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Poetry and the Liberal Arts

Mr. Mark Van Doren suspects poetry of a relationship with the liberal arts. It seems that a coincidence of best achievement in poetry and the flourishing of the liberal arts is observable. The great poets often had a liberal art at their command—Shakespeare was a master rhetorician who knew how to practice his art without anyone being aware of what he was doing. The 190 figures of rhetoric he had at his command became translated into so many motions of the logical and pathetic human heart. It seemed evident, though, that Mr. Van Doren could not base his attempt at showing relation between the noble and the dialectical voice through historical relationship alone. A poet and his purpose had to be defined to this end.

A poet is one who thinks first and writes later. He is an artist while on duty and perhaps a liberal artist at all other times. He is one who might think of a character, lets the character become alive and then creates him. Yet, after creation is achieved, the character lives as an individual and has the right to master his creator, the poet. Poetry deals with individuals. A Shakespearean or Homeric character is not mainly great because there is something of us inside him (or vice-versa), but because he is Achilles or Hamlet, an individual as no other, a man with a name. And a man must be important to deserve a name.

It is this individuality which makes poetry unique. Other arts can deal only generically with man, not with a singular snowflake, man, or rabbit. Poetry deals with them as pure singulars, it attempts to make heard the ineffable something which makes a snowflake yet a separate thing after chemical, physical, and geopolitical analysis have "placed" it. And this power to deal with particulars makes poetry a liberating agent. It makes a man free to be taken qua John Smith, qua microcosm like unto which there is no other. Such an individual is untouchable—being alone in the world and self-sufficient. He has no occasion to be questioned about the meaning and purpose of his existence, nor could anybody ask him such questions: nobody knows him that well. As individual is ineffable, Aristotle says. We can talk of man as political, rational, and risible, but we can never *really* know a person and the greater the person the harder this is.

And here, says Mr. Van Doren, lies one of Shakespeare's paradoxes. Surely he expressed himself in sufficiently clear and lucid style, and the plays in themselves are as simple and clear. Everything that is said on stage happens there. Yet here we have the

completely individual Hamlet—perfectly lucid, yet ununderstandable—becoming, perhaps, a greater enigma in the proportion in which the fascination of his person increases. Equally difficult is it to clarify the problem of how a poet uses abstractions without appearing to use them, how, the play seems to have no meaning, no coherence. It merely is, a world or comes of itself of which, if it be a good play, every individual part as well as every character is as concise an individual as the world of the play itself.

Yet the world of the play is also the mirror of our own world. On the other hand (or because of this) it is a world that we would not wish to change after seeing the play. The play has no purpose except itself. We can again not ask Shakespeare why he created the world of "Hamlet" in the same way that we cannot ask why he created the "melancholy Dane" himself.

If a poet is good, he does not know the end of the play he is writing. It seems, according to Mr. Van Doren, that he conceives and creates the idea and then allows it to become an individual world that behaves as it wants to behave, but that is yet human enough to be subject to accidents which modify the world itself, in proportion as it modifies the evolution of the hero's fate. In a really good poem, as in life, the unexpected happens. Hamlet knew not Polonius was behind the curtain, nor did Achilles foresee that his thirst for glory could lead to the death of his best friend. Yet still, in the seeming chaos of the hero's world, i.e., in the unphilosophic universe which he inhabits, education goes on. In the *Illiad*, Achilles ends by understanding glory.

Poetry works through irony. If Achilles had not made many mistakes, he would never have learned so much. He is great because he had such great difficulty in learning something. In tragedy, Mr. Van Doren says, the liberal arts are practised because it measures the limit of how far man can be presented as an individual. And it here becomes evident that previous statements tie in: tragedy seems an attempt to make a great man effable.

Besides tragedy there is yet another form of drama called comedy. And if tragedy deals with the presentation of the individual so that he may be best understood, comedy spreads itself over the world in presenting man as he can be known from another angle. The comic hero is either a fool or a wit who dialecticises constantly. The possibility for dialectic are, as we know, endless and hence poetry in comic form is often shapeless. The world of comedy is essentially safe because every man goes over every hurdle and everything always ends well.

Also, as is usual in a dialectical world, nobody takes anybody else very seriously. People in comedy do not feel and must keep their audience from feeling, too. The comic here has no career: he seems to be as wide as the world. Yet comedy has its limits as well as tragedy. They are, however, from without rather than from within, Achilles is limited from within and we learn and suffer with him. But Odysseus is a man who grows smaller and smaller as the drama progresses. We suspect him of ignoring that he is a higher being than the Cyclops or that he really knows how hard it is to stay at home. A John Tanner, on the other hand, is a dialectician whom, at the end of the play, no one can take seriously any longer. Heroes in comedy are reduced to beings who are not despicable, but who have had to fit themselves into a limited frame.

Perhaps Euripides killed tragedy because he made the mistake of knowing Socrates not wisely, but too well. He felt that man should be understood solely in terms of logic. He excluded from his plays the ignorance which characterises great poetry, the ignorance of the liberal arts which seems to be achievable only after the poet has absorbed them. When we see what the idea in a given poem is, the poem is bad. The more perfectly the liberal arts are forgotten, the more perfectly are they possessed.

The duty of a good critic, according to Mr. Van Doren, is to be able almost to duplicate the poet in artistic worth. I feel very keenly about this since I felt that Mr. Van Doren's lecture was a poem, a poem by definition without meaning, purpose, or logic. This is not by way of depreciation. I feel very much that we should have more and better poems on Friday nights. Mr. Van Doren's poem was good, I think, because if we listened to him well, he had a great deal to teach us—above all that we are silent in our very greatest moments and that the good poet must learn how to be silent. It is almost painful to write this review because, now that these words have been written, my feeling is that I have said really nothing about the lecture.

—FLEISCHMANN

Celestial Enchantment

What mocks us, that we force the bounded
To the boundless?
The unplaced place, so rarified that unfrequent
travelers
Are strangled with a quick, sharp gasp,
And sent hurtling through time and space
To fall prostrate on the sense-bound sphere.

There again with patient, painful logic
Climb with quiet sweat,
Soothing with murmured nothings

The panic of the heart.
What mocks us that galls us in our rest,
Yet pries our fingers from the rungs?
* * * *

Proud—struggling to see a way that's laid
In unoriented pinwheels of vapor.
Self-moving—yet like a ping-pong ball
On a jet of air.
Bend with the hands of the imagination
The arch of events,
And see therein The Rise, Climax, and The Fall.

Down the chasm of Time,
And Time's chasm has high walls,
Moves an endless stream of clutching hands
"Shaping the course of destiny."
Yet in the ethereal vastness, unmarked,
Save only as a marker for all orbits,
Rests the answer to eternity.

And a hand among the multitude,
Relaxing its thrust into that mist,
Is caught by the honeyed winds
Of the past-present-future;
And whirling at an harmonic pace
Through its celestial track,
Does rain down reflection of those omnipresent rays.

—LINTON

Player on Pan's Pipes

Mr. Zuckerkandl fired his lecture with messianic enthusiasm and made an earnest attempt to let students into his mind on the issue of music and intellectual virtue. Music can be studied like mathematics, but general characterizations about music give one no way of distinguishing the hand of the master. Or it can be approached as an emotional experience. However, Mr. Zuckerkandl's job was to locate the place of music in a liberal arts curriculum.

Plato says the Lyre is essential in the educating of youth because music is a strong ethical power. Does music influence character? Orpheus can make nature knuckle under his magical spell and the walls of Jericho respond to a musical tone thrice taken. But John Wesley remarked, "what a pity the devil has all the good tunes."

To get underneath the question, consider that we identify intellect with rational, logical thought. Science has monopolized intellect. "Where there is order, there is intellect," is a deep conviction with us. Order means to us a logical or mathematical structure. Mathematical patterns are revealed in the physical world by the sciences. Here is the one sidedness of our approach. Since we are heirs to Locke, we have too narrow a concept of intellectual range.

Most of the long hairs agree music is well-ordered movement. But what moves? In a melody we get pegged tones with gaps inbetween. Movement in music is non-spatial and non-physical. It is mind-movement. Plato has gymnastics for the body, music for the soul. As physical movement gives one intimate awareness of one's body, movement of mind gives one intimate knowledge of one's mind. (Mr. Zuckerkandl seemed Kantian here. We get to know our own mind, not the intelligibles.) Music reveals to us an order of the universe as far as it is mind. The musical order revealed in the world of tone is a non-logical and non-mathematical order and it is futile to try to reduce it to such.

Kant, who dedicated his philosophy to redeem mathematical appearances (as well as morality) has a breach with Plato. The mode of understanding is not seeing. Intuitions are all sensual, but the senses cannot think. So understanding has to provide patterns of reception. *Anschauung gedanke*—contemplative or intuitive thought—Kant felt was just beyond man's reach. Goethe took up this lance. His theory of colors is direct Vision challenging discursive reasoning. In it he postulates an efficient negative principle, an *opaque* to "bring out" light. White light is pure and colorless and comes into visibility thru modifications imposed upon it by "darkness."

"... Life is but light in many-hued refraction."
(Faust, Part II)

Clark-Maxwell's equations sustain Goethe's theory. But 19th century followed Descartes' lead to the bitter end. Bitter because it reached its logical culminations in the mechanical *weltanschauung* of the turn of the century. With only a cavalier remark about the twentieth century revolution in physics, return to Whitehead who says a piece of iron is a melodic continuum. What holds it together is the same thing that holds music together. And Bergson, as St. Augustine, the immense speculator about time before him, needs to speak of music in developing his revolutionary concept of time. The good sustains all movement and music makes this reference beyond itself.

—FRASCA

To the Members of the Polity:

To say that the students at St. John's do not "regulate" the dormitories in a responsible fashion is to state a fact that elicits a variety of responses. In one form or another these responses imply 1.) that there are no problems; and/or 2.) that such a regulation is an infringement of personal liberties. The first, if true, is a happy state of affairs; but even so it is irrelevant. The Polity was empowered

to "establish minimal dormitory regulations" on the premise that the organization which would allow the inhabitants of a dormitory to resolve difficulties, if and when they do arise, without recourse to the Administration should be ready at hand. The *Apology* and *Crito* would seem to furnish an answer to the second type of response. A college is a community with which a student makes a contract he is free to abrogate at any time. By his presence he indicates his continued subscription to that contract and submits himself to the laws of the community. Granted this, objections to government in the dormitories can legitimately be based only on a basic disagreement as to the form in which that government is to be exercised.

Now the *fact* is that St. John's has in this respect been for some years a democracy. Hence there would appear to be no necessity for a defense. That the members of the Steering Committee, the Court, and the officers of the Polity should feel such a compulsion and not be content to state what follows as something deducible from the fact of polity, is interesting and significant. The defense arises, I suppose, from a sensitivity to the traditional Yankee mistrust of government in any form so apparent here. In a broader context this resistance to the Polity is a symptom of the disjunction that exists between the academic and the social and moral aspects of our community life.

At any rate the Administration has inquired as to the possibility of the Polity fulfilling the responsibilities granted it by the constitution. Let us assume that there have been difficulties and agree that situations demanding some disciplinary action are at least probable. Then there are various solutions ranging from self-government to a house-mother in each dormitory. Though the one extreme is not immediately likely, we have, on behalf of the Polity, indicated our preference for the first. The proposition is simple: if there must be dormitory regulation let us do the regulating ourselves.

The Student Court is the only machinery explicitly established by the constitution. We suggest that the Court be utilized to the fullest extent and recommend that its activities be supplemented as follows. We have asked the Steering Committee member in each dormitory to take the initiative in getting some sort of dormitory committee chosen. We have not visualized these committees as a gendarmerie or a clique of monitors. These committees would function in the following ways:

1. receive complaints relative to specific dormitory regulations from both student and administration and, if possible, adjust these complaints without resorting to the Court.
2. handle such other situations as it might be called upon to deal with.

3. act as a liaison between student and administration regarding physical conditions of the dormitory.

4. represent the dormitory as prosecutor or defendant in cases brought before the Court.

The Court will have appellate jurisdiction in cases where a violation of the general welfare is charged. Where the nature of the situation is such that the dormitory is not directly involved the Court will have primary jurisdiction.

The effectiveness of the above organization will, obviously, depend upon the degree to which it is utilized by the Administration as well as the student. Here a wise smile and the observation that though the Polity has the formal machinery, the Administration will, as always, retain the substance of power, would be in order. This, we believe, is not a necessary condition. In one sense, of course, the Administration must always possess ultimate authority; and it is moreover, by virtue of that very fact that it can entrust to the Polity as much authority as the Polity can assume responsibility. We feel, however, that the Administration has been and is sincere in its efforts to get the Polity to function.

When the Administration feels compelled to initiate disciplinary action (e.g. damage to college property; public scandals; etc.) it has agreed to utilize the Polity machinery. This in effect means that the dormitory committees would be the Administration's first recourse just as they are the student's. The Administration would also have the right to ask the Court to review any settlement it deems unsatisfactory.

The officers of the Polity, the Court, and the Steering Committee have thoroughly discussed the situation with the Administration and we have agreed to the above proposals. There remains the final question: suppose the Court does function as outlined above, what is to prevent the Administration from circumventing or disregarding its decisions? The answer is: nothing.

In conclusion, however, we would like to say that we are aware of no other authority compelling the Administration to so much as discuss the problem with us, and in the absence of such evidence we are willing to conclude that the intention is sincere and that there is integrity behind the agreements reached.

—C. KRAMER

(The "specific dormitory regulations" mentioned above under 1. are enumerated in the appended sheet to the Constitution of the Polity recently distributed. —Editor.)

Sonnets

I

(Narcissus)

When all of time has lingered past this heart,
When space and void are one within the same
And other voices cry from worlds apart
To halt the flux of ecstasy and pain:
When you have offered your last sacrifice,
When wearied by the day you seek the night
To meet your lover's eyes, but put a price
That for his soul extinguishes the light:
Then comes from the chaos Oedipus foretold:
The flaw of Adam permeates the coil
To burn and rot, decay the green green-mold,
And blood of love takes seed in sterile soil.
Thus look, Narcissus, through the Ivory Gate
Where Love's becoming is:—dis-stilled from Hate.

II

(Where Love's becoming is)

From Shallow mount to deep abyss I've seen
The monsters of the flesh who seek my soul,
And Kings and Knaves have crowned La Eros Queen
While Satan's kin have offered up the bowl.
Though Nectar from the Chalice is my want,
Imprisoned by the Lusts for final death
The Jokers, wild with visions, come to haunt,
While Agape stands by to offer breath.
The strangeness of the times has posted bond,
Procured release past prison matron's plea,
And in the guise of night which we have donned
We walk in mid-day sun, alone, now free
To seek the Sun who keeps us in His ken
And seek the life for which we cry "Amen."

—DEWING

Lear At C. U.

In *Lear* Shakespeare seems almost to have sacrificed the players to the words. The language itself has life and resists being fleshed. Bald, bold, most intellectual when most passionate, (as in the villains' speeches) it allows almost no freedom for the actor. If he attempts to play up to it, he appears puny and inadequate; if he tries to neglect it, he finds the action so sudden and violent that he cannot hold it together. In fact, if we do not pay scrupulous attention to the language, we tend to quarrel with the abruptness of the development of *Lear*. His initial rage is only prepared on the most abstract level. The idea of "natural" is wittily played against that of "lawful"; the theme of father and child is asserted obliquely. Yet within a few minutes *Lear* summons horrified attention for the climax of his relentless

struggle for domination, specifically for his ultimate effort to wrest from his virgin daughter her intransigent independence.

For any other playwright this scene would be at the climax or the denouement. Most actors playing *Lear* wish it were.

To put all this in five minutes demands something the best actor can only faintly shadow. To include less in the play, however, would have been to fail to treat the problem in its full range of implication. If its referents are to be as private as the family, as public as the state, and as universal as the natural order, obviously the actor must suffer.

The pitch is often epic: that is, the play does not explicate its events. It is easy to read their passion as arbitrary. As a result most actors play *Lear* as the "Angry Man," subject to irrational fits. This conception relieves the spectator of involvement in the problems of the play and trivializes its meaning. *Lear* has long calculated this gift of his authority as the ultimate assertion of his power. Not only can he bestow powers upon others but thinks himself free to abdicate his own. The source of power himself, he expects not to rule, but to exist apart in his castration, the object of universal awe.

In other characters, Shakespeare demands the reverse of his players. He is able to refer to the classic virtues and vices with almost as much ease as Plutarch or the Stoics. Edmund, Goneril, Regan are entirely simple in their evil. To explain them is to miss the point of the play. They are unnatural, unordered, irrational beasts. Dangerous as their conception may be, without them, Nature, which is the subject of the play, would be one-sided and weak. The orders of state, family, physical and metaphysical being, are defined by their dark almost unimaginable negatives. No one will ever play them "convincingly." Not merely heroic proportions suffice: they are beyond us altogether in their purity. In themselves they are close to the barren villains of melodrama, but their function in the play distinguishes them. They exalt the level on which the others move and by the intensity of their impact, allow us to observe an equally intense reaction.

Conversely, Edgar, Cordelia and *Lear* are drawn as delicately as the detail of a Renaissance painting. Imagination and observation, reality and fantasy, playing among themselves reverse their roles and intentions to the very end of the play. When *Lear* seems most angry, most fit for clinical diagnosis, what he says is most sane. Something similar may be said for Gloucester's abnegation of life.

The recent production at Catholic University under its guest director confirmed this reviewer's opinion that *Lear* can only be properly presented under such auspices, rather than in the slick commercial theatre. It must be directed for its story.

No one can star as *Lear* without ruining the play by obtruding himself. An unassuming production as this, whose attraction to its audience was the play and not the players, may devote itself to the real job: the play as a whole, the contrast and complement of characters and rhetorics.

The director establishes as a minimum, a clear reading of the verse. Nobody recited, nobody mumbled, embarrassed by their lines. The stark strength of Goneril, Regan and Edmund was weakened however, by the actors' self-conscious stylizations, out of place in this production at least. They were simply unable to accept their plight with dignity. props: costumes of monk's cloth served all but the Goneril and Regan slinked and snarled like something out of Terry and the Pirates. Edmund, who tried to render evil genial, made it into vaudeville instead.

On the other side, however, plain sincerity overcame *Lear*'s frequent over-acting and Gloucester was often moving after his blinding. Edgar, no actor, brought intelligence to inform a deliberate design. The major moments, unimpeded by awkward personalities, spoke directly to the audience, especially those of pathos: blind Gloucester, *Lear* and the fool. The reconciliation with Cordelia was deeply touching. The fool was often excellent. Tragic moments were weaker, but their suggestion was enough for the audience to develop out of the context.

Especially of interest to St. John's was the use of a bare setting almost without effects. The wide, shallow stage accommodated splendor and yet enclosed intimate encounter as well. There were no ladies, who were not improved by crepe and jewels. The pace with which scenes were hurried on and off was breathless, but no one was rushed while on the stage. It was assumed that the audience would not be bored with an almost uncut performance. On the other hand this was not taken, on the whole, as an excuse for bombast.

The total effect of this production was to put *Lear* on the stage in such a way that we could immediately see what Shakespeare projected in the play. This work more than others can only be grasped on the stage. Its difficulties, its apparent flaws, are as essential to the intended meanings as its rhetorical triumphs. A performance of this quality is probably possible in this country only in colleges. If St. John's with smaller resources in personnel and equipment could restore its tradition of putting on plays that can hold the attention in themselves, it might exemplify, however imperfectly, what to expect from the theatre: when the seminar's glib allegories must collapse before the denser complex of the theatre; and conversely, when there is demand for more intelligent searching into the meaning of the structure and elements of a play.

Straightforward presentation of the masterpieces of the theatre seems an essential starting point. One can hardly imagine the tedium of rehearsing a play without taut language; nor on the other hand, imagine the excitement of trying to break the fixed limits of language, as in *Lear*, to get beyond them, beyond the limits of action to real understanding. Naturally in a lesser degree the same considerations apply to the audience. We look forward with anticipation not only to seeing the *Birds* at C. U. in December, but also the *Alcestis* at St. John's.

Hamlet

When Mr. Spaight was here last year, he was asked what he thought of Sir Laurence Olivier's *Hamlet*, then forthcoming. He replied that he feared the danger of a surfeit upon the mind; of stirring up the imagination with the evocations of Shakespeare's words and then crushing it with a specific image on the screen. His criterion of whether or not the film would fall prey to this danger was to be its handling of the Queen's "There is a willow grows aslant a brook" describing the death of Ophelia. He wondered whether the speech would be both read and portrayed. Those who have seen the film will recall that is precisely what happens; the Queen's speech, complete with cuts and a soap-opera reading, is accompanied by a full-fledged sequence of Jean Simmons, in a slightly ruffled cow-maid costume, floating down a chocolate-box stream, plucking petals while she sings. This overpowering sequence has been described by an eminent critic as breathtaking, and I agree; it is as breathtaking as a *coup de ventre*.

In that scene we have epitomized the dangers of filming *Hamlet*. Olivier's last adaptation, *Henry V*, came off marvelously well, while more misgivings must be felt about this latest export. Perhaps there is a fundamental difference between these two plays. In *Henry V* the Chorus laments the failings of the stage, and wishes for greater means of verisimilitude to portray his epic. *Henry V* benefits tremendously from reality, or rather super-reality; from motion, color, eye-staggering settings and the London Symphony Orchestra. But *Henry V* is a great drama, and it has been said that *Hamlet* is more a great dialogue. The plot of *Hamlet* is not a great one, and of the many imaginative levels of the play, only the first is dramatic. As Mr. Spaight brought home to us, much of the effect of such a play for Shakespeare depended upon the crudeness, or rather the unrealism, of its production. *Hamlet* was played on a rough stage, without costume or scenery, in all probability

by bad actors, *but with a good audience*. The audience had to be accustomed to a constant exercise of the imaginative faculty while watching the play. It was able to be carried directly from the evocative language to the ideas behind it, without the impediment of association with the mundane. For example, in Olivier's opening scenes, one feels quite at home, for who has not at some time stood in a cold and dark old building and been afraid? In Shakespeare's opening scenes, with the tension dramatically fractured by purposeful slapstick and bawdiness, one is forced to manufacture a unique fear, the fear of being outside Elsinore. The Olivier ghost is a respectable heir to a long line of such; Shakespeare's is so obviously an old man in a bedsheet that a unique terror, of an intellectual rather than a thalamic character, is aroused by his presence. With the film the imagination has nothing to do; with the play it roams far and wide. It can get glimpses of great things.

Of course, the responsibility for such realism cannot be placed altogether at Olivier's door, for it is the product of a long deterioration of the theater reaching back to the Restoration and even further—to Euripides, in fact. Sir Laurence, who appears to be an intelligent man, fobs off the faults in his version, which he perhaps understands, upon the necessity of entertaining "Gertie in the sixpennies." I should think, by the way, that he has not done too well even at that; the explanation of Hamlet's staging of the play-within-the-play is difficult enough to follow without the substitution for the entire "Oh, what a rogue and peasant slave am I" soliloquy of a single, startling, cross-stage leap to accompany "The play's the thing." But what really intrigues me is the reason that Olivier feels he must force-feed the imagination of the common folk in order to bludgeon them into an acceptance of the Bard. The idea that the plebeians lack imagination is strange to us who have read Homer and heard Susan Reed. It is, indeed, only in this last generation that ordinary people have lost the faculty of imagination. It is because they are no longer called upon to be good audiences. It has happened only since realism, in the form of novels, plays, the radio, and the film, has filled the folk-mind with the products of other people's imagination.

Thus we have *Hamlet*, not at all badly done on one level by Sir Laurence Olivier, a competent interpreter and actor. But his very production will contribute to that spate of realism that is dulling the imaginations of those who should bear the interpretive task in the next generation. Who, in the end, will be left in the theater free to imagine?