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What Poetry Knows

George P. Elliot

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Chancellor Emeritus William Pearson Tolley presents
the Dedication Address

THE COURIER

A COMMEMORATIVE ISSUE
on the
DEDICATION OF THE ERNEST S. BIRD LIBRARY

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What Poetry Knows

by George P. Elliott

Late one afternoon last fall in a quiet corridor in the Hall of Languages, I chanced to overhear an interchange between two girls gotten up like bums. The denim patches on their elbows were freshly faded, and the legs of their bell-bottom jeans were frayed and muddy around the ankles. They were about the same size, and they both wore their long brown hair immaculately disheveled. One had apple cheeks and wore a hand-tooled leather belt slung about her hips like a belly-dancer's girdle, while the other had a snub nose and was exposing her navel – no Women's Libbers they. Three years ago a couple of Marie Antoinette coeds might have been comparing the strategies of the Robespierre in their economics class to those of the Danton in psych. But, since that revolution neglected to take place, what these two were talking about instead was how to handle men.

"He didn't want to have a physical relationship with me," said the first one. "It was more like, well, you know, artistic. He just wanted to appreciate me. That make sense to you?"

"Oh, yah," said the second, "it's like this thing that got started between Jimmy and I. We had, you know, like such a great friendship going for us we didn't want anything to mess it up, so we talked the whole thing over and decided we better not enter into a relationship."

"Wow," said the first, "heavy. You mean you came to that decision together?"

"I said we're friends," the voice was a bit tart, "and friendship can't be unilateral, friends *communicate*."

"You're so right. What a mature way to handle a thing like that."

"Of course," she sounded mollified, "I introduced the subject, but any subject has got to be introduced by somebody."

"Really mature."

What a marvelous place for a writer is Syracuse University these days! A young man asks a young woman to concoct with him one of the tasty recipes he has come across in Dr. Comfort's *Gourmet Guide to Making Love*. "No," she cries, "let's make mince-meat instead," and she grinds them both through the whole decision-making process right to the bitter end. Now imagine trying to teach Yeats to them! Not that she doesn't care for poetry; she has just loved Kahlil Gibran ever since her favorite uncle gave her *The Prophet* for a high school graduation present. And Rod McKuen's poetry really sends him, he doesn't care if it isn't supposed to be any good, everybody's entitled to their own opinion. But it would be as easy to teach them the *Kamasutra* in Sanskrit as to get them to understand what's going on in "Michael Robartes and the Dancer."

He Bear in mind your lover's wage
 Is what your looking-glass can show,
 And that he will turn green with rage
 At all that is not pictured there.
She May I not put myself to college?
He Go pluck Athene by the hair;
 For what mere book can grant a knowledge
 With an impassioned gravity
 Appropriate to that beating breast,
 That vigorous thigh, that dreaming eye?
 And may the Devil take the rest.
She And must no beautiful woman be
 Learned like a man?
He Paul Veronese
 And all his sacred company
 Imagined bodies all their days
 By the lagoon you love so much,
 For proud, soft, ceremonious proof
 That all must come to sight and touch
She I have heard said
 There is great danger in the body
He I have principles to prove me right.
 It follows from this Latin text
 That blest souls are not composite,
 And that all beautiful women may
 Live in uncomposite blessedness,
 And lead us to the like – if they
 Will banish every thought, unless
 The lineaments that please their view
 When the long looking-glass is full,
 Even from the foot-sole think it too.
She They say such different things at school.

Well, the world has scrambled in the half century since Yeats wrote that poem, and now “they say such different things at school” is one of the things a few of us say at this school. But the irony of this doesn't cut very deep, for we aren't under any illusion that poetry is where much of the action is in this microcosm of America, Syracuse University. What poetry knows is utterly alien to what most Americans want, to what most of the people on this campus want.

From time to time, there have been societies and rulers who can and want to hear what poetry says, Elizabethan England, for example, and when that happens poets have an opportunity to be less private and cryptic than usual and more open. At the other extreme, there are times and places, such

as Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Russia, when poetry is so anathematized that poets cease to write at all or write only for themselves and a few initiates. The medieval troubadours had it both ways: they were held in high regard throughout *Langue d'oc*, yet what they sang was so dangerous in the eyes of the Church that often they hid occult religious meanings in their popular love songs. Just how seriously the Church took this heresy was demonstrated in the 13th century by the Albigensian Crusade which laid waste to Provençal culture and put an end to troubadours forever.

We professor-poets in free-speech America now are in a strange, if not unique position. Society and our rulers don't know what to do with any poetry except the popular song-lyric — which also, of course, often contains occult meanings, though not very religious ones. Yet, since poetry has long been respected and since America wants to be thought well of by the rest of the world, we priestly professors of poetry are paid generously to explain how to read and write it, we are given academic "research" leaves to write some ourselves, we're fellowshipped just like real scholars. Maybe society has some sort of vague notion that, just as a way to defuse a revolutionist is to give him a nice bourgeois salary to teach courses on Marxism, so a good way to safen down a poet is to call him a Poet in Residence and get him to talk to young people about poetry. Maybe. But I'm not at all sure it has to work out like that, even for the revolutionist. Take Angela Davis: as a candidate for an academic position these days, she has everything a political science department could want. She's not only a civil rights martyr, she's black, she's a woman, she has her Ph.D., and she publishes. But I'd be willing to bet that it would take more than a \$50,000 endowed chair at Harvard to defuse her. Maybe society, uneasy that quite a few of the young seem to be turned on by poetry, would like, by making professors out of poets, to take the *cult* out of *occult* and turn them into *oc*-men — *oc* in *Langue d'oc* meant *yes*, turn poets into *yes*-men. But I doubt this will happen, for though poets love listeners, honors, and money with unseemly ardor, there is no way short of a lobotomy to make them forget what poetry knows.

I realize I am putting the worst possible interpretation on all this, prying around in the gift horse's mouth. Still, it is remarkable that in this society a man who repairs shoes, which needs to be done and can be done well, is paid about a third or fourth as much as a man who teaches poetry, the results of which can't be measured and are for all practical purposes useless. Why is this? I don't know. Therefore I speculate, and speculation has a natural affinity for the extreme case. Well, suppose my unkind conjectures were true and society's intention in professorizing poets is to make poetry safe for democracy. Even so, I think nothing very lamentable will come of it but on the contrary that it will turn out to have been all right.

I have three reasons for this optimism. (Writers pretty much divide up into those to whom things come in threes, those to whom things come in fours, dualists, and those for whom all is One. I'm a three-man myself.)

The first reason is the plain fact that the young do increasingly come to poetry – for all sorts of peculiar reasons, no doubt, but also for the right reason, to learn something of what it knows. Take the most obvious symptom. “Creative writing,” to give it its institutional name, has proliferated so that now there are thousands of such classes throughout the land, in high schools, colleges, and graduate schools. The oddest aspect of this phenomenon, commented on by writing teachers everywhere, is that many of these students have read very little. It does not seem to be poems they like so much as the language of poetry. They don’t much trust the language of business or politics any longer, and since they speak sociologese and slang, some of them are suffering from malnutrition of the imagination. But literarily they are amateurs, they are not serious about making poets of themselves. The revulsions that drive them to drop in on poetry are the same as have notoriously driven so many to drop out into drugs; but the attractions that pull them to poetry are quite different, more civilized and civilizing. I mustn’t give a false impression; the increase in the number of young people attracted to poetry is striking, but proportionally they are not many; the really dedicated ones are few indeed. However, poetry cults never have been large; in the two and a half centuries of *Langue d’oc* culture, the total number of poets who achieved the rank of troubadour was about four hundred. In our peculiar age a cult is less likely to incur the infections of publicity if it holds its meetings Monday Wednesday Friday from two to three in 307 Hall of Languages than if it performs black masses in an abandoned mine-shaft in Arizona; it’s interesting that some of the good poets, these days when the outcast look is in, go around dressed like insurance salesmen.

My second reason for optimism is the failure of linguistics to get much of anywhere with literature. Linguistics is the behavioral science of language, and before it came along science did literature an immense service with the scholarly reconstruction of texts and contexts. But the one thing science won’t tolerate is a mystery. Scholarship never dealt with the unanswerable question *what makes poetry so powerful?* Images were analyzed, words were counted and clustered, theories were constructed, symbols were codified, myths were rationalized, themes were traced and patterns found – the mystery was untouched. What to do? Could it be that poetry was more stubborn than love, death, good and evil? Kinsey, then Johnson and Masters, explored the continent of love with chart and camera, and out came you know what. Insurance companies do what they can actuarially to take the sting out of death. (I recently got an announcement from the company that handles retirement funds for the professoriate, to the effect that “these differing tables reflect the more favorable mortality experienced by women.” My wife was not consoled; but then, she knows what poetry knows.) Sociology routinely quantifies such ineffables as happiness, scenery, justice. Economics has occupied a large part of the territory formerly belonging to what moral philosophy calls “the common good.” Linguistics was devised to

breach the bastion of poetry, and for a couple of decades now the linguisticians have been working seriously on language and literature. (Isn't *linguisticians* a slithery, reptilious word? *Linguisticians*. I wish it were in general use.)

The mystery can't be in the words themselves since plain expository prose uses the same ones; it must be in the way they are put together. All right, first the linguisticians set about extracting from language both pleasure and any reference to life-experience, what is vulgarly meant by *meaning*. Then they talked about what was left in an artificial anti-language with lots of arrows, *ps* and *qs*, no humor, and as many words ending in *oid* and *istic* as possible, *ational*, *ology*, *ific*, *osis*, *wise*. (Contemplate this: one of the ways a *structuralist* gets his jollies is by *deconstructing* a sentence.) And what has happened to poetry as a result of this ingenious assault? Nothing much. There are more good prosodists around than there used to be, though whether linguistics is responsible for this increase is not clear; and less good poetry is written in meters than formerly, though there is no apparent connection between this fact and either the rise of linguistics or the improvement in prosody. Also, from the point of view of esthetic progress, it's downright reactionary that so many poems, after all this time, after modernism, dada, surrealism, minimalism, nihilism, and linguistics, should still, right in the 1970s, not only be but mean. As for critics, they bow to linguistics politely because it's in fashion, but I don't know of any substantial literary criticism that owes much of a debt to linguistics. For a poet, linguistics is rather like Xerox. "Great," he says, "You've got a great game going for you there, keep up the good work. But I just can't figure out any way for it to help me get hold of this poem that keeps batting around in my head."

The third and much the most important reason I think having writers in the academy will turn out to be more good than bad is that they will make it harder for others to simplify and distort what poetry knows. People trying to understand the world of humankind commonly turn to poetry, fiction, drama, for guidance and illumination. In recent times the behavioral sciences claim to be the source of wisdom about man's nature, what its components are, how to control them. But very many thoughtful people, including thoughtful behavioral scientists, are becoming increasingly uneasy about, say, the presumptions of psychology or the intrusions of sociology. Progress is the human proof of the validity of science, and in the realm of human behavior progress seems to be a hydra – beheading one problem causes two new ones to spring up in its place. Something has gone drastically wrong. Increasingly, behavioral scientists are doing as Freud did long ago, turning to poetry to help them understand what we are like.

For my own part, I hope this movement sophisticates; for not only does poetry (by which I now mean all literature) show us how we are connected within ourselves and with one another, it also strangely figures forth in its images and plots and metaphors and scenes patterns of our very

nature. And we need constantly to be reminded of what we are. Science is so determinedly progressive, so set upon bettering things, that it has promoted theories of social and psychological control wildly at variance with what we are really like.

As an instance of this, take the notorious misbehavior of the children of American affluence in the 1960s. It generated a tidy industry of analysis, interviewing, hypothesizing, table-making, most of which could have been dispensed with by a thoughtful reading of the Nigerian fable *Simbi and the Satyr of the Dark Jungle* by Amos Tutuola, written twenty years ago. Though Tutuola's literary education was poor and his English clumsy, he is, in my opinion, as strong a fabulist as the present age has produced.

Simbi was the daughter of a wealthy woman, and she . . . was the most merry making girl in the village and in respect of that almost the whole people of her village liked to see her every time. Especially for her singing and amusing sayings, and she was pleased with her mother's wealths.

But then her two best friends are kidnapped.

Of course, a few weeks after, the love of her friends was fading gradually from her heart, and then she started to eat a little food, but she stopped singing entirely She became tired of her mother's wealths and became entirely tired to be in happiness, etc. that which her mother's wealths were giving her

"The only things I prefer most to know and experience their difficulties now are the 'Poverty' and the 'Punishment'." It was like that Simbi thought within herself, because she had never experienced neither the difficulties of the poverty nor had experienced the difficulties of the punishment since when she was born. . . .

She called her mother to a room and with great respect she asked:

"Please my mother I shall be very happy if you will allow me to go abroad from where I will experience the difficulties of the 'Poverty' and of the 'Punishment'."

"Will you shut up your mouth, Simbi, for asking me of what the whole people are praying of every minute not to know and experience until they shall die!" her mother warned her seriously and then drove her out of the room at once.

So, disobedient child, she runs off, and for 125 pages she is battered around by poverty and punishment. But finally she returns home.

“Hah, my mother, I shall not disobey you again!” Simbi confessed to her mother when she remembered all the difficulties and the poverties which she had met.

And:

Having rested for some days, she was going from house to house, she was warning all the children that it was a great mistake to a girl who did not obey her parents.

Another, and profound, example: *The Iliad*. War has always been abominable, but it used to be, under some circumstances, glorious as well; now, technology and nationalism between them have made war abominable and only abominable. As a result, and it is not hard to understand why, there has been a great revulsion against the progressive forms of war-making which threaten to destroy the world they have already depraved. But this revulsion has gotten out of hand, especially in the liberal West; it has turned against that male aggressiveness which is an obvious root of war, noble or ignoble. There have been various attempts to explain away this aggressiveness; one of these is a marvel of lunatic ingenuity; men are aggressive as a compensation for their sense of inferiority at not being able to bear children. Like Hercules maybe? Or King David? Or Beowulf? Well, whatever the rationalistic explanation, the logic goes: war is evil, therefore male aggression is evil. There are some who yearn for the day when genetic progress will let them breed aggression away. There are even feminist extremists who by cloning would do away with men altogether. Only logical.

Now if you read *The Iliad*, really read it, you will not be able to deny the great good of glory, which is the crown of masculine aggressiveness used according to certain rules. Take the scene in which Andromache, her baby in her arms, catches Hektor as he is about to go out to battle. (This is Lattimore’s translation.)

She clung to his hand and called him by name and spoke to him:
‘Dearest,
your own great strength will be your death, and you have no pity
on your little son, nor on me, ill-starred, who soon must be your
widow;
for presently the Achaians, gathering together,
will set upon you and kill you; and for me it would be far better
to sink into the earth when I have lost you, for there is no other
consolation for me after you have gone to your destiny —
only grief; since I have no father, no honored mother
Hektor, thus you are father to me, and my honored mother,
you are my brother, and you it is who are my young husband.

Please take pity on me then, stay here on the rampart,
that you may not leave your child an orphan, your wife a widow.’

He knows she is right.

‘All these
things are in my mind also, lady; yet I would feel deep shame
before the Trojans, and the Trojan women with trailing garments,
if like a coward I were to shrink aside from the fighting;
and the spirit will not let me, since I have learned to be valiant
and to fight always among the foremost ranks of the Trojans,
winning for my own self great glory, and for my father.
For I know this thing well in my heart, and my mind knows it:
there will come a day when sacred Ilion shall perish,
and Priam, and the people of Priam of the strong ash spear.
But it is not so much the pain to come of the Trojans
that troubles me . . .
as troubles me the thought of you, when some bronze-armoured
Achaian leads you off, taking away your day of liberty,
in tears; . . .
but strong will be the necessity upon you;
and some day seeing you shedding tears a man will say of you:
“This is the wife of Hektor, who was ever the bravest fighter
of the Trojans, breakers of horses, in the days when they fought about
Ilion.”
So will one speak of you; and for you it will be yet a fresh grief,
to be widowed of such a man who could fight off the day of your
slavery.’

His helmet scares their baby son, so he takes it off.

Then taking
up his dear son he tossed him about in his arms, and kissed him,
and lifted his voice in prayer to Zeus and the other immortals:
‘Zeus, and you other immortals, grant that this boy, who is my son,
may be as I am, pre-eminent among the Trojans,
great in strength, as am I, and rule strongly over Ilion;
and some day let them say of him: “He is better by far than his
father”,
as he comes in from the fighting; and let him kill his enemy
and bring home the blooded spoils, and delight the heart of his
mother.’
So speaking he set his child again in the arms of his beloved
wife, who took him back again to her fragrant bosom
smiling in her tears.

Or read a recent novel, *Cockfighter* by Charles Willeford, and you will see how male aggression denied does not cease to exist, does not go away, but perverts hideously. To be effective, pacifism must accept it as a profoundly important fact of our nature that honorable combat fills young men with a radiant, terrible joy which exalts both them and their women; they want that joy more than they fear the danger. The liberal pacifism which denies this fact treats aggression as dishonestly as Victorians treated sex, and the results are no less dirty and even more dangerous. Sex badly suppressed can, at least sometimes, sublimate into love. What does aggression badly suppressed sublimate into? What does our new, worse Victorianism generate? Distrust, suspicion, litigiousness, sadism in art and violence in the streets. Meanwhile, the world needs a genuine peace built on an acceptance of what is rather than a lie, on restraint not denial, what William James called “the moral equivalent of war.”

Poetry knows, in a different and deeper way than science ever can, what our emotions are and how they work, what we are really like, for poetry is not blinkered by the drive to manipulate us (for our own good, of course). Instead, poetry rejoices in and marvels at all of human nature, good and evil alike. It's poetry not science that teaches us to be wary of manipulating each other so much, to wonder at ourselves as we are. Yet, though this is of great importance, the essence of poetry is more important still; but it cannot be explained, talked about in classroom prose, taught. Yeats again:

Everything that man esteems
Endures a moment or a day.
Love's pleasure drives his love away.
The painter's brush consumes his dreams;
The herald's cry, the soldier's tread
Exhaust his glory and his might:
Whatever flames upon the night
Man's own resinous heart has fed.

The world ignores at its peril what poetry knows. But as Louis Armstrong said, when someone asked him *What is Jazz?*, “If you got to ask me, I can't tell you.” Memory: language as the memory of a people: poetry reminds. That is all I am going to say here and now. If I said any more about it in public prose, I would be saying something else.

How would one dare to paraphrase those lines of Yeats, making them clear, easily accessible? Those words arranged as he arranged them mean exactly what they say, and no other arrangement of them could mean the same thing.

Whatever flames upon the night
Man's own resinous heart has fed.

Yet, it is not just that what those lines say is true. More, they remind us of a truth we have always known but keep forgetting.