

“Poetry” And Philosophy

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If I had to choose a motto for this lecture, I should turn a remark of Lowes Dickinson's upside down. “When science arrives,” said Lowes Dickinson, “it expels literature” . . . The case I shall find evidence for is that when literature arrives it expels science.

P. B. Medawar, “Science And Literature”

I

On hearing the title of this address, some of you who have followed the long scribbling career of your speaker probably mumbled to yourselves in consternation, “Oh dear, wasn't this just about where I came in?” For the title may have reminded you of an essay entitled “Literature And Knowledge” published in *The Sewanee Review*, oh, ages ago, that you tried to understand and finally gave up in defeat. This old essay is one of the most profound treatments of the subject that has ever been written, since it approaches almost complete unintelligibility—even for the writer, today. I am entitled to say in exculpation for treating the subject again tonight that it was chosen for me by the man through whose invitation you honored me to address you, your president, Professor Prescott Johnson. I accepted the invitation, the subject and the title, not only because of the honor involved but also because I surrendered to the hope that after brooding on the problem for years I might be able to convey my thoughts on it in a more superficial way, that is to say, in an intelligible manner.

Paradoxical as it may seem, the least egocentric way of presenting these thoughts is to put them as an autobiographical story, while reminding you that a purely autobiographical statement, a purely idiotic one, in the primitive sense of the term, cannot be true unless it is also accepted objectively. It is then as a candidate for citizenship in The Republic of Knowledge, and not as a non-participating citizen, that I venture to offer you, offer some of you again, the fruits of a lifetime of dallying with “poetry” while being sacramentally married to Philosophy until my Mexican divorce of a few years ago.

Let me begin my story with the remark that I think of myself as a post-Carnapian, by which I mean that I use the term “knowledge” in a narrow sense to refer to a body of interrelated propositions of which it can be asked what is

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it true to and how is it known to be true. Let me note also that I use the term "poetry" rather than the term "literature" to refer to verbal objects, whether in verse or prose, skillfully made in order to be apprehended in the aesthetic mode of response. Northrop Frye objects to the use of the term "poetry" in this wide sense, but I know of no other term that would emphasize my central purpose. I am not alone in this wide usage. Most of you will remember an even wider usage of the cognate term "poetics," to refer to a treatise by a distinguished contemporary composer on the making of music. Note, further, that I have said that poetry is an object; this is to say that it is not a thing by itself but is what it appears to be in a relationship to, or transaction with, a subject that responds to it in a specific way. The term "philosophy" is even more polysemic; remember that one of its obsolete but utterly legitimate usages referred to efforts made to turn base metal into gold; it is as legitimately applicable to Hegel's system as it is to the work of Ryle; and I am very fond of another usage, this one a Gargantuan oxymoron offered me by a fellow high-school student who, seeing me worried, dismissed my worry with magisterial advice: "Be a philosopher; don't think about it"; literally an oxymoron, let me say in passing that had my ignorant friend chosen to phrase his advice differently we would have to recognize him as a member of an ancient but still living philosophical tradition. The philosophic activity I take to be a systematic effort that seeks to penetrate substantive matter. Any one who prefers to use any of these three terms differently can have no quarrel with me, for neither he nor I can claim private ownership to them. But since the terms "poetry," "philosophy" and "knowledge" will be used in these stipulated senses, I should emphasize the narrowness of the discussion. Note, however, that this acknowledgment means that the same document, a book entitled *The Illiad*, say, can be not only a poem, but can also be a historical record for a scholar like E. R. Dodds or a profoundly edifying piece of moral propaganda for a writer like Simone Weil, or these and others for the same person at different times.

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So much for questions of usage. It is time to begin the story of how I arrived at the views I hold. Back in 1935 at the suggestion of F. C. Sharp, my respected and revered teacher, I began teaching a course entitled "Philosophy in Literature." By then I already had some knowledge of what professionals take philosophy to be. But although, as I said, I had been carrying on an affair with literature since my teens, I had no idea whatever of what poetry was. So I taught a course in which I took theoretical problems discussed or suggested by works of literature and treated them as I would treat them in a course in philosophy. You will remember that somewhere in Somerset Maugham's *Of Human Bondage* there is a discussion of the nature of morality in which, if my memory does not betray me, one of the characters holds that all morality consists of is the policeman around the corner; this passage was no ordinary piece of meat for me, it was prime steak. "Is that all there is to morality?" I would ask, and the class would be off in a grand chase over fences and ditches and tall Wisconsin corn after an animal that was here, there and elsewhere all at once. Since

the students knew nothing about the nature of moral philosophy and I was only a little better off, everybody had a grand time. The course was immensely popular and its registration grew rapidly. I have always been grateful that it was given to me to teach in American Universities, where the quality of teaching and research is measured objectively by quantitative standards: if a course has a large registration, no matter what goes on in the classroom, you are a great teacher, and if you supply the dean frequently with off-prints you are a great scholar, no matter how little you have to say and how poorly you say it. Later I realized that the course had been a swindle in which great quantities of a substance was generated to which we can refer euphemistically as hot air.

How I came to recognize that the course was a swindle would make up a long, tortuous, picaresque tale which might be entitled "Autobiography of a Shoplifter as Scholar." It would be a tale the details of which, by now, I have forgotten, from shame; and one in which no one could possibly be interested. But one episode of it I must refer to because it was critical. One of the novelists I used in the course was Dreiser; and it came to me as I studied him that his explicit philosophy—if you allow me to call it that—was not only utterly shallow and second or third hand, which was quite obvious, but that it had nothing to do with what went on in the novels. The philosophaster denied meaning to human life, but the men and women of the novels struggled and succeeded or failed in a vital, fully significant way. The universe could not be utterly empty of value if human life, which was a part of the universe, was as crowded with triumph and failure as it was in Dreiser's novels. This fact, overlooked by the critics, raised the question, "Why was this so?" since tragedy can have no more meaning for a materialist than it can have for a Christian.

Although not aware at the time, I already had the answer to my question from the little aesthetics I knew. Dreiser the novelist had in-formed the "matter for" his art (and kindly note that the term "matter for" is a technical term), he had in-formed, that is, his experience and his knowledge of a world which he observed with great acuity, depth and honesty, in dramatic terms, while also philosophizing about that matter. There were, then, two Dreisers, the novelist and the village materialist. My next step was obvious. The novels had a density that could be called philosophical, as distinct from the absence of such a quality in, say, a perfect tale about trout fishing by Hemingway. The question that obtruded itself next was, "What did that density consist of and how could it be accounted for, if it was something other than the lucubrations of the village materialist?" The answer is that in the novels the *dramatis personae* move in a world that is grounded in the cosmos, whose reverberations we sense dramatically, while the editorial comments that obtrude in the novels and the essays that the philosophaster produced attempt to explain human experience in conceptual terms. Both novelist and abstract thinker were moved by the same formal impulse, but the two products were totally different objects. No doubt the novels can be read as the critics read them, but the reason, never suspected by them, is that the critics can see no difference between "poetry" and the philosophy that poetry is thought to exemplify; the critics were not aware that what they were

doing was reading into the dramatic presentations arguments that could not be deduced from them without the introduction of premises that could not be found in the drama. For arguments cannot be deduced from presentations without the aid of theoretical constructions; presentations, considered by themselves, like isolated facts, are ineradicably, ineffaceably, infrangibly ambiguous. No wonder then that the novels were taken to illustrate the materialism that Dreiser himself took to be their meaning. Critics overlooked the fact that they could be taken to illustrate any system of thought whatever, had they read them with different external assumptions that fitted what they were looking for.

Although I had not yet come across D. H. Lawrence's lines about the truth of the novel and the dribbling lies of the novelist, nor had yet seen through the muddle of T. S. Eliot's notion of the objective correlative, with the aid of Croce, no doubt, I found myself on a mountain top with unlimited visibility before me. Only much later than my perception of the two Dreisers and the confusions of the objective correlative did I read the malediction pronounced on the so-called "intentional fallacy." When I came across the news of the dread interdiction I knew a), that while I had not dreamt of proclaiming it a fallacy, I had long been familiar with the difference between the intention of the poem and the intention of the poet; b), that it could only be called a fallacy on the basis of a definition of poetry that the maledictors failed to supply; and c), that the cornerstone of an adequate aesthetic had to be the distinction between the different modes of human experience and their objects, for otherwise you could indulge without restraint in the Queen of Heart's passion for ordering the heads off of men who pursued different aims than your own; this point I came to see much later. It was indispensable, therefore, to elaborate the distinctions between aesthetic objects and cognitive, moral and religious objects—which elaboration would add up, if achieved, to a philosophy of culture. If the aesthetic object is distinct from these other objects, and if it is an object for a subject and not a thing by itself, it would have to be approached in a special way and not in the way in which we read referential documents, undertake inquiries, arrive at moral decisions and worship. Had Michael Oakeshott's brilliant essay on "The Voice of Poetry In The Conversation of Mankind" been available to me then—it was not published until 1962 and I did not read it until June 1967—I would have been spared much of the laborious work I had to do to arrive at an adequate view of the relation of poetry to other modes of human activity. For what Oakeshott calls "contemplation" he shows to have nothing to do with knowledge or any other mode of human experience. I am not boasting that I anticipated Oakeshott or saying that I fully agree with him. Oakeshott elaborated his views by means of a criticism of Plato's notion of *theoria*, while I had shop-lifted my own views from many counters, chiefly perhaps, one labeled "Crocean notions." I am merely saying that long before reading Oakeshott's brilliant essay I had concluded that poetic activity is different from moral, cognitive, and religious activities. On the surface, the relationship between poetry and knowledge is that poetry is prior in the logical as well as in the empirical order to knowledge, making the latter possible. For the seed of a poem is an aesthetic

act of apprehension or perception—a pleonastic phrase that seeks to emphasize that the data of knowledge is an act of aesthesis or perceived experience, in the primitive sense of aesthesis, which the knower analyzes for his purposes. But on the surface only, for when we seek to disentangle completely the interrelationships between the initial act of aesthesis and the process and product of knowledge we find that the latter product is the result of a complex two-way traffic between the perception of data, its organization and the fitting of it into a theoretical framework.

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As I began to see what poetry is I began to realize with remorse the harm I had been doing my students when I used novels as springboards for philosophizing; unwittingly I had inculcated in them a disrespect for poetry of which they were not aware, and had kept them tethered to two ancient and flagitious errors: that a poem is dramatized conceptual thought and that it can be true or false to life; these errors would create no trouble if it were always clearly and explicitly understood—as it almost never is—that when the terms “true” and “false” are used for the products of poetic activity they share nothing in common with the products of cognitive activity—again on the surface. This is not the case on the basis of the assumption hoary with age, gravid with error, and as well nigh universally accepted as the law of gravity. Hoary, gravid and universally accepted as it may be, this theory is rank and crude error just the same. I refer to the Aristotelian theory of imitation, for on one interpretation of Plato’s thought, which to me seems to be the correct one, there is, strictly speaking, no imitation of life, no copying of spacio-temporal existence. On the Aristotelian version a poem is taken to be true if it has a relationship of correspondence or adequation to a thing that it imitates as an image in a good mirror has to that of which it is an image. We are told by a historian of philosophy that:

Aristotle says relatively little concerning the process of imitation, and that little has been subjected to great differences of interpretation; yet what he says of natural objects and their production and of artificial objects and their making affords sound basis for reconstruction of his theory of imitation. The natural object, composite of form and matter, acts according to the natural principle of its being; in imitation the artist separates some form from the matter with which it is joined in nature—not, however, the “substantial” form, but some form perceptible by sensation—and joins it anew to the matter of his art, the medium which he uses. The action which he imitates may be “natural” to the agent, but the artist must attempt to convey not the natural appropriateness and rightness, but rather a “necessity or probability” suitably conveyed by the materials of his art.

Overlook the fact that, as Gian Orsini has pointed out, the word “form” is not to be found in the *Poetics*; it may be granted that in spite of the crudity of the view, this is what Aristotle must have meant by the notion of imitation. Differences of interpretation cannot successfully conceal the fact that the term was employed literally by Aristotle. There are two reasons for my lack of doubt:

Aristotle distinguished between the truth of history and the truth of poetry, and the above account of imitation is consistent with his psychology. In the act of seeing, the forms of things seen somehow fleet or jump to the eye, and the same holds for all the senses. It is this account that gives the basis for the belief in the crude separation of the form from the matter with which it is joined in nature which we are told, is performed by the poet. He does not add anything to the separated form out of his own spontaneity before he joins it to the matter of his art, for while keeping his eye on necessity or probability he is still keeping it on external data.

Indulging in the idle game of if-ing the past, I have sometimes wondered how different the history of art and the theory of art would have been had Aristotle not cast his shadow on them until our own day. Whether Western art would have been superior to that which we have it is idle to speculate about; but I am confident that the theory of criticism and criticism itself would have been free from its deep-rooted defect had the *Poetics* met the defeat the Aristotelian sciences met. Is there anything left of his biology, psychology, physics outside histories of philosophy? But his aesthetics lives on in perpetuity, an endemic and pandemic source of corruption of criticism and taste.

The crippling objection one must bring against the Aristotelian version of imitation has already been suggested: to the degree that poetry is the product of the creative imagination, to that degree it cannot be like anything that one experiences outside the moment of aesthetic apprehension. Gilson, referring to a passage in Aristotle's *Physics*, claims that Aristotle did include the factor of creativity in his conception of imitation; but great a scholar as Gilson is, he overlooks the fact that in Aristotle's psychology, to which I have just referred—and which, as is well known, gives rise to his realistic epistemology—there is no room for what we may call the idealistic component, that is, the constitutive role of the mind in perception. Nor is there even so much of a hint in the *Poetics* about the fact that the poet adds anything out of his own spontaneity to the form he separates from its natural matter or to the matter for his art in the act of making.

For the present purpose, the essential point about the Aristotelian view is that a poem can be true to life because it corresponds to something external to it that is available for perception independently of it. Let me emphasize that this is the heart of the matter: the availability for perception of the not-yet informed matter for the poem in order to compare it with its informed substance. On any kind of imitation, the reader is able to perceive two distinct entities: that which the poet imitates, perceived independently of the poem, and the object of the poem, which is, but for the difference in media, the same or like the thing imitated. When you reckon with creativity, the poem does not make the matter for it available to the reader; to the extent that the poem makes it available, the poet's creative power has not entered into the making of his poem. On any version of imitation, it follows that if the matter for the poem and the informed substance of the poem can be perceived each distinctly from the other, the critic cannot be denied authority to judge the truth of the poem—authority that he

takes as a matter of course and seldom hesitates to use. We thus have at one extreme, the egregious hybris of a sophomore who walks up to you after a lecture and tells you that Kafka's novels are not true to life. But what the poetic imagination grasps has no status in existence, by which I mean that the locus the object may have in time or space or both is altogether irrelevant to it. However, if a poem cannot be said to be true or false to life, the very same document can be read as history or sociology and can be judged for its truth. Ironically the truth of a sociological or historical document depends on the objectivity of the observation that the historian or sociologist brings to his data. Were this a discussion of history or sociology I would have to correct the mistaken impression I must have given you, that I believe that scientists lack creative minds; suffice to note that while creativity is not, cannot be, absent from cognitive activity of any kind, cognition remains tethered to facts and burdened with the duty of presenting proofs—restrictions that the poet knows nothing of.

This is not to deny that the poet uses his experience, uses what I called above, in a term borrowed from Dewey, the matter for his art. What else could he use? In the creative process the matter for his art is transubstantiated as it is in-formed, as A. C. Bradley, using quite a different terminology, unfortunately not well enough fixed, explains brilliantly in his inaugural lecture, "Poetry For Poetry's Sake." There is often a close resemblance between a poem and life. *Emma*, the novel, presents something like the life Jane Austen and her circle lived. But how true to life *Emma* is cannot be known, not even by Jane Austen herself, since her daily life both contained and lacked elements that the novel has but that are impossible to separate from either in order to compare them. Jane Austen could not have viewed her own life as a whole or in part unless she in-formed it in the way in which she in-formed the matter for her novel, *Emma*. No doubt the life of the Austen circle was controlled by decorum, manners, goals, efforts, and a basic operative morality that could be lived up to or violated as these qualities are in the novel; but the novelist's actual life could never achieve the form that the dramatic presentation offers us in the novel after it was brought to a finish. Life, whether yours, or mine or that of the Austen circle, is lived in different terms than those that rule the actions of characters in fiction; actual human life can be perceived only if it is unified, and it can only be unified for a person when he sits down to write his autobiography; but then, to the extent that the job succeeds as art it lies as history. It was said by Heisenberg that our mathematical formulas do not portray nature but our knowledge of nature. Let me borrow the idea and modify it for my purpose. Poetry does not portray life but the poet's dramatic organization and transubstantiating of actual life. Creative maker that Jane Austen was, she not only added, trimmed, patched, eliminated, ordered, decorated, and embroidered the matter for her art, but as she did this she transubstantiated that matter, much as the alchemists of old dreamt of transubstantiating base metal into gold. To say that *Emma* is true to life is to say that Jane Austen was only a gifted reporter or was like the anthropologist who has recently given us a factual account of a Mexican family. The Aristotelian belittles the poet.

This holds however you explain what the poet contributes of his own, whether you explain it as a dredging from the depths of the mind elements that remain beyond reach of introspection, either inherited from an early period of the life of man or somehow transformed from the child's early life, or somehow acquired or buried in the mind in some way, or whether you deceive yourself into believing that you are explaining it when you say that the creative component comes out of a high hat called "Emergence," or whether you "explain" it mythically as the gift of a god or a muse—which is indeed the best of the non-explanations at our disposal; or whether you say, as I do, that it is the product of genuine spontaneity—a statement which, making no bones about it, I know, to be a shameless declaration of ignorance.

4

You are entitled to ask me to go deeper into my reason for my refusal to call the aesthetic apprehension of a presentation a form of knowledge. The reason is that by a presentation I mean an object for a subject on which the latter dwells attentively and exclusively for the sake of a complete apprehension of it as a whole, or as I have been calling it since the middle thirties, "intransitively." You may point out that a presentation, whether apprehended in the aesthetic mode or in any other mode, is an object of perception, which is surely an object of knowledge. I reply by reminding you of my stipulatively narrow use of the word "knowledge," and add that, leaving aside the problem of mathematics and logic, I distinguish perception from knowledge because, while empirical knowledge starts from perception and sometimes returns to perception in the form of pure contemplation of the object from which it starts, when the act of knowing is taking place, the mind does not stay on the starting object; in the act of aesthetic perception—etymologically redundant as the expression may be—the attending mind dwells on the object and does not seek its relations to other objects. There is a difference between merely looking for the sake of seeing what is before the eyes and looking at a thing in order to place it in a classificatory scheme or to understand it or to inquire into its origins or ponder the probable generative consequences or the promise of weal or the threat it may entail.

Have you ever leaned safely on the rail on your side of the ditch and looked at a panther, say, pacing before you, have you seen the splendid power of its controlled body, the ripple of the muscles under the shining fur in the sunlight, the dancing airiness with which it mocks its weight, the effortless rhythm of its forward lunging motion, the swing of its head right and left, the lightning speed with which its legs come down to the ground stopping for an instant before the paw reaches the ground to come down on it gently, softly, noiselessly? If the grace and harmony of its motion, if the fearful power of its rhythmic pacing did not hold you for a few seconds of complete fascination, you missed an aesthetic moment.

It has been said that if poetry does not give us knowledge in the narrow sense, it cannot be denied that it is the source of wisdom, and readers frequently encounter paeans to the profound wisdom to be found in, say, Shakespeare. There

are two objections to this claim. The first is that it constitutes a retreat from solid semiotic ground, where a word like "knowledge" can claim a satisfactorily clear meaning, to a swamp in which we plod in confusion as our feet sink in viscous mud; the second reason is that those who find wisdom in Shakespeare or any other poet have a perfect right to carry it off with them, but the theorist is entitled to ask whether the wisdom was found in the plays by selection or by importing it into them before it was withdrawn from them. Nor must we forget in passing that Timothy Dwight warned Yalermen to avoid Shakespeare's plays in New York because they were a source of moral corruption.

Let me iterate that the argument depends on a notion of the aesthetic transaction narrowly defined, the object term of which I have narrowly called a poem. This object appears only at the moment of attention on it when that attention is directed intransitively on it. Outside of that moment all that remains is a fading image, which can be refurbished of course, through a second successful transaction with the same object but which outside the transaction remains, strictly speaking, ineffable. This ineffable object is the thing critics work on. Some attempt to give their readers an account of what they find in the poem during the transaction. They engage in a more or less surreptitious effort to perform a miracle that one of the bishops of contemporary criticism has condemned as a heresy: the hopeless attempt to make a paraphrase do what the poem alone can do. It cannot succeed. Not only can we say this with confidence but we can add that a critic who makes the effort has not discriminated between his transaction with the poem and what he says about it. Of course, his talk may itself be a presentation of aesthetic value. It can be asserted that Walter Pater's famous evocation before Leonardo's Mona Lisa is in itself an object of aesthetic apprehension. Yeats made the argument in effect when he included an opening passage of it in *The Oxford Book of Modern English Verse* ("The presence that rose thus so strangely beside the waters, is expressive of what in the ways of a thousand years men had come to desire. . .") The whole paragraph may be read as a poem, but it has nothing whatever to do with Leonardo's picture. There is a very good reason for objecting to the practice of those who pass off an account of an object for the object itself; and the good reason is that they are deceived and the reader is deceived.

If the critic cannot offer a paraphrase of the object what can he do? The best he can do, if he respects the poem, is to say, with much hunching of shoulders and much hemming and hawing, in a diffident way, "Look, sir, this is what I take to be some of the components of this object when I grasp it intransitively; if you approach the thing as I do, if you try to put together as a whole what you discern, as I do, maybe a poem will appear to you, which I hope is something like what I beheld." In the attempt to lead his reader to enter into a transaction that may have some similarity to his own, the critic can use whatever means he thinks will work, he can use languages as flagrantly inconsistent as he will, he can stand on his head, do cartwheels, dance a tango all by himself, or perform on a pogo stick. One thing he cannot do and that is to present to the reader the same object or something like it. In passing let me

say that the man seeking clarity about problems of criticism does not have the same freedom as the critic who is trying to lead the reader to perceive for himself what the critic finds in the object. A responsible thinker trying to rear a poetics cannot use terms inconsistently nor can he pick up his categorial scheme from a dictionary. If he believes he can, he is simply confused about the exigencies of theory. Criticism can be written in a dinner jacket or *en pantoufles*. Theory is subject to the jurisdiction of philosophy, with all its methodological strictures and rigors, or it is worthless. A man who lacks method in philosophy is no better than a man who lacks manners at the table.

5

But you are not satisfied. "Surely," I hear you say, "there must be more to even what you call 'poetry' than the apprehension of an object for its own sake, more than looking for the sake of seeing, hearing for the sake of listening, idly beholding or perceiving an object for the sake of perceiving it. You are brushing aside too lightly the opinion of the ages. Plato did not fear poetry out of sheer prejudice and the Bolsheviks do not repress their serfs solely to satisfy their lust for power. If all there was to poetry is what you say, it could only be condemned because it frittered away the energy and wealth of those who pursued it; this is not the objection of moralists and rulers to it; what they fear is the effects it has on those they rule. What you are doing is defending the old discredited theory of art for art's sake. You have assiduously avoided the use of the word 'pleasure,' but what if not pleasure do you take to be the function of poetry?"

This is a fair objection on which I must satisfy you, at least sketchily, or your worst suspicions about the worthlessness of my views will be fully borne out.

1. I begin by noting that the meaning of the term "poetry" I have used in this address is a purely theoretical or conceptual stipulation. How Tom, Dick, or Harry reads literature, whether he seeks poetry or something else, and how he values what he finds in it, are empirical questions that cannot be answered in the absence of the dossier of Tom, Dick, or Harry. I can tell you from Kenneth Burke's writings, for instance, if you accept the assumption that his written comments report accurately his response to the documents he discusses, that he occasionally reads poetry with a sensibility and an acuity that are very rare, but that usually what he is interested in is to turn the documents he analyzes into a concoction of his own, a kind of a thick stew in which you will see, if you stir it up, chunks of Freudian psychology, Marxist sociology, Burke's semiotics, and much else. On the same assumption I can tell you how F. R. Leavis reads poetry. And I can further advance my conviction—arrived at from my acquaintance with literary criticism and my wide personal acquaintance with teachers of literature—that very few critics and readers seem to be interested in poetry as poetry.

Let me iterate, a), that I have no objection to their interests but solely to the belief that they are interested in poetry when what they are interested in is politics or morality or religion or mythology or something else. And let me add, b), that this is the reason we need a concept of poetry—or more precisely, the

reason we need to stipulate how we use the term “poetry” and stick rigorously to our stipulation, if we are to arrive with a modicum of clarity at the difference between, say, what Kenneth Burke does to the documents he writes about and what Leavis does with those he is interested in. It may very well be that what Burke does to his documents is very valuable. This I would expect to be true of the work of a man as brilliant as Kenneth Burke, although my expectation is based entirely on faith, because it is long since I have read anything of his that did not leave me utterly bewildered; did not leave me bewildered, note, not because I did not put effort into deciphering his thought; I did . . . But that is an altogether different story.

2. Let me point out that your question about the value of poetry read as poetry falls within the area of moral philosophy. You are asking about the moral worth of the aesthetic activity and wondering whether contemplation for its own sake meets moral criteria. You have asked a perfectly proper question, since all human activities are open to the scrutiny of morality. The creation of, and intercourse with, poetry demands, in our society, the expenditure of an enormous amount of energy and wealth, and it is proper to ask whether the expenditure is worth it.

To answer this question we must begin by remembering that Plato’s objection to the poets was two-fold; he objected on moral grounds because they told scurrilous tales about the gods and he also objected on cognitive grounds because they imitated the appearances of things rather than their realities, the ideas; this they did out of ignorance of the truth, which was Plato’s Truth. Whether poetry and the other arts can corrupt, and in what way they can do it, is a complex and a moot question that cannot be taken up adequately in this address. For my purposes it is sufficient to state that however the question is answered, the power of art to influence those who have commerce with it does not depend on its truth, however we interpret the term “truth,” but on a multitude of other factors we need not go into here. I believe that poetry and the other arts do indeed influence profoundly those who have intercourse with them, and through them, their cultures; but the most radical impact of art is not the direct effect that it may have on action and character, the effect that the anti-pornography moralists are solely concerned with. These people are too simple-minded about morality, too ignorant of aesthetics and of the nature of the symbolic process, to begin to conceive how art plays a constitutive role in culture.

Whether poetry is true or false because it does not imitate ideas but appearances and thus ignores Plato’s Truth, is a question I would not attempt to answer, since I have never been able to grasp with clarity what Plato meant by the idea of a bed, let alone what he might have meant by the idea of a tragedy or any other kind of poetry. The idea of a circle or a triangle is easy enough to grasp; furthermore we know that no circle drawn by human hands can come close to the idea of a circle and therefore be as true as its idea; but if painters undertook to paint the idea of things . . .—well, I doubt whether anyone would care to walk half a block to a gallery exhibiting canvases of true circles, triangles, and the other figures found in Euclid’s *The Elements*. As for beds, what is the

idea of a bed? The reader need not be reminded that the query asks in particular terms a question Plato himself brought up against his own theory of ideas. On second thought, however, I beg to withdraw my hunch that no one would walk half a block to look at Platonic canvases of Euclidean figures. A half block? Why, I must acknowledge with admiration for their fortitude and their devotion to the things of the spirit that the sophisticated men and women of our nation drive miles all the way down town to look at the latest exhibition of *avant guard* art.

To the Bolshevik's views of art and truth, similar comments apply. They too, want their Truth in art and what that Truth is we all know: In art they want a glorification of the present state of affairs in Russia, of the past since October 1917, and an undoubting declaration of faith in their future; they also want from artists outside Russia a denigration of the West. But when you read Khrushchev on the subject of the arts, as you can in the *Encounter* Pamphlet (No. 9) on *Khrushchev on Culture*, you have a confirmation of something you have long known, that the masters of Russia are solely interested in the capacity that art, or what they call art, is expected to have, the capacity for making docile serfs.

Please note before I turn to the next step in answer to your objection that the Platonic and the Bolshevik conceptions of the function of art are specific formulations of the same theory, a theory that defines art and therefore poetry in non-residential terms. There are theories whose objections to art as art are more blatantly philistine and more crude than the Platonic and the Bolshevik conception of art; these theories can be disposed of in terms of the principles that have guided the above criticism of the Platonic and the Bolshevik notion of the function of art. The next step in answer to your objection consists in reminding you that mere entertainment, with no other object than entertainment, pure play, is something that our society recognizes as valuable or it would prohibit or obstruct spectator athletics, circuses, games of all sorts, and much else considered, and rightly considered, an ingredient of the good life. One would have to have as narrow a view of human life as Savonarola had to accept with approval the kind of a world he tried to build. A cursory look into Plato's *Laws* is sufficient to enable us to perceive how monstrously intolerable human life could become if it were to fall into the hands of a moral despot of genius. I find it advisable to make this point because it is all too easy to dismiss the value of poetry for its own sake as if it were no more valuable than pure play and assume that the value of pure play is to be rated at nothing. Presently I shall give you *ex cathedra* my reasons for believing that it has greater value. But if it were no more valuable than play it would still require the serious consideration given it by Oakeshott who, replying to those who reject the view that poetry as pure contemplation is escape, writes:

Of course, from one point of view poetry is an 'escape'; not escape (as is sometimes supposed) from the perhaps unmanageable or frustrating life of the poet, but from the considerabilities of practical activity. But there is nothing sacrosanct about practical enterprise, moral endeavour, or scientific inquiry that 'escape' from them is to be deplored . . . In

poetry, then, the self which desires and suffers, which knows and contrives, is superseded by a self which contemplates, and every backward glance is an infidelity at once difficult to avoid and fatal in its consequences.

There is nothing sacred about practical enterprise or moral or scientific activity, that makes escape from it to be deplored out of hand. But Oakeshott seems to overlook, when he writes of the contemplation of poetic images, that the act varies in intensity and depth, and therefore in value, not only in direct relation to the achieved perfection of the object, but of the superficiality or depth of the in-formed substance of the image. Intent on the act of contemplation and intent also on freeing the Platonic notion of *theoria* from the contemplation of the real *eidos*, Oakeshott seems to overlook—"seems," for I am not confident about my objections to the thought of as clear and acute a thinker as Oakeshott—that the apprehension of poetry as poetry is the grasp of in-formed substance which in weight or density of immanent meanings and values can range from the purely formal perfection of a story of trout fishing to the grave vision, vibrant with cosmic reverberations, of works like *The Oresteia* and *King Lear*. The aesthetic and the moral value of the aesthetic experience varies with the specific gravity, if you permit the expression, of the in-formed substance of the object. It is probably the great specific gravity of these plays that has led some critics to speak of their "wisdom" or their "truth." That a complex quality of great import, of unspeakable density of meaning and value, is to be found in them no one could possibly deny. The question about which I quarrel with the critics who find "wisdom" or "truth" in them is as to the manner they characterize that which is indeed in them, and the unnecessary confusions and false problems generated by their irresponsible language.

6

I have been discussing what I call the residential value of poetry, the function it performs as poetry during the successful moment of aesthetic apprehension. The non-residential functions are the subject of another long paper, the discussion of which, as in the case of the subject on which I have had the honor of addressing you tonight, is to be found already in print. Two of these functions should be mentioned because they are direct and valuable entailments of the aesthetic mode of apprehension: One is the heightened vitality that the moment of rapt attention elicits from us, often giving us the illusion that we have been transported into a realm which is far more real than the quotidian world of routine, effort and anxiety in which we live. The other is the function poetry and all art perform as constitutive symbols, the way in which an aesthetic object perceived intransitively furnishes us with a categorial scheme of perception and feeling by means of which we achieve a modicum of intelligibility, by means of which we raise ourselves above the level of automatic behavior. As I have said elsewhere, we cannot see without the borrowed eyes of the poet. It is in this sense that we can agree with the poet who claimed that his art elevated him to the exalted position of legislator of mankind.