, to see anything much in lines like these:

*Go on, go on, and love away!  
 Mine was, another's is, the day.  
 Go on, go on, thou false one! now  
 Upon his shoulder rest thy brow  
 And look into his eyes, until  
 Thy own, to find them colder, fill.*

But there are many poets on whose work the same reader will be ready to pronounce, in the most final manner, This is good and that is bad, this is beautiful, that is ugly. An assumption slips in that his experience is the exact experience which the poem exists to give, not coloured or limited by the mind he brings to it. He is confident that he not only admires, but fully understands, this (shall we say?) in Herrick:

*Here a solemn fast we keep  
 While all beauty lies asleep.  
 Hushed be all things, no noise here,  
 But the toning of a tear:  
 Or the sigh of such as bring  
 Cowslips for her covering.*

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He declares the poem good or beautiful. But does he feel it as a pretty appeal to sentiment, or as something a little more complex? Does he merely approve of its simplicity, its compactness of form? Or does the artistry come home to him, the way, for example, in which sense and music combine to concentrate one clear note in the 'toning' of the fourth line? Does the relation between the simply quiet close and the gravely quiet opening—'cowslips' for 'solemnity' and 'her' for 'all beauty'—enter into the effect upon him? He may be fully responsive to these and other elements, even if he does not consciously distinguish them. But in all likelihood he is not, unless he is capable of feeling the different effectiveness of Landor's scheme, where the concentration is reserved for 'colder' in the last line—a very centre-point of power, a marble index of emotion.

If the supposed reader likes the exquisite lines of Herrick for a mere prettiness and neatness, it does not occur to him that he is failing properly to experience the poem. It is all that he can do to recognize that what he dislikes, or does not like, may be beyond him: it is much more difficult to recognize that what he *does* like is beyond him, if he likes it for wrong or inadequate reasons. The indifference of most people to poetry is not what chiefly causes it to be held in light esteem. The damage is rather done by those who remain fixed in a half liking. Poetry has value for them, a genuine value: they rightly judge of their experience as a pleasure, an amenity added to life. And, so far, all is well: but they often mistake this adventitious and rather faint pleasure for an experience of poetry in its full and true quality, and so the idea is

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encouraged that poetry-reading is a dilettante pursuit, not anything vital or robust.

At present I am not so much concerned with this unhappy result, as with the bias that we have to guard against in the approach to poetics. Let us get rid, if we can, of the insidious, half-conscious assumption that readers who 'like' poetry have the same experience of a poem, and only part company when they judge the value of the experience. The experience itself inevitably differs—widely among readers in general, less widely among readers of sensibility and developed taste. The best that even a sensitive reader can hope to win is an experience, not the same as, but in a fairly high degree similar to, that of the poet.

Even this he cannot do all at once. For it is another plain fact, frequently ignored, that the experience occasioned by a poem is not a momentary event, abruptly begun and ended. It is a process; and, while still simplifying the truth, we may distinguish (1) preparation, (2) appreciation, (3) effects, and (4) another kind of happening—whatever its relevance—which accompanies every stage, the nervous activity of our bodies. We must briefly consider these headings, in order to answer our original question, What is the true subject-matter of poetics?

*Preparation.* Every reader, as I say, brings his own idiosyncrasy to the reading of a poem. And so he has to go through a process of adjustment, which may be so slight and quick as hardly to be noticeable. On the other hand, it may be slow and difficult. The metre or rhythm may rouse a critical prejudice, due to his previous reading.

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Or he may find the outlook of the poet antagonistic to his own. Again, he may have to grapple with an obscure meaning, before the poem can be enjoyed. Or—and especially with some modern poetry—he may be doubtful whether the right approach is through intellectual alertness or passive surrender. Shall he, let us say, look for intellectual coherence between the successive stages of *The Waste Land*, attaching himself to one of the several guides through Mr T. S. Eliot's territory? Or is Dr I. A. Richards right in saying that such a quest is useless, that “the items are united by the accord, contrast, and interaction of their emotional effects, not by an intellectual scheme that analysis must work out”<sup>1</sup>?

*Appreciation.* We only experience a poem as fully as we can if, and when, doubts and difficulties like these have been resolved, and a sympathetic insight achieved. For the true enjoyment of poetry, like all other aesthetic experience, is free from such questioning and distraction of the intellect. It is an experience of the contemplative imagination, having a unique tranquillity, in which the elements of sense and thought and feeling actively combine. We recognize it as good in itself, and value it for its own sake.

*Effects.* We may also value the poem for its incidental after effects. It may reconcile us to a harsh world or, on the contrary, it may leave us with a desire for action, even revolution. It may suggest a moral ideal or illustrate a philosophy. In so far as these effects follow on a true contemplative experience, a delight in the poem in and

<sup>1</sup> *The Principles of Literary Criticism*, p. 290 (Appendix B).

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for itself, they represent a thinning out of that experience, a return to the world of action or speculation.

*Nervous Activity.* At the moment it is only necessary to note that all the above happenings are accompanied by tides of activity in the nervous system, the physical response to innumerable stimuli.

In *preparation* for the enjoyment of a poem we may have to do hard thinking, and the poem may, among its after *effects*, leave us with ideas for further intellectual exercise. Again, before we reach disinterested enjoyment, the poem may rouse in us echoes of sensual appetite or moral interest, both concerned with action; or the impulse to action may follow upon the enjoyment of the poem. Poetry, indeed, is related before and after to the whole of life; all the elements of human experience, every activity of thought and desire, contribute to it and may be affected by it. But the *appreciation* of poetry, the enjoyment, the central imaginative experience, is distinct from this intellectual and practical context. It holds thought and desire in solution, but, in its own unity, it transcends them. In ideal purity, it is not concerned with thought as such (even in a philosophic poem), or with action as such (even in a dramatic poem): for thought and action have alike become objects of contemplation. This is the distinctive mark of poetic experience.

*Essentially, we may say, the theory of poetry is concerned with imaginative or contemplative experience, created through a certain metrical ordering of words, and with the values of such experience.* In a secondary way it is concerned with practical and intellectual activity—with life, indeed, in

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its infinite variety—but only as entering into the imagination. The values of poetry, as of the other arts, are distinct from those of morality, and equally from those of speculative thought: poetry, as such, is to be judged simply by the quality of imaginative experience it gives, and not by the test of moral goodness, or of truth in reference to something outside itself.

Here, then, we have given a brief definition of the sphere of poetics, a brief indication of the nature of poetry. If the outline is too hard, it can be modified as we traverse the ground in detail. But the doctrine has, I think, a general validity, and is not merely relative to this or that outlook. It will hold good, for instance, even if we adopt a materialistic view of the world, and regard the *nervous activity* of our bodies as the thing fundamentally real. For such a view may affect the quality, but not the kind, of experience we get from poetry.

Let us consider the point. If, in the name of science, we are convinced that the mind is no more than a part of the nervous system, and that the soul is a chimaera, we are condemned to a depressing view of life. Such a view, imaginatively held, is likely to have some lowering effect on the general quality of our experience—its seriousness, its tone, and especially its width; and since, as I have said, every element of human experience contributes to poetry, it is also likely to have some adverse effect on creative work. I do not wish to press this too far, remembering that there is a poetry of pessimism and despair. But I think it is generally true.

Again, a materialistic outlook must damage our ability to appreciate poems which express a religious conception

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of the world. True, given a serious sense of values, we can usually accept, for the sake of imaginative experience, a particular moral or religious standpoint, seriously held, with which we disagree. But the required sense of values is likely to have suffered to some extent from our materialist views; and even if, by some human or divine grace, it has not, there comes a point at which the awareness of conflict with the truth of science (as we see it) must impede acceptance of a religious attitude.

In fine, the *quality* of our poetic experience is affected—I will not say greatly affected—by the nature of our beliefs. The *kind* of our experience, on the other hand, is not affected at all, however drab our theory of the Universe. Even with an emasculated ethic and metaphysic, we should continue to create and enjoy beautiful things. The quality, alike of creation and enjoyment, would tend to deteriorate: we might slip into that decadent condition in which art confines its attention, for Art's sake, to sense-values abstracted from life. But even if poetic experience were limited to superficial and minor perfections of form, it would remain distinctive in kind, as a peculiar imaginative satisfaction created through an ordering of words, and, as such, it would still claim the special study of poetics.



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## Chapter II

### DISTRACTIONS

Poetic experience is of value, we have seen, quite apart from the useful effects that may flow from it, and quite apart from any significance it may have in relation, e.g., to the meaning of human existence. The special task of poetics is to concentrate on this independent value. It is a difficult task, and we are liable to be distracted from it in several different ways. The ways may vary somewhat according to the view we take of mind and its relation to matter. Let us formulate three possible views, and suggest their tendencies:

- (1) The material world is bound up with spirit, and has no independent meaning or existence.
- (2) There are independently real worlds of mind and matter, and interaction takes place between the mind and the highly organized matter of the nervous system.
- (3) The mind is merely part of the activity of the nervous system.

*If we take the first view*, it may tempt us to give rein to emotion. Intoxicated with the conception of a spiritual world, we may be dissatisfied with our limited experience, seeking to pass to an experience outside ours, to a wider experience, to the 'heart of the Universe'. We may be bold to claim, as English romantics have often done, that poetry, at its highest, gives us the vision of ultimate or transcendent reality. And it must be admitted that the nature of poetic experience may itself encourage us to

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advance such a claim: for it has a wholeness and harmony that mirror the qualities commonly attributed to the Divine, or the Absolute, or the World of Reality.

Moreover, it is often accompanied by a feeling of illumination: and, as Dr Richards warns us, we may too lightly interpret 'this feeling of a revealed significance, this attitude of readiness, acceptance and understanding' as 'actually implying knowledge'.<sup>1</sup> I am not ready to agree with him that the state of mind is merely 'the conscious accompaniment of our successful adjustment to life'. The poetic experience *may* be significant of a wider reality and, if it is, that significance *may* be even more important for human life than the imaginative satisfaction which the experience gives.

But the question is a proper one for philosophical enquiry, and, whatever the answer, is outside the specific range of poetics. A study of the poetic experience in itself will not be concerned with what it may, or may not, reveal of the destiny of man. Some further reference to this matter will be found in Chapter xiv.

*If we take the second view*—independently real worlds of mind and matter—it may reinforce the powerful influence of the notion, dear to common sense, that beauty exists in an object, whether picture or poem, apart from any experiencing mind. This 'objective' notion diverts attention from concrete experience to an abstract thing, an external object in which beauty is supposed to inhere. It tends to reduce the experience of poetry to something passive, a reflection—or, at best, a modification—in the mind of a value outside it. It encourages the idea,

<sup>1</sup> *P.L.C.* p. 283.