

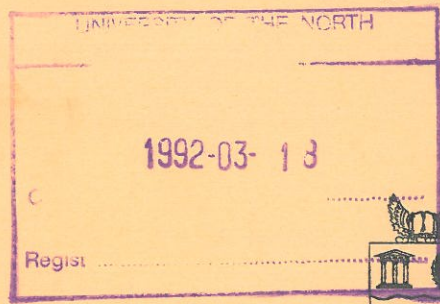
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Man, Myth and Muse: an examination of some of the functions of the Poetic Faculty.

by

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MAN, MYTH AND MUSE AN EXAMINATION OF SOME OF THE FUNCTIONS OF THE POETIC FACULTY

Inaugural Lecture delivered on accepting the Chair of English at
the University of the North

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by

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“All about and around us a *faith* in poetry struggles to be extricated, but it is not extricated. Some day, at the touch of the true word, the whole confusion will by magic cease; the broken and shapeless notions cohere and crystallise into a bright and true theory.”¹⁾

Walter Bagehot

MAN, MYTH AND MUSE

An examination of some functions of the poetic faculty.

* * * * *

"I agree with no man's opinions. I have some of my own."²⁾
Turgenev: *Fathers and Sons*

Life being very short, and the quiet hours of it few,
we ought to waste none of them in reading valueless books,³⁾
Ruskin: *Sesame and Lilies*

GOD breathed into the man He had made a part of His divine Spirit, and endowed him with reason and the power of speech: from thought and speech literature had its birth. In his literary activity man, by divine grace, shares in the might of the *Logos*, the creative word of God, and literature is the handmaiden of faith (or, religion) and the enlightenment flowing from faith, whereby man can solve his problems, cure his ills, overcome fear and prejudice, and attain his high destiny.

Literature is surely, if it is anything at all, the attempt of writers to understand and interpret life (and therefore Nature and God), and to achieve a synthesis within man's nature, in terms of his life-situation. By this I mean a reconciliation of his individual nature with his own age and environment, within the framework of society and of all mankind.

These are high claims and bold statements indeed, which I shall try to justify in what follows.

A timely pause now and then for the purpose of mental and material stocktaking, a time of revaluation and redefinition, is certainly necessary for nations and for individuals. The opening speech of our State President at the beginning of each session of parliament is such an occasion. It serves as the starting point for an appreciation of the home and world situation, and a planning of the domestic and foreign policy to be followed from there, as determined by the needs of the commonweal. And every year the position is reviewed anew. So, too, the president of the United States of America, in time of crisis or threat, addresses the people of his country to acquaint them with "the state of the

nation". And we know that on a more personal level the priests and ministers of religion of all faiths have constantly to exhort their flocks to make similar re-appraisals.

The age we are living in offers sufficient occasion for such soul-searching owing to the dual and paradoxical nature of man's attitudes and values in his outlook on life in the present time. That we are living in a sick world, and that mankind is infected with the general malaise of the age, hardly anyone will care to deny. The twentieth century has seen such astounding advances in science and technology, and in the social and administrative sciences, that few problems affecting the welfare and happiness of men could be expected to remain, especially as the majority of peoples today are confident in their ability to solve by their own efforts all their own material and spiritual problems, and very often those of other nations as well! Man has begun to believe that there is nothing he cannot do. At the same time, however, human misery, want, and lack of basic amenities still exist: confusion, fear and nervous tensions are constantly oppressing all mankind, causing a general debility of moral tone, undermining of self-assurance, and clouding of judgement, even (and perhaps especially) in the very highest world-tribunals. Men are both supremely self-reliant and the victims of nagging though suppressed feelings of doubt and insecurity, not knowing what the future holds in store for them and the values they hold dear. In their hearts they echo the cry of D.H. Lawrence: "Give us gods, oh give them us."⁴⁾ - parodied by their actions to: "Give us (ideological) idols, oh give them us!"

Under these circumstances professions of "fundamentalist" faith are generally viewed with amused tolerance as curious relics of superstition, or the naïveté of an old-fashioned minority out of touch with practical matters and the stark realities of life.

So it is perhaps permissible for those of us who still rely on old "outmoded" values, who seek light and comfort to guide us on our dark way from other sources than mechanical, technical, and scientific knowledge alone, also to pause and take stock from another point of view. We have a good case now, I think, to evaluate our spiritual armament - not so much on the religious plane, although that too is certainly always necessary - but in terms of our intellectual integrity and normal defensibility, with

reference to our literature as a reflection of man's higher capabilities, and as a possible key to the solution of, or reconciliation with, the many problems that beset our out-of-joint times. In so reviewing literature it is perhaps a good thing to take a categorical stand on basic principles, however debatable they may appear to those who are dubious of or inimical to them: hence the rather dogmatic statement of the opening sentence above.

Yet the listener/reader who feels suspicious of the premise and its apparently homiletic tone may be assured that this address, though it will contain some thoughts on theology and religion, is no treatise on eschatology, or even a "tract for the times", but a serious though unpretentious essay in literary theory. I believe that the history of literature shows a clear and close relationship between the development of man's literary sense and that of his religious awareness – a kinship which I shall strive to demonstrate – and that herein may lie a clue to our approach to some of the problems that in our time obscure rational thinking and vitiate ethical behaviour and human relations generally.

The question which I therefore propose to pause and ponder with you here is: Has poetry any value today? To answer this question we will have to determine, as well as we can, what poetry is, or should be, and to what extent it fulfils its function. We must relate the question to poetry specifically for two reasons: first, it is more relevant to examine poetry which very few people read, or if they do read, fail to extract the greatest value from; secondly, as poetry is the seminal form, whatever we discover about poetry will apply *mutatis mutandis* to other literary forms, also drama and fiction, with which most people are to a certain extent familiar.

After this somewhat elaborate *apologia* I come back to my initial statement.

Speech and intellect.

God gave man reason and the power of speech, which man, through the ages, has used – like his other intellectual powers – for both good and evil: very often to less exalted ends than such a high gift merited, but on the whole worthily and in proper,

useful fashion. With speech man was able to make intelligent contact with the minds of his fellows, to have mutual exchange of thought and ideas. While on the one hand speech was the instrument for expressing his humblest physical needs and most commonplace observations, it was on a different level the medium for conveying his loftiest spiritual aspirations and most profound intellectual speculations.

Traffic between nation and nation; the expression of respect and regard between kindred peoples; the dissemination of knowledge, the spread of culture, the very progress of civilization – all these are unthinkable without a medium of communication by word of mouth or through the written or printed word. Vanished nations of antiquity can still speak to us through the words we find carved on the ruins of their architectural remains or the uncovered fragments of their artifacts. These written words are the visible symbols of the speech which was once a living thing, used by living, breathing persons like ourselves. Even from such bits of communication, we become acquainted with the quality of their minds and thought, and across the gulf of time they speak to us as if the years had never been. In more adequate and lasting fashion many winged words spoken in our time are being preserved on film sound-tracks, records, and magnetic tapes, to be reproduced at will in years to come, and we in turn will be able to communicate in this and other ways with posterity. We too may then affect and influence the affairs of men as those people of old, by the fortuitously preserved remains of their religion, laws and literature, contributed to our culture and civilization.

In truth the *word* – spoken or written – is a mighty and indestructible thing – a greater force, perhaps, than any of the forces of nature which are today, through man's knowledge and technical skill, harnessed for peaceful uses or unleashed for destructive ones.

It would be an interesting study to determine the physiological and intellectual processes whereby man came to develop the highly articulate faculty of speech he has today, but the pursuit of such inquiries we must leave to the biologists and psychologists – to decide, for instance, whether speech is dependent upon man's reasoning faculty or *vice versa*. The various abstract

notions such as Soul, Mind, Thought, Reason, Intellect, Ideas, and so on that have to do with man's consciousness of existence – these metaphysical concepts are beyond the power of the average man to explore, yet their expression in literature is of immediate moment to every man and woman.

What is clear to the ordinary man in this connection is that the two human capacities of thought and speech are inseparably involved in each other, of reciprocal influence, and usually simultaneously operative. Words are not applied after thinking: they are the *means* of thought (or a means of thought, for one can think in visual images only, without attaching words to them, or in terms of colours and sounds). In speech, of course, thought and utterance are practically simultaneous. But especially in the process of literary creation the thought itself exists in the words, is the words: the thinker/writer selecting and rejecting, arranging and re-arranging until the most effective combination of words to express the particular thought (so that the thought may be *communicated*) is found. Then the words have clarified and crystallized the thought, the thought has organized the words, the words give communicable form to the thought, and neither could have happened, as it were, or been, without the other.

The cerebration (i.e. nerve-action) which is thought, and the resultant speech – these two activities represent, for most thinking people, the chief developmental difference between man and the lower animal orders.

Whether he was created separately from and in no relation whatever to the beasts, or directly descended from them by a slow process of evolution in Darwinian sense (and both these geneses, whichever we choose to accept, are equally *miraculous*), it is clear enough that man has command of a superior intelligence, one manifestation of which is the articulate and highly organized communication system which is human speech. It is more comprehensive in range, more significant, and of greater power to elicit adequate response, than the few sounds whereby animals convey meaning to others of their kind. And by means of this power of thought and speech men have taught, and learned from, each other to the degree of knowledge and wisdom we have attained today.

It is the very faculty of reason with its effective expression through the medium of a highly developed form of speech which is proof – if such proof were needed – of man's intimate relationship with that all-embracing Intelligence and Power which pervades and controls the cosmos, namely Divinity.

Reason refuses to accept the dismal mechanistic view that man is only a superior mammal with a well-developed nervous system, highly efficient fore-limbs, and the acquired capacity for walking erect. However closely his skeletal, muscular, digestive, circulatory, and nervous systems may correspond to those of a frog or a rabbit, or the amiable dolphin, or the versatile and co-operative chimpanzee, man certainly has other capacities and extrasensory psychical endowments beyond the neural reactions of even the most intelligent animals, which cannot be accounted for on purely physiological grounds. Hence man's physical and intellectual achievements have always been so appreciably in advance of those of any creature, however closely 'related' to man, that the existence and force of this *tertium quid* must be conceded by even the most stubborn rationalist. Man therefore has something else transcending mere intelligence which lifts him out of and above any neat biological classification, namely the indubitable affinity with Godhead, of which his powers of thought and speech are at once the result and the proof. Through these superior spiritual powers man has maintained his governance of the world (even if not of himself), and his is the only species that lifts up its eyes to the heavens to worship, and has produced the arts of which literature is one.

All this is so obvious that its emphasis would be absurd and intolerable, were it not that the relevance of this ingenuous refutation of the animalism of man – a suggestion, even, of a kind of apotheosis of man – will, it is hoped, become apparent as the argument proceeds to determine the nature and function of literary composition.

The beginnings of literature

From the observations of anthropologists and students of folklore among primitive communities in our time we can reconstruct the birth of literature amongst our earliest ancestors far back in pre-history with reasonable certainty as follows:

Besides using his power of speech for the practical purpose of ordinary conversation man found in it a medium for an imaginative activity in creating an art form – that of literary invention, as reflected in the telling of tales and making of songs.

In his waking hours that were not occupied with the sterner necessities of life man had leisure to amuse himself and his fellows. Then he played and sang, told anecdotes and recounted adventures and escapes from peril, relived the excitement of the chase and the wilder joys of battle, bragged about his own prowess and that of his mighty forebears. Many were the graphic and exciting tales of great exploits told round the fireside as the long winter nights drew in, great was the boasting in praise of himself or some other champion. Need we look further than this for the origins of the familiar *isibonga* so characteristic of the warrior tribes of our own country?

Often these marvellous tales would be accompanied by appropriate gestures, song, and the movements of a triumphant dance; by means of action and pantomime a memorable event would be dramatically portrayed, the whole scene vividly re-enacted. It was pleasant then, as now, to hold the attention and enjoy the interest of an appreciative audience, and who shall blame the narrator if the stories came in time to grow in the telling with the addition of highly coloured imaginative detail and some harmless exaggeration. (Do we not even today readily acquiesce in that "willing suspension of disbelief for the moment which constitutes poetic faith"⁵) when we are regaled with the small epics of our angling friends?). The uttering at intervals of a chorus of approving grunts or other audible marks of imaginative audience-participation would serve as a contrapuntal theme punctuating and supporting the narrative or clinching the statement with a refrain. Perhaps a second eye-witness might take up the tale or enact a portion of it. Such was the birth of dramatic narrative in ballad form, or on a larger scale, the epic; such too the beginning of the mimetic art, the source of primitive drama.

These often-told tales of individual heroes, the family group, clan or tribe, would in time become established tradition, and the foundation be laid for a canon of legends in which the protagonists assumed gigantic stature and their achievements acquired an almost supernatural quality, as the mighty deeds ranged

beyond the bounds of the physical world and penetrated even to the shadowy territories of wonder outside reality. As time dimmed the memory of the details of some actual hunt which in the re-telling, however, acquired other wondrous components, the figure of the antagonist lost its natural lineaments and in the folk-imagination was transformed into a monster of supernatural form and quality. Thus Beowulf strove with and slew Grendel and his horrible mother, Siegfried destroyed his dragon.

Many themes for song and story were afforded not only by epic hunts and battles but also by the ordinary circumstances of life, the daily round of existence. Man's common activities within his own environment – as in the search for food, adventure, or only amusement, while ranging over hill and dale, through brake and forest, over streams and up the crags – furnished to his senses and sharply-trained powers of observation episodes and material enough for innumerable stories.

He took note of the behaviour and habits of the beasts, birds and fish, and invented aetiological folk-tales to recount or to explain what he saw. Their counterparts we find among all peoples, such as the nature-tales of the Bushmen or Hottentots; the folk-tales that have come to us as the "Uncle Remus" Stories told by emancipated slaves in North America, that had been handed down to them from their original West-African forebears; and the kind of stories that, in more sophisticated form, Rudyard Kipling gave us in his *Just-So Stories*. Bringing to the invention of these tales shrewd observation, lively imagination, and the collective wisdom of the race, primitive man invested the commonplace, familiar things with an aura of charm and romance and a kind of persuasive truth of beauty.

And so man built up his stock of tales about people, animals, places and things from his natural surroundings and immediate experiences. They were not always told in the ordinary speech of every-day use, but were usually, for greater effect, declaimed, either by the single narrator, or – as often – in a chorus. Man also invented musical instruments. The first of these were probably early versions of the flute and the harp. The harp would naturally lend itself to providing an accompaniment for the narrative, and to the struck chords the declamation would become a chant in which the varying pitch and modulation of the voice

would in time fall into the pattern of a regular tune, and thus song would become the medium for carrying the narrative.

It is probable that the development of various related arts were largely co-incidental in this way and that from the mother art of story-telling were born music, song and dancing, while the combination of these derivative arts would give rise to drama, as indicated above. On another level of imaginative activity other artists, whose predilection and ability lay in those directions, developed the graphic and plastic arts, which were also of a *mimetic*, that is, of an imitative or representative character. These were related to the narrative and dramatic arts, but used pictorial representation for the *mimesis*, and depended for their excellence upon the visual effect of shape and design instead of on hearing and imagination. The plastic arts must have come somewhat later in the history of early man's intellectual development, when his awakening aesthetic sense made him recognize the value of *beauty* which had no utility except to give pleasure, and he slowly learned to combine art with workmanship in his handicrafts. But the first of all man's imaginative creative activities was the art of story-telling, for which the medium was speech – plain or made graphic as we have indicated.

Literature and religion.

Side by side with the making of a purely anthropocentric literary tradition, wherein man in his business of living provided the themes, there also developed another kind of literary activity on a higher and more abstract plane. It had its origin from a fundamental urge, a necessity, woven into man's deepest spiritual nature – not intellectual and conscious, but intuitive, and undefined at first.

In noting the Beowulf and Siegfried legends above we hinted that it was not always the commonplace, familiar things, or only terrestrial heroes and situations, that figured in man's earliest tales. From the beginning man was intensely concerned with two main aspects of life, two planes of existence. In the known sphere of experience he moved within the pale of his physical environment and faced situations arising there that he could handle with the might of his hands or by the use of his own wit and ingenuity. In the other, the unknown sphere, which was not always manifest yet constantly forced its phenomena upon his

awareness, he had to cope with mysterious, terrible forces against which his cunning alone availed him little.

Man was always acutely aware of the harsher aspects of nature, and his vulnerability to their forces. In primitive times life was mostly a struggle for survival: hunger, privation and death were always immediate considerations, accident and injury from many sources were commonplace. These things man strove to understand, and he wrestled with the problems of his existence so posed until he had worked them out.

The greatest and most puzzling problems man strove to explain in acceptable terms were those relating to the mysteries that were so ever-present and insistently assertive, those namely of his own birth, life and death. What were his origins, he wondered, and what was his destiny?

We can hardly doubt that from the very circumstances of his origin as a living species inhabiting the world man must, from the beginning, have had vague but real intimations of aspects of life beyond that of mere physical existence. There were in his experience various recurring psychological phenomena which in time began to impress themselves upon his awareness, and which he learned to know and to accept, even though he could not fully comprehend them. From queer phenomena like sleep, dreams, hallucinations, trance states and visions, even of mental derangements, he learned what he had already dimly perceived by intuition and from his natural, innate religious sense: the existence of the spirit, the soul – that other impalpable part of his personality which was perhaps even more the real *he* than his visible, physical body. With the apprehension of this knowledge he was able to realize the immanence of, and place himself in relation to, the great all-comprehensive, creating Spirit from whom he drew his own being. It was natural for early man to associate the wilder aspects of nature, namely wind, storm, thunder and lightning, and the vital power of the sun, with this Great Spirit; the All-Father; and since the manifestations of His might came from the sky above – that must be His home. So man cast his wondering and worshipping eyes upwards with awe and foreboding.

But for early man even those things which, under normal circumstances and in the friendly light of day, were familiar and

part of his common experience could sometimes assume terrible aspects, and he could only dimly speculate on the nature, and the effect upon himself and his kind, of the terrors lurking in the murky hollows of rock-recesses, the black depths of overgrown valley pools, the gloom of the thick forests, the windswept slopes of mountains. To him it was logical to accredit these natural features with separate and real identities and conscious existence, either of themselves or by virtue of the invisible entities that were their essences or guardian spirits. And the suspected, potentially threatening, forces of nature that he had to contend with, which determined the march of the seasons, and governed the climatic conditions on which his subsistence partly depended — all these things taxed his powers of thought, so that he might understand, and know how best to deal with them. He had to learn how to explain and account for everything. Some of his conclusions and explanatory stories were logically based on proved observations of natural phenomena, but most of them were far-fetched and fanciful.

So man devised a whole cosmogony or theory of creation, and a complete theogony, the myths embodying the genesis and history of the gods relating to all these natural objects and phenomena. In his early animistic stage these beliefs became organized into his earliest form of polytheistic religion. The numerous gods were then either bodiless presences that inhabited, or haunted the vicinity of, every stock and stone, river, lake, grove, forest, mountain-peak; or else they were anthropomorphic beings, dwelling in some indeterminate empyrean home, whom he envisaged as having bodies like his own, beings of an unearthly beauty and superhuman strength, but with the ordinary human attributes, qualities and motives which he himself had.

These were the powerful beings who had created themselves and the cosmos, with everything in it, including man. They could and very often did, interfere in human affairs. The relationship between men and gods was close: the bounds between the spheres of existence of men and gods were hazy and overlapping, so that they could be easily traversed. The result was that the gods would often look with desire on the comely daughters of men, while the goddesses sometimes bestowed their favours on a personable mortal male, and many great heroes were the fruits of

such liaisons. The Zulus and the Japanese are only two of the races whose traditions made them descendants of celestial ancestors.

Some of the gods which belonged to the lower and less formidable orders of the divine hierarchy might be controlled by magic, even tricked, by means of charms and spells, into serving man — a belief that persisted into the Middle Ages, as illustrated by the legend of Faustus, and by the many rare and curious books of magic that have survived from that time. A greater class of gods was that comprising the spirits which could grant or withhold their favour and blessing in respect of an auspicious birth or marriage; or of succour in extremity and death; or relief in respect of season and rain so that plenteous crops might ensue; and in the many other uncertain issues of the daily business of life. As the more powerful of these gods so entirely controlled the destinies of man and had power over life and death, and the unfortunate mortals could never know how arbitrarily they might act in scattering ban or blessing, they had to be served and propitiated by a complex organized form of worship, in the observance of which in time there grew up a complex system of chants, incantations, songs and ritual dances, prayers, offerings, sacrifices and other complicated magical formulae and ceremonies.

It was only in the very earliest times, however, that fear and superstition were at the root of religious practice, and they survive in the superstitious usages of the few isolated and primitive societies remaining today. Where we do still find beliefs and rites of a propitiatory nature among some of our indigenous peoples they are rather survivals of a genuine manifestation of awe and respect for the *manes* of the ancestors (forefathers apotheosised to the position of minor gods), a feature also found amongst the Romans and the Chinese. In later and more highly sophisticated societies man's relations with his gods existed on an easier and more familiar basis. Especially the Greek gods were considered to be in some respects very human-like. They were generally amicably disposed to men, yet they often interfered in human affairs, when they could be unpredictable, jealous and cruel. They sometimes bickered among themselves and carried on heavenly feuds in which hapless mortals might be unwillingly involved and crushed in the cosmic conflicts. On the whole they were beings with unlimited powers but without the moral strength

to make them respectable and awesome.

Whatever the relationship between man and his deities, however, whether based on superstition and fear; or respect and veneration; or a practical wish to ensure protection and aid from beings more powerful than man; or a more positive need for an object of worship as the symbol of Good – it was obvious that man was inferior to the gods and dependent upon them. So, in spite of the obvious shortcomings of the gods which were patent to their shrewder and less bigoted devotees, it was generally considered necessary and expedient to retain divine favour by the observation of pious service. This was done when the forms of worship became organized in an ecclesiastical and hieratic system.

Certain streams, hills, and groves were dedicated to a particular god or goddess, and altars and temples were there erected in their honour. Orders of priests, priestesses and acolytes served in these sacred fanes, and observed the rites and mysteries at the proper times and seasons. They composed and performed the choral songs and stylised dances and revels proper to the religious ceremonies of the various cults. The priestly bards were considered to be divinely inspired, and as having greater accessibility to their divinities. They were the intermediaries between deity and devotees, the medium for the transmission of the divine decrees, the augurs who had to be consulted on every important matter. Such a rôle was fulfilled by the Greek priesthood, for example: in this relation the oracle at Delphi and the tragic figure of Cassandra come readily to mind. Perhaps even better is this caste of priestly bards represented in the Druids of Celtic Britain. They were poets and prophets, even more than the lay teller-of-tales. They were the keepers and preservers of the traditional lore of their people – the literature, the customs, the laws, all the traditional practices attaching to their social and economic life which was most intimately connected with their religion. They were the proper guardians of the national *mores*, even if not of the *morals*.

The poetic faculty

We have now at some length examined two kinds of creative artistic activity, through which men gave shape to their inventiveness, in the two fields of secular and sacred literature. The

creative activities in the making process in both cases were, I think, similar or related, having a common origin in the higher emotional and intellectual faculties of man. The practitioners of these two human activities shared a common artistic and imaginative quality which we cannot describe otherwise than by the overworked word *inspiration*.

We may well now use the word *poetry* for this body of narrative, song, legend, fable, myth, and ritual, and for the process whereby it was composed, for that is exactly what it was. The word comes from the Greek words used in the context, namely: *poiein* = to make; *poiesis* = making, poetry; *poietes* = maker, poet. All literature is a *making*, a creation, just as all the other arts of mimesis or imitation (of life) are a making. For the ancient Greeks all artistic activity, both creative and interpretive, was *poiesis*, making; and the artist a maker, *poietes*. Among the early Germanic peoples, also the Anglo-Saxons, a maker of songs was called a *scôp* = shaper. The relationship between *scôp* = shaper, and the Afrikaans *skep* = create (*skepper* = creator) is obvious.

Among all peoples the poet or bard was held to be specially favoured of the gods and divinely inspired; he was even thought, while in the creative mood, to be *panikos* – slightly mad, under the influence of the god Pan. We are reminded of this by the Shakespeare's somewhat disparaging description of the making activity in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, where he makes Duke Theseus give rather a dim view of lovers and poets whom he classes with lunatics:-

“Lovers and madmen have such seething brains,
Such shaping fantasies, that apprehend
More than cool reason ever comprehends
The lunatic, the lover and the poet
Are of imagination all compact:
.....
The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,
Doth glance from heaven to earth,
from earth to heaven;
And as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name.”⁶⁾

It is apparent, also from the description of the poet's ability to find his themes everywhere, as indicated in the lines above, that the earliest poetry was not confined to the retelling of actual events and observed facts. We have already suggested the importance of imaginative expansion of the bare facts: the essence of poetry, the telling of tales that will be *more* than mere factual reporting, is *imagination* and *invention*. This requires peculiar qualities of the mind not possessed by everyone, a particular faculty of genius that springs from thought, and mastery of words, and other abilities possessed by only certain members of the clan, tribe or society.

The bard, the teller-of-tales, would therefore be one of a rare and select group, one of those individuals who revealed the particular bent for this activity, just as there would be others who had aptitudes for other things, like hunting and fighting, or making weapons, or pottery: most likely the bard would naturally be a more sensitive person – one apart – not of those engaged only in the cruder activities of the group to which he belonged. The man who had this gift might learn its techniques from a master, serving an apprenticeship at his craft until he mastered it, and was then honoured and rewarded by the community.

The Language of Poetry

The speech used for these songs, stories, legends, tales of folklore (and later myths and religious rites) would necessarily be of a special form and style different from and superior to that of ordinary speech, more dignified, and suited to grave and important matters. When dealing with exalted themes man embellished the plain, bald language of every-day use in order to have the proper rhetorical language which could alone serve the purpose. Moreover it had to be a language that would lend itself to the more easy memorising of matter that was constantly growing in variety, length, and complexity, for, until the development of writing, and for a long time after that until the invention of printing, the only medium for the literary art was word of mouth. So man contrived a specialized form of speech for the purpose, and shaped his literary inventions according to, and clothed them in, the forms and features of this language of *making*, of poetry.

His first and most obvious device was to use a more rhythmic pattern than that of ordinary conversation, for deep feeling and

high seriousness demand dignity and emphasis of phrasing in the delivery, or themselves determine and shape the utterance which then falls into impressive periods with regular stresses and rhythms.

Then he added other mnemonic aids – alliteration and assonance and sometimes, in lighter mood, jingles and refrains. Later came more striking language and various more sophisticated poetical devices: retention of archaic words or stock descriptive phrases (such as the *kennings* of Old English poetry); the use of similes, metaphors and other graphic tropes; inversion of normal word-order; imaginative detail. The narrative was not cast in continuous sentences of varying length with the intonation and phrasing of prose speech, but fell naturally into lines or verses of approximately equal length. The rhythm became more marked until there was a regular metrical pattern and beat in the lines, which could be varied to suit changes of feeling or tone, and to avoid monotony.

The whole effect of this rhetorical art was, however, not attained by outward form only. As Sir Philip Sidney says, "... it is not riming and versing alone that maketh a Poet, no more than a long gowne maketh an Advocate"⁷). The bards also infused into their work other more subtle elements of thought and imagination, feeling and passion, carried by the proper arrangement of the words (apart from considerations of mere metre) in order to give the most striking and effective statement; the words themselves contained a wealth of meanings from the suggestive and evocative nature of the images employed; the declamation had an interpretive value and prophetic effect which gave to the particular composition a universality of application: the bard himself sang as if inspired, not only to interpret a personal experience, but to speak for all men. These intangible qualities that clung to the making process filled out and gave greater significance to the sound and sense. The result of this wedding of musical language to the ordered thought of intense personal experience was the achieving of a clarity, conciseness, and completeness of expression, with greater wealth of meaning, than could be attained in the loosely constructed, less deliberate utterance of ordinary colloquial speech on everyday matters.

And so man's specialized speech, shaped for this particular

purpose, acquired in form all the outward trappings and innate meaning and emotionally charged intellectual qualities of that special literary form which we call Poetry. This creative faculty of *making*, and the language he devised to give expression to it, man used for the creation of his wordly literature and the lore on which he based his religious practice, his forms of whorship.

The common element in literature and religion

Faint protests might at this stage be voiced at the attempt to couple two activities of the human mind which may perhaps be considered as having little relationship other than incidental. To me it is perfectly clear, however, that they can – and must – be taken as being related human functions. This is not an *a priori* point of view perversely propagated by forcing the evidence to fit the theory: it is the inevitable conclusion arrived at deductively. Early poetry and religion have the following elements in common:-

- 1) They both spring from an "inspirational" source: they are not deliberate intellectual creations;
- 2) They are both expressions of deeply emotional feeling, acute sensibility, intuitive wisdom: in both cases it is the heart speaking, insistently, and the body and brain cannot choose but acquiesce;
- 3) In both the imagination has active play in creating the matter and the forms of expression; and they share a certain poetic beauty of fitness, and prophetic quality of inevitable truth;
- 4) Most important, their matter is common. The literature of, say, the Greeks is the very matter of their religious beliefs, and the rituals in turn provide occasion for the composition of the proper choral odes and dithyrhams. In drama especially, it is the great cosmic issues, the clash of human nature with divine law, the conflicts of ethical principles, which deeply concern the poets, and which they try to work out in poetry in order to gain this synthesis and reconciliation which must be reached in order to make sense out of the chaotic situations of life.

We may sum it up thus: While in the very earliest times man's secular poetry may have had only slight connections with the religious awareness taking shape in his mind, and the making process that gave form to his worship, it is clear that when we

come to historic times literature and religion are practically synonymous, and fused together in a form that is the last stage in a single, long-established tradition. The myths of the gods form the material for man's literary invention, and the affairs of gods and men are inextricably involved in each other. This is true of all the great mythic systems of the world, such as the Babylonian-Assyrian, the Indian, the Germanic, the Teutonic, the Celtic, the Greek – to mention only those of the old world, which are relevant to our study, and can in their later stages be followed in a written literature.

How the purely literary traditions of a people can be woven into their religion is clear to us from the Hebraic literature of the Old Testament, where legendary matter and tradition, recorded history, moral and civil law, prophetic books, psalms, and other rhapsodic works form a large part of the *corpus* of the literature assembled in the Canon. In the factual historical events recorded in the Books of the Kings, and the Chronicles, for example, as supplemented by the books of the Prophets, we see that branch of literature which is History reflecting the expression of the religion of Isreal and Judah. In the more purely literary books of Daniel, Esther and Ruth we see history, poetry and religion nearly equally mixed. The Book of Job is a work of such great antiquity that here we see myth carrying the poetry, and the poetry expressing the very oldest doctrine of obedience to Jehovah, as these matters must have grown in the very earliest pre-historical ages of oral tradition. The Psalms are the greatest singly body of religious poetry – poetry of the supremest character, and religion of the most idealistically moral kind – the world has ever seen.

For the Greeks, as they appear from the poetry and drama they have left us, religion was so part and parcel of their ordinary lives and of every important social and civil activity, that it was woven into the very texture of their way of life. And here we are not referring to the dim legendary past of the "Heroic Age" portrayed in Homer and Hesiod, when gods and men were believed to have trodden the world together: we are thinking here of the Greece of the sixth to the fourth centuries B.C. In these times even the performance of their Attic drama and the dedications of their athletic sports were of the nature of the religious festivals. Their religion was at this time very actual and real and it per-

meated their lives as a normal feature like any other activity of life. Their religion provided their literary tradition; their literature embodied and expressed their religious beliefs.

As time went on, and we come to Greek life and society in the two centuries before the pre-Christian era we note a change in this attitude as the power of traditional orthodox thinking began to decline. People no longer believed every fantastic detail of their mythology; they observed their religious obligations casually as a traditional cultural activity, a good custom that would not do anybody any harm, and might even still be a good thing. (We fear that this is the temper of many modern professing Christians!).

But we note another more interesting, and perhaps more valuable side to this classic *Götterdämmerung*, and two very timely reasons for it. First, the importance of the gods begins to wane because there is a slow but sure shift of emphasis from god to man. Poets come to realize that the cosmic antics of the gods are rather unreal, even trivial, and belong to the romantic atmosphere of antiquity, the "Heroic Age" which has definitely passed, whereas the more immediate problems and conflicts of men and women of flesh and blood have a far greater significance in life. Human passion and suffering are fitter subjects for tragic poetry, and more relevant to the actual situations of life than the fabled adventures of unsubstantial divinities who cannot really experience adversity, sorrow or pain. The movement is away from the *ideal* towards a greater *reality*. No longer can men be interested in mere episodic narratives of incidental action, unrelated to human character, but only in human documents containing a consideration of action flowing from motive, and the psychological analysis of these motives. Poetry more fitly portrays men and women acting under the influence of sensibility and the stress of strong passion, wrestling with ethical problems and the moral principles which will determine their actions. The immediate effect of this heightening of tone is to increase the artistic value of the poetry. It is now a more philosophical thing, containing studies of universal humanity, with greater fidelity to nature. But apart from this greater humanizing of literature, there is another reason for the change in temper. The decline of the traditional orthodox religious values is also due to a growing scepticism as a result of the increasing study of philosophy and

the widening horizons of the natural sciences. The traditional polytheistic ideas had always carried within themselves the weakness that would cause their ultimate rejection. A religion based on a shaky foundation of fanciful tales about a whole host of gods of doubtful power and indifferent morality had sooner or later to succumb before the onslaughts of rational thinking. And this brings us to two important points we have to make in this context.

Man's religious sense essentially monotheistic

Much of what we have said above on the possible way in which early man's considerations of life and nature determined the development of his religious ideas and contributed to his literature would seem to indicate that the ideas must inevitably be animistic and so lead to universal polytheism. This conclusion is not correct.

I must now submit a theory which I realize I would be hard put to substantiate by proofs; however, by the same token, it can as little be disproved: whence I may be justified in venturing to advance it, fanciful as it may be, and contemptible to minds of sterner stuff!

I must ask you to go back with me into the dim and indeterminate ages of pre-history: any time, say, between 250,000 and 20,000 years ago – to the times from which, according to the findings and reckoning of geologists and paleontologists, remains of man (or the earliest man-like creatures) have been found.

I believe it is possible that in those times Man – originally created perfect and in the image of his God – was condemned, as a result of his disobedience and fall from grace, to wander the hostile earth in a debased condition of degradation, savagery and ignorance, from which he had, through slow and painful development over many agonizing millenia of evolution, to work himself up anew to the status he had had in the time of his pristine innocence – that of *homo sapiens*, *homo religiosus*. The man of those 'primitive' times would be man at the level where we know him in the reconstructions made by ingenious anthropologists from a fragment of a jawbone or a brainpan: the pithecanthropic creature of the beetling brows, the prognathous face, the hairy body, and the sub-human intelligence who – although perhaps by

only a very little – was even then the superior of the beasts, or (if one prefers) the *other* beasts.

It was this man who in the centuries of slow and toilsome emergence from that primitive state (at probably about the beginning of the "Iron Age" – some 10,000 years before the birth of Christ), rose to the measure of civilization wherein he, by virtue of the dormant godlike spark in him which *would* not be extinguished even at his most bestial, could invent the poetry and develop the forms of worship we have noted above. The animistic basis of his thinking which led him to the making of a polytheistic mythology was the result of mistaken thinking due to his childlike ignorance in that stage of his mental and intellectual development. The irresistible *inner urge* to give expression to his religious sense was due to the existence in his subconscious mind of the *true religious sense* which had its origin in the first of all men. Throughout the ages of evolution and development the germinal principle of monotheistic belief and a sublimer, more moral religious sense must have existed in vestigial form deep down in man's consciousness – the faint primordial flicker of a memory of identification with Godhead: the "still, small voice of God", which would later grow into the conviction of perfect faith, and drive out all lesser creeds.

"For the Lord is great, and greatly to be praised:
he is to be feared above all gods."

For all the gods of the nations are idols: but
the Lord made the heavens. "8)

At the proper time (appointed by divine Will before the beginning of time) when most peoples were still worshipping a multiplicity of gods, bowing to their dumb and ineffectual graven images, these heathen cults came to be challenged by a purely monotheistic religion of a sterner, narrower, more ethical kind, stemming from the worship of the omnipotent Father-God of goodness and truth, who had made a covenant with His chosen people that they should owe Him love and yield perfect obedience to His laws. This higher concept of godhead and religion came from the more moral culture and philosophy of the humble shepherd-tribes who wrested a hard living from the barren hills of the deep Middle East, the descendants of the patriarchal Abraham to whom this service had been revealed by God himself a thousand

years or more *before* those religions were systematized which we see reflected in the records of the Assyro-Babylonian or Egyptian structures of myth and legend.

Polytheism and monotheism thus had independent origins, nor can the latter be said to have come after or evolved from the former which is really the aberrant form. It was natural and inevitable that monotheistic worship, the superior form, should oust all other forms wherever it spread, by virtue of its own vitality and elemental truth, and it has become the corner-stone of western civilization itself.

Early literature and religion – primitive science

The other point I have to make is the attempt to refute a common fallacy which has done great harm in clouding man's judgement of his own inner nature and deeper affairs. Because poetry and religion deal with the invisible, impalpable things that have their existence in imagination and faith, and do not lend themselves to rational and sensory examination, they are often contrasted with Science, which is knowledge gained from experience and experiment, and tested and proved so that its logical factual content may be stated and accepted in the cold light of reason. So these things have been placed in opposition to each other as if they were exact contraries. This idea is erroneous.

The healthy scepticism and curiosity characteristic of man's insatiable thirst for knowledge which we noted above among the later Greeks had also been present in man's mind comparatively early, even the mind of the more sophisticated "Stone-Age" man who dared to look upon and think of his environment as a challenge to his intelligence. In his very desire to understand the mysteries of nature and life around him which urged him to contrive explanations to account for all the things he saw, experienced, and nearly always dreaded, he was building better than he knew. He had to examine, justify, explain, even counteract or avert, if possible, and in doing all this he was dimly trying to *control nature* and its blind forces, in order to assert his human ascendancy. Although his rationalizing activity may have been childish and fantastic, and despite his fear and ignorance, he was displaying courage in exercising his intellect thus; for he was standing up to the Unknown, and attempting to wrest from it its

secrets, little realizing, meanwhile, the great psychological truth that danger boldly faced is already half overcome. We cannot dismiss the importance of mythology and folklore in the beginnings of man's intellectual growth, for through the labyrinth of primitive metaphysics we see the emergence of ordered philosophical thought. He who braves the Unknown robs it of its terrors and dangers, and when its nature is determined its control follows quickly.

The myths and folklore tales which observed, speculated, explained, rationalized, and generally blundered through the mazes of philosophy and metaphysics in search of concrete truth, and even attempted to control natural and supernatural powers by means of charms, spells, fetishes and the other paraphernalia of mumbo-jumbo, did elicit here and there crumbs of intuitive apprehension; were, in truth, the first stirrings of primitive science. In a certain sense any myth that seeks an acceptable explanation for a natural or supra-natural problem, however fanciful that explanation may be, is at least in the nature of a hypothesis, whose validity, when once it has been formulated and stated, may be tested by observation and other checks. The average folk-tale is already an attempt to order observed phenomena and draw a rule from actual instances: this is the very essence of scientific method. The fact that the observed data is still inadequate, and the interpretations made therefrom faulty, does not yet invalidate the attempt, or the method. We know from our own indigenous races what a wealth of natural lore is embedded in stories of animals and their habits – the result of careful observation and imaginative study over generations of people with very inadequate intellectual equipment.

A great deal of established scientific knowledge had been extracted from the dark ways of pagan worship by the time of the Greek philosophers of the Sophist School in the fourth century B.C.; and hundreds of years earlier even, the Egyptians (who were then still worshipping, amongst other, the sun-god Ra and the moon-goddess Isis, besides all the other hawk and jackal gods of death) had brought the science of mathematics to a very advanced stage. Their handiwork is witness to the astonishing degree of pure knowledge they had attained. The pyramids they erected contain in their structure evidence of a knowledge of

architecture, mechanics, physical laws, astronomy and other related sciences which is nothing less than amazing.

Thus scientific and technological expertise and the skills which today enable man to achieve almost incredible things – as when man with his space-probes assaults the very heavens, home of the gods, – all have their humble origins in man's imaginative and poetic thought at the dawn of time when he was struggling to find, and clasp, the strong hand of his God.

Conclusions

The listener who has remained with me thus far may be justly forgiven for wondering at this stage where all the inquiry is leading to. We have indeed gone a long and devious way, but our progress has not been without result, for we have – unfortunately very cursorily – examined and established some points on the following matters:-

- 1) Man's faculty of speech seen as the expression of a certain affinity with divine power;
- 2) the use of this power of speech (allied with imaginative thought) to create literature (poetry);
- 3) a modest theory (or at least a re-statement) that the poetic faculty, associated with a profound intimation of pristine kinship with deity, is the source of man's monotheistic religious nature;
- 4) an indication that the branches of man's knowledge – namely the revealed, as religion; the imaginative-creative, as poetry; and the expository, as philosophy and science – are related intellectual activities;
- 5) we have seen how, before the beginning of the Christian era, literature in its later stages of development became *humanized*, through a shift of emphasis from gods to men, so that its themes are now *men in action* under the stress of strife with moral issues and ethical problems.

Much of the discussion, I am aware, was speculative but certainly not entirely fanciful; it is obvious however that these matters require (and deserve) much more extensive argument and adducing of cumulative evidence than this occasion affords.

It remains for me (as envisaged early in this address) to integrate these matters in an assessment of the nature of poetry and

its value in these times. It is difficult to do this unless we realize at the same time the function of Criticism — that activity which you and I and the other “common reader” have to practise if we are to get the greatest value out of our study of literature, and if it is to have the value we believe it to have, and which it should have if it is to be justified in a materialistic world whose criteria are all too often chiefly utilitarian and mercenary.

Criticism in its widest and best sense is a very necessary activity, as is clear from the immense amount of critical writing which has been done over nearly twenty-five centuries of Western European culture. It is the study of the “theory” of literary creation, in order to judge of books and writers; and its chief end is the fullest possible comprehension of man’s “making” genius. It comprehends at least two activities. In its limited sense it means examining literary works in order to determine their artistic excellence (or lack of it), so that the inferior may be dismissed and attention given only to what is really great and has aesthetic, moral and intellectual value. But secondly it also embraces the very ability to understand the true nature of creative writing, to know what its purpose is, what it is supposed to *do*; and then to judge *in how far* a particular piece of literature *succeeds in fulfilling its function*, and so succeeding, or failing, as a work of art.

The early Greek critics in classic times, from a close study of the extant works of art which were then generally acclaimed as great, attempted to extract from literature itself what were its organic “laws” of structure, what were the qualities peculiar to it that made it a worth-while human intellectual activity. Later critics then tested *their* contemporary literature against the rules or “laws” of the ancients to see how far their work “conformed”. We are familiar with their conclusions and attempted definitions. And today, as then, the nature of poetry can be broadly indicated by its *effect*: its purpose is to *please* and to *instruct*, and its value can be determined by the extent to which it succeeds in doing this. Critical opinions differ on the question of where the emphasis should fall on these two *functions* of literature, and, indeed, upon the question whether this is in fact the correct definition, or even a partially adequate definition; but an examination of these problems is out of the question for us here. We may safely say that most people read for the one or the other of these

two ends. And the unhappy truth as regards the mass of people in these times is just this — that they read chiefly for pleasure and relaxation. This is the age of prose, of the novel, and especially of the novel of suspense or of illicit or vicious passions, or all the other themes that give a vicarious “thrill” to people who only seek a form of escape from reality.

Yet the hard truth is that only that literature is best, and worthy of your and my attention, which has been produced by the greatest minds — by people who had something profound and valuable to communicate: work, therefore which will most richly repay with pleasure and profit those who demand only that which is excellent. And such great literature is never simple and easy. It requires devoted study, an intellectual approach, reading with a discriminating and critical mind. But such reading then nourishes the mind further, and trains the reader to understand and to judge, not only literature itself, but — much more important — mankind and life. For where all the other branches of human knowledge and intellectual activity have as their purpose the specific search after *truth* within the sphere of that particular branch of knowledge (and so, indirectly, with the nature and problems of man and life) and have their chief value from the very narrowness of the self-imposed limitations of specialization, it is the very comprehensiveness of literature which determines its particular value: it is the study of man himself in his various life-situations. Man is the central fact of the natural world. Poets, dramatists, and novelists have therefore been subjecting man (in all the revelation of his human strength and weakness) to the closest scrutiny and analysis ever since man has had the ability to examine himself and his deeds critically.

Literature is the visible and accessible copy of the *book of life itself*. Not that literature is a textbook of human behaviour with the specific or implied object of “teaching” man: such obvious didacticism would immediately vitiate any work of art. The improving moral tale has never, even at its best, been highly thought of. Yet there is a sense in which every great work of art is, inevitably, a commentary upon, and therefore a criticism of, man and life. And as it mirrors and interprets life so it will instruct as well as please, and therefore be didactic.

The effect of all great literature is to make man able to view

himself and his thoughts, passions, motives, values, and the effects they have, in the right light and perspective, with that clarity and sanity which is implicitly taught by the great books of all nations. And, as the reader's comprehension grows with reading, and his insight into human nature increases, so will his critical judgement of himself, and his compassion for his fellow-men become profounder, and he may then realize the *unity* in the *natural diversity* of men, the fundamental correspondences existing between all human beings, the essential kinship with each other of all the members of mankind. When man is able to see this relationship with his fellow-men, also those relationships which are generally clouded by ignorance and the inculcated prejudices of environment and training; when he has been stripped, or has freed himself, or all self-delusions, and so attained true humility – then it will be possible for him to start anew to re-create the world and society, and to start building towards a happier dispensation for all men.

I do not wish to give even the appearance of claiming that literature can do all this. Every man must, of course, be a fanatical believer in, and champion of, his own chosen subject or discipline: nevertheless I would be more than foolish if I tried to give the impression that literature is the panacea for all the world's ills. Only the grace of a genuine, unequivocal capitulation to the power of religion could accomplish that complete change of heart in mankind which would achieve this heaven on earth. What I do want to state most emphatically is this: that a devoted and informed study of great literature will go far to creating the climate and atmosphere for a *revaluation* of the current values of society. We will not find this in escapist popular literature, but in that serious literature which faces up to life, forces man to see himself as he is, and so speaks with a clear voice to responsible, thinking people.

It is the genuine belief of teachers of literature that the study of literature, for the acquisition of an extensive and profound knowledge of the best that man has thought and written, is an excellent training of vital importance for any one who would have a *truly emancipated mind and a strict balance of judgement*, which are rarer virtues than we realize. (Of course, each of us knows that we are informed and broadminded, sensible, tolerant, un-

prejudiced: it is always *the other man* who is ignorant, stubborn and prejudiced!)

A balanced judgement, a free, unclouded mind, a wide knowledge and sympathy – these are essential qualities for every ordinary man and woman of the earth's 3,200,000,000 inhabitants; much more so for the few score thousand of thinkers, leaders, teachers, technicians, and entrepreneurs who have in their hands the terrible responsibility of controlling the destinies and solving the problems of those teeming millions who are increasing at the rate of fifty millions every year.

Literature, then, has no limits to its field of study: it is the study of the whole man, of all life. It is a *conspectus*, wide in its sweep, of every aspect of man's nature and heart and mind, that explores these territories in order to show how men act, and why they do so, in their own affairs, and towards other men. It exposes man's weaknesses: it also discovers man's potentialities. I think that on the whole great literature has triumphantly asserted and affirmed the dignity of man. I am led to this view, and I want you to share in the discovery, by some of the themes that speak to us from literature, especially poetry, which – as we have indicated earlier and throughout this essay – is perhaps the most concentrated, distilled essence of the experience of the writers who (with or without their knowing it) by the very practice of their craft were the natural and ordained singers, prophets, and priests of mankind, the universal interpreters of so much of divine wisdom, truth, and beauty as man may in this existence be allowed to understand and to enjoy.

If I might also dare to stray where other surer feet have trodden (and faltered) I would try to define poetry thus:

Poetry is the purest, and most perfect form of literature, the acutest vision, the most concentrated statement of truth and beauty. The poet is a man of the greatest sensibility, the most comprehensive vision, and capable of the justest interpretation and ordering of thought, which he can communicate by using the fittest and most significant language; and by an extension and application of the particular (the experience of the poet and the reader) to the general (the experience of all mankind), poetry becomes a criticism of life, a reconciliation of the limited and imperfect (man) with ultimate perfection (divine intelligence and will); and so incidentally it is a measure and a guide for human judgement and behaviour, and a source of great pleasure.

I am aware that this clumsily expressed definition contains, besides its own ineptitudes, echoes of Johnson, Wordsworth and Matthew Arnold: this I cannot help, for all three wrote much good sense on these matters and each expressed part of the truth. The ideal definition would have to be a pastiche of all the key statements of all the great critics from Aristotle to T.S. Eliot, who each formulated a part of the truth, *plus* the critically trained reader's own additions and qualifications. For poetry is such a complex thing that a definition to fit all poetry including that of Chaucer, Milton, Shakespeare, Donne, Blake, Wordsworth, Keats, Coleridge, Tennyson and Eliot would have to be a very comprehensive and elastic one: for that reason that it has not yet been satisfactorily formulated. Perhaps even a composite definition made up from all the critical works of all the great critics would still be inadequate. Poetry cannot be concisely defined for it speaks so directly to the sensibilities and intellect of each critically sensitive reader that any definition is bound to be subjective. One apprehends poetry with one's total response – of body and heart and brain, and even more, with the *intuition which is the intelligence of the soul*. Remembering our insistence earlier in this address on the necessity for the right critical approach by each reader to great literature, we are gratified to find support for our views in the statement of Anatole France:-

“Le bon critique est celui qui raconte les aventures de son âme au milieu des chefs-d'oeuvre.”⁹⁾

--- The good critic is he who relates the adventures of his soul among masterpieces. (My italics).

Poetry is the universal voice, the composite interpretive utterance of all mankind. Each one of us will best be able to make his own definitions from poetry itself, the final source; and I conclude this inquiry by quoting a few – too few – extracts to illustrate what I have been saying, suggesting, arguing, and pleading throughout this address. The following qualities go to make significant and therefore great poetry:-

1. **Loftiness and fervour of faith**, found in that poetry in which the prophetic note is sounded most clearly, as

(i) The Bible: “My heart is inditing a good matter: my tongue is the pen of a ready writer.”¹⁰⁾

(ii) Idem: Then flew one of the seraphim unto me, having a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with the tongs from off the altar: and he laid it upon my mouth.....

Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, Whom shall I send... Then said I, Here am I; send me.¹¹⁾

(iii) Idem: ...The LORD said unto me, Say not, I am a child: for thou shalt go to all that I send thee, and whatsoever I command thee thou shalt speak..... Then the LORD put forth his hand, and touched my mouth. And the LORD said unto me, Behold, I have put my words in thy mouth.”¹²⁾

There we have the task, the charge, and the charter of the poet.

2. **Invincible courage**, which even in pagan poetry expresses a faith that refuses the admission of defeat – a faith that man cannot have from himself alone, but from some inexhaustible reserve where he can draw from:

(i) Homer: *Iliad* – Σεῦ πάτερ, ἀλλὰ σὺ
 ῥῦσαι ὑπ’ ἡέρος υἱας Ἀχαιῶν,
 ποίησον, δ’ αἴθρη,
 δὸς δ’ ὀφθαλμοῖσιν ἰδέσθαι. ¹³⁾

---Zeus having plunged the contending Greeks and Trojans into mist and darkness, and the fighters' courage so being robbed of use, Ajax hurls a challenging plea to Father Zeus that he dispel the mist, brighten heaven with sunshine, grant them the sight of their eyes, and – “so it be but in daylight, destroy us.” This is the courage of one who feels that if he must die it will be an exit in a last blaze of glory.

(ii) *The Battle of Maldon* –

“Hige sceal þe heardra, heorte þe cēne,
 mod sceal þe mære, þe ure mægen lytlað.”¹⁴⁾

---Thought shall be the harder, heart the keener,
 Courage shall be the more, as our might lessens.”

(iii) Shakespeare: *Macbeth* –

“Arm, arm, and out!

.....
 Ring the alarum-bell! Blow, wind! come, wrack!
 At least we'll die with harness on our back.”¹⁵⁾

– Macbeth realizes that with Lady Macbeth dead and retribution knocking at the gates, he has come to the end of his tether; so he almost welcomes death, as a man accepting his fate with dignified resignation.

- (iv) There is the unforgettable parallel in Edmond Rostand's *Cyrano de Bergerac*, where the adventurer-poet, realizing the approach of death, says defiantly:-

“Always the answer – yes! Let me die so--
Under some rosy-golden sunset, saying
A good thing, for a good cause! By the sword,
The point of honour – by the hand of one
Worthy to be my foeman, let me fall--
Steel in my heart, and laughter on my lips! 16)

3. Related to this quality is the one we may describe as *Simple Grandeur*: as in Simonides's Epitaph on the 300 Spartans who fell to a man at Thermopylae. In its very restraint and stark simplicity it rises to a sublimity not very often attained:- ὦ ξειν', ἄγγελον Λακεδαιμονίοις
ὅτι τῆδε / κείμεθα, τοῖς κείνων
ῥήμασι πειθόμενοι. 17)

– Stranger, tell the Lacedaemonians that we lie here obedient to their orders.

This is one of those complete, perfect .. understatements, almost, that ring true, and leave nothing more to be said.

4. Next I would mention the intangible and indefinable means whereby poets in a few words can transport us to far-away places, or *create* the very atmosphere and feeling of *magic and bewitchment*:-

- (i) Vergil:- “Tacitae per amica silentia lunae.” 18)
– Amid the friendly silence of the still moon.
- (ii) Goethe:- “Kennst du das Land, wo die Zitronen blühen,
Im dunkeln Laub die Goldorangen glühen,
Ein sanfter Wind vom blauen Himmel weht,
Die Myrte still und hoch der Lorbeer stecht,
Kennst du es wohl?”

– Knowest thou the land where the lemon-trees bloom?
In the dark foliage the golden oranges gleam,
A soft wind blows from the blue heaven,
The myrtle is still and the laurel stands high:
Dost thou know it well?

- (iii) Or as when Keats, with a blend of self-conscious art and the happy chance of inspiration, achieved the two immortal lines that are the epitome of all enchantment:

“Charm'd magic casements, opening on the foam
Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.” 20)

- (iv) and Coleridge:-

“For he on honey-dew hath fed,
And drunk the milk of paradise.” 21)

- (v) It is characteristic of the peculiar genius of Edward Lear (and of the magic inherent in poetry) that a sinister atmosphere of mystery and horror can be created even in an avowedly humorous or nonsense poem (no less than Coleridge does so in another mode in *Christabel*):

“When the awful darkness and silence reign
Over the great Gromboolian plain,
... When the storm-clouds brood on the
towering heights
Of the Hills of Chankly Bore .
Then through the vast and gloomy dark,
There moves a single lurid light,
... And those who watch at that midnight hour
Cry, as the wild light passes along--
... ‘The Dong! -- The Dong!
... The Dong with the luminous Nose!’ 22)

5. We note too, the *Magic music of poetry*: how only in this art a thing may be rightly said, the idea captured, the vision frozen, as it were, in photographic clarity, by the haunting, musical phrase, the *mot juste*. Note, for example, the suggestion of breathless speed with which night comes in the tropics, in this quotation:

(i) Coleridge:

"The sun's rim dips; the stars rush out:
At one stride comes the dark." (23)

'Rush' and 'stride' suggest the space-devouring advance of some vast, cosmic giant. And listen to the boom and crash of the long Pacific combers in

(ii) Tennyson:

"The myriad shriek of wheeling ocean-fowl,
The league-long roller thundering on the reef." (24)

Here even the unexpressed is suggested: the hiss of the foam.

There is all the sinuous, silent movement of a feline in the suggestive images of the following:-

(iii) T. S. Eliot:

"The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes,
The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-panes." (25)

(iv) Carl Sandburg:

"The fog comes
On little cat feet." (26)

Then there is the *Apprehension of Truth*, the flash of insight, the illuminating thought, so characteristic of the poetic power:

(i) Keats:

"'Beauty is truth, truth beauty,' - that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know." (27)

(ii) Wordsworth:

"Not in entire forgetfulness
And not in utter nakedness,
But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God, who is our home." (28)

The poet's meaning is not immediately or easily intelligible, nevertheless the reader accepts the statements: he is beguiled and convinced by the poetry.

7. Then I would also like to mention the *Profundity of Simplicity* when the very restraint of a poignant passage makes it almost unbearably pathetic, even painful - as in:

(i) Shakespeare: Lear (in a lucid moment during his madness)

"I am a very foolish fond old man,
Fourscore and upward, not an hour more or less;
And, to deal plainly
I fear I am not in my right mind." (29)

(ii) Wordsworth:

"She lived unknown, and few could know
When Lucy ceased to be;
But she is in her grave, and, oh,
The difference to me!" (30)

8. We must note the *Universal Love* that speaks from, and is proclaimed by, great poetry:

(i) Coleridge:

"He prayeth best who loveth best
All things both great and small." (31)

(ii) Blake:

"For Mercy has a human heart,
Pity a human face,
And Love, the human form divine,
And Peace, the human dress.

And all must love the human form,
In heathen, turk, or jew;
Where Mercy, Love, & Pity dwell
There God is dwelling too." (32)

9. At the risk of repeating myself I have to emphasise how one is constantly being struck by the *Truth* of the epigrammatic power which poetry so constantly reveals, especially in satire:

9. At the risk of repeating myself I have to emphasise how one is constantly being struck by the *Truth* of the epigrammatic power which poetry so constantly reveals, especially in satire:

(i) Horace:

"Ut qui conducti plorant in funere, dicunt
et faciunt prope plura dolentibus ex animo. . . 33)

- Hired mourners at a funeral say and do
A little more than they whose grief is true."

We no longer hire mourners to put up a good show at a funeral, but Horace's acute vision in this couplet saw through all pretence, all hypocrisy, and so lasts beyond a topical relevance and becomes a universal, timeless truth. And all the disillusion and disgust felt by a *fin de siècle* generation is expressed by T.S. Eliot: he first gives one of those incomparably drab pictures of sterility and etiolation in people's natures and lives - as in 'smell of steaks in passageways', 'faint stale smells of beer', 'the hands that are raising dingy shades in a thousand furnished rooms' and in the lines:

(ii) ". . . the smoke that rises from the pipes
of lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of
windows. . . 34),

and then the wonderful image, frightening as some obscene thing from a horror-film:-

(iii) "I should have been a pair of ragged claws
Scuttling along the floors of silent seas." 35)

There is accuracy of observation, bitter truth and wry humour but also ineffable compassion in the 'typing' of a whole layer of society in the short, telling statement:-

(iv) "I am aware of the damp souls of housemaids
Sprouting despondently at area gates." 36)

which makes vivid and real to us the humanity of:

(v) "I am moved by fancies that are curled
Around these images, and cling:
The notion of some infinitely gentle
Infinitely suffering thing." 37)

10. Then I quote, finally, a few extracts illustrating various moods of *religious faith*, from the quiet assurance of George Herbert to the jubilation of Gerard Manley Hopkins, from the despair of a damned soul to the triumph of the redeemed, that demonstrate how religion and poetry cut across bounds of man-made doctrine.

(i) The Bible:

"Truly my soul waiteth upon God. . . 38)

Surely I have behaved and quited myself,
As a child that is weaned of his mother." 39)

(ii) Idem:

"I waited patiently for the LORD, . . and he
inclined unto me, and heard me cry." 40)

(iii) Herbert:

"Nor let them punish me with losse of rime,
Who plainly say, *My God, My King*." 41)

(iv) Idem:

"Love bade me welcome: yet my sould drew back,
Guiltie of dust and sinne. . .

And know you not, sayes Love, who bore the blame?
My deare, then I will serve.
You must sit downe, sayes Love, and taste my meat:
So I did sit and eat. 42)

(v) Marlowe shows the intense, terrified grief of Faustus who knows that he has betrayed his Lord and lost his soul:

"O lente, lente currite, noctis equi!
The stars move still, time runs, the clock will strike,
The devil will come, and Faustus must be damned.
O, I'll leap up to my God! - Who pulls me down? - 43)
See, see where Christ's blood streams in the firmament!
One drop would save my soul, half a drop: ah, my Christ!

Note the agonized sound of the exclamation 'ah!' in the last line, and compare it with the 'ah!' in the extract from Hopkins, which is a sigh of exquisite joy:

(vi) Hopkins:

"The world is charged with the grandeur of God.

.....
O, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs —
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright
wings. 44)

Hopkins's poetry is always joyous and incantatory, whether he adores ecstatically or quietly, or wrestles with God:-

(vii) "Look at the stars! look, look up at the skies!

O look at all the fire-folk sitting in the air!
The bright boroughs, the circle-citadels there!
..... This piece-bright paling shuts in spouse
Christ home, Christ and his mother and all his
hallows." 45)

(viii) "Thou art indeed just, Lord, if I contend
With thee; but, sir, so what I plead is just.
..... Mine, O thou lord of life, send my roots rain." 46)

(ix) "Give beauty back, beauty, beauty, beauty, back to God,
beauty's self and beauty's giver." 47)

But there is no end to the beauty, the fitness, the truth. We could go on like this for ever, tasting, savouring, experiencing the wise and true things that wise men and women have said and written. It is all stated very succinctly by Ruskin, when he says:

"To see clearly is poetry, prophecy, and religion all in one." 48)

We may epitomize poetry as concisely with our own little epigram, giving a slight twist to Milton, when we say that the purpose of poetry is

"to justify the ways of man to God."

The nature and purpose of poetry have been described for us by many poets, and by critics who were not poets themselves

but had made it their study of a lifetime. One who was poet, dramatist, and translator — George Chapman whose translations of Homer inspired Keats's noble sonnet — has left us a complete criticism describing (i) the task of the poet, (ii) the purpose of poetry, and (iii) the nature of the poetic impulse, all in one short and memorable statement:-

"To the glory of God, and the singing of his glories, no man dares deny, man was chiefly made. And what art performs this chief end of man with so much excitation and expression as Poesie?... And since the excellence of it cannot be obtained by the labour and art of man, as all easily confess it, it must needs be acknowledged a divine infusion." 49)

There it is, so it seems to me: To the glory of God, and the singing of His glories, man was chiefly made, and the art whereby he may best do this is that of Poesie. That is man's noblest calling, that is poetry's chief function. And from this follows that the function of the critic is to study all poetry in this light, to determine its merits according to the way in which it performs its function so defined.

It will be the task and considered duty of this Department to strive to lead its students to the *whole* understanding of literature, and therefore to comprehend man with insight, sympathy, and love; to apply in their own lives, if possible, the humane doctrine of poetry; always to assert, as does all literature, the dignity and worth of man, the chief crown of which is man's recognition and acceptance of, not only his 'rights' but also his responsibilities to mankind as a whole; and to study their chosen discipline like true scientists, in the spirit and in the light of what I have tried to convey in this address.

Let me finally, in support of this *credo*, quote a modern poet whom no one can accuse of being a starry-eyed romantic, as little as his honesty and sincerity can be doubted: Dylan Thomas, in the prefatory note to his *Collected Poems* says the following:-

"These poems with all their crudities, doubts, and confusions are written for the love of man and in praise of God, and I'd be a damn fool if they weren't." 50)

— And that just about says everything, I think.

REFERENCES

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Page	Ref.	Author	Work
3	1	Walter Bagehot	Literary Studies Vol. 2
4	2	Ivan Turgenev	Fathers and Sons
4	3	John Ruskin	Sesame and Lilies, preface
5	4	D.H. Lawrence	Complete Poems Vol. 2
10	5	S.T. Coleridge	Biographia Literaria, xiv
17	6	W ^m Shakespeare	A Midsummer Night's Dream, V, i.
19	7	Sir Philip Sidney	An Apologie for Poetry
24	8	The Bible	Psalm 96 - 4,5
32	9	Anatole France	La Vie Litteraire, preface
32	10	The Bible	Psalm 45: 2
33	11	Idem	Isaiah 6: 6, 7, 8
33	12	Idem	Jeremiah 1: 7, 8, 9
33	13	Homer	Iliad, xvii - 645
33	14	Anonymous	The Battle of Maldon, 312
33	15	Shakespeare	Macbeth, V, v
34	16	Edmond Rostand	Cyrano de Bergerac, tr. Brian Hooker
34	17	Simonides of Ceos	Epitaph on Spartan Dead
34	18	P. Vergilius Maro	Aeneid, ii - 255
35	19	Johan W. von Goethe	"Mignon", fr. Wilhelm Meister, III, i
35	20	John Keats	Ode to a Nightingale
35	21	Coleridge	Kubla Khan
35	22	Edward Lear	The Dong with a Luminous Nose
36	23	Coleridge	Rime of the Ancient Mariner, Pt ii
36	24	Alfred Tennyson	Enoch Arden
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36	26	Carl Sandburg	Fog
36	27	Keats	Ode on a Grecian Urn
36	28	Wm Wordsworth	Ode on Intimations of Immortality
37	29	Shakespeare	King Lear, IV, vii
37	30	Wordsworth	Lucy
37	31	Coleridge	Ancient Mariner, Pt. vii
37	32	William Blake	Poems of Innocence. "The Divine Image"
38	33	Q. Horatius Flaccus	Ars Poetica - transl. Conington
38	34	T.S. Eliot	Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock
38	35	Ditto	Idem
38	36	Ditto	'Morning at the Window'
39	37	Ditto	Preludes, iv
39	38	The Bible	Psalm 62: 1
39	39	Ditto	Psalm 131: 2
39	40	Ditto	Psalm 40: 1
39	41	George Herbert	'Jordan'
39	42	Ditto	'Love'
39	43	Christopher Marlowe	Dr. Faustus, V, iii
40	44	G.M. Hopkins	God's Grandeur
40	45	Ditto	The Starlight Night
40	46	Ditto	Thou art indeed just, Lord
40	47	Ditto	The Leaden Echo and the Golden Echo
40	48	Ruskin	Modern Painters, I, I, iii
41	49	George Chapman	Preface to the Iliad
41	50	Dylan Thomas	Collected Poems - note.

Afterword

A Scientist and a Linguist on *Intuition*:

“Scientists often speak of the ‘flash of insight’ which penetrates into the heart of a difficult problem. Albert Einstein has said that ‘the really valuable factor is intuition’. This ‘flash of insight,’ or ‘intuition,’ requires imagination, and in this respect the scientist is like the poet or artists”.

Lionel Ruby: *The Art of Making Sense*.

A Philosopher on *Literature and Religion*:

“This idea is that religion and poetry are identical in essence, and differ merely in the way in which they are attached to practical affairs. Poetry is called religion when it intervenes in life, and religion, when it merely supervenes upon life; is seen to be nothing but poetry.”

George Santayana: *Poetry and Religion*.