

WARTON LECTURE ON ENGLISH POETRY

GREAT POETRY

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WHAT do we mean when we talk—as we so often and so glibly do—about ‘great literature’ or ‘great art’, about ‘a great painter’ or ‘a great poet’?

Most people, when they use the word ‘great’ in such a context, probably have at the back of their minds a vague conception of outstanding and established excellence—eminence based on superior achievement and attested by the authority of acknowledged experts. That is the common reader’s idea of greatness, and in that sense the word is often used by publishers with a popular market in view: *Great Poems by Great Poets* was a favourite volume with me when I was not of an age to be troubled by the problems lurking in its title.

People who use the word in this sense take much for granted, at any rate when they apply it to the artist. Clearly they have in mind something more than popularity or long-standing reputation; they presuppose some quality, some real merit, in the artist or his work; but what that quality may be is a question they are content to leave to others. And in this they are wise, for artistic merit is not merely an indeterminate concept, like being tall (for instance) or being old; it is a concept involving questions that are difficult, some would say impossible, to answer. Though we might not all agree about the point of height or age at which an author should be called tall or old, we all know what we mean by height and age, and agree about how they should be measured. But there is no such universal agreement about how to measure artistic or literary excellence, or even about what it is.

Certainly we often use the word in this sense, superficial though its use may be, in ordinary conversation, and not only when it is about artists that we are talking.¹ You can be, in this

¹ The word was very frequently used, often in the superlative, in the recent trial concerning D. H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*. One witness, for instance, said, ‘I would say he is certainly among the six greatest, the five or six greatest, writers in English literature in this century. . . . I wouldn’t

sense, a great craftsman or a great cricketer, just as you can be a great creative artist—Sheraton was great in this sense as well as Shakespeare, Bradman as well as Beethoven; you can be, in this sense, a great general or a great judge.¹

But often when we speak of a great poet or artist we have in mind something different from the popular conception. Shakespeare and Donne, Milton and Gray, Shelley and Keats, Byron and Wordsworth, Tennyson and Browning—all of these are certainly great poets in the popular sense, just as Jane Austen and Scott and Dickens and Trollope and Tolstoy and Meredith are, in that sense, all great novelists. But even the common reader will feel that there is a distinction to be made between them, and in this very matter of greatness. If pressed, he would probably describe it as merely a difference of degree: he might say that Tolstoy is a 'greater' novelist than Trollope, and Wordsworth a 'greater' poet than Gray. And if he felt uneasily aware that this was not a full statement of the case, he might express what he felt by saying that Tolstoy and Wordsworth were 'really' or 'truly' great, while Trollope and Gray were not—thus admitting that the difference was not merely in degree, but in kind.

If we want to know what constitutes 'true' greatness in literature we shall have to go elsewhere than to the common reader. At this point it is likely that words will fail him—and not him alone. For while it is easy to provide a description adequate for everyday purposes of what is meant by greatness in its popular sense, about 'true' greatness it is very difficult to say, usefully or helpfully, anything at all. Listen to the opening sentences of William Michael Rossetti's preface to his edition of Shelley's *Poetical Works*:

Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Shelley—these are, I believe, the four sublimest sons of song that England has to boast of among the mighty dead—say rather among the undying, the never-to-die. Let us remember

rank the book among the greatest of the works he wrote, although I think certain passages of it are among the greatest things that he wrote. . . . I would say the expurgated passages come into this class.' Another declared, 'He seemed to me then, and seems to me now, one of the greatest writers in a decade of giants. He made a great difference to me, and I owe a great debt to him.' I suppose it was in the popular sense, in so far as they had any clear idea of what they meant by it, that these experts used the word.

¹ It is not in all fields of activity that greatness is attainable, even in this popular, superficial sense; it can be achieved by the racing motorist but not by the taxi-driver, by the captain of industry but not by the errand-boy. The criterion would seem to be not the scope for originality, but rather the opportunity for exercising unusual gifts or extraordinary skill.

also two exceptional phenomena, an 'inspired ploughman', Burns, and an unparalleled poetess, Mrs. Browning, and be thankful for such a national destiny. There are plenty of others: but those four are, if I mistake not, *the* four.

Well, you may say, that is only a fresh proof of what we have always known—that William Michael Rossetti, for all his love of poetry, was not to be taken seriously as a critic. Listen, then, to one who has a better claim to be accounted a critic than William Michael Rossetti; listen to Swinburne:

The great man of whom I am about to speak seems to me a figure more utterly companionless, more incomparable with others, than any of his kind—

so Swinburne opens the essay prefixed to his Selection from Coleridge; and he goes on:

In all times there have been gods that alighted and giants that appeared on earth; the ranks of great men are properly divisible, not into thinkers and workers, but into Titans and Olympians. Sometimes a supreme poet is both at once: such above all men is Aeschylus; so also Dante, Michael Angelo, Shakespeare, Milton, Goethe, Hugo are gods at once and giants; they have the lightning as well as the light of the world, and in hell they have command as in heaven; they can see in the night as by day. As godlike as these, even as the divinest of them, a poet such as Coleridge needs not the thews and organs of any Titan to make him greater.

Plainly, the idea of greatness that Swinburne had in mind when he wrote those words was something different from the popular idea, from mere 'eminence' or the literary excellence on which such eminence is founded.

But what it is—what qualities, gifts, attributes, he was thinking of—Swinburne does not make clear. He is, as it were, struck dumb; the word 'great' in his mouth is little more than an exclamation mark; he can only gasp his admiration. Indeed, he himself confesses that this is so:

Of his flight and his song when in the fit element [he says, of *Christabel* and *The Ancient Mariner*] it is hard to speak at all, hopeless to speak adequately. It is natural that there should be nothing like them discoverable in any human work, natural that his poetry at its highest should be, as it is, beyond all praise and all words of men. . . . When it has been said that such melodies were never heard, such dreams never dreamed, such speech never spoken, the chief thing remains unsaid, and unspeakable. There is a charm upon these poems which can only be felt in silent submission of wonder.

It is easy to smile at this—hard, perhaps, not to smile at it. One is tempted to say that Swinburne would have done better to yield completely to the 'silent submission of wonder'. But that would not be altogether fair. For Swinburne feels very strongly about Coleridge, and he wants his readers to know this and to feel as he does, and that aim is not an unworthy one. If he trusts too much to the infectiousness of enthusiasm, we should remember that in the criticism of art, reasoned praise is always more difficult than reasoned blame—it is harder to explain why you like something than to explain why you dislike it. And explanation in this case was peculiarly difficult because the conception that Swinburne was trying to communicate—the 'greatness' of a poet or his work—is not an easy conception to identify.

Hard it may be, but Swinburne never even makes the attempt; he is content to pour out a stream of phrases that tell us really no more than that Coleridge's poetry affected him very deeply; and to be content with this is to abdicate the position of critic. If Swinburne had supposed that *Kubla Khan* acted on him in the same sort of way as the opium that produced it acted on Coleridge, then we should have no right to complain that he has treated us only to an account of his reactions to it; but he evidently believed that his reactions were directly and recognizably related to some actual superiority in Coleridge's poems, and we therefore have a right to ask him to give us some idea of what he thinks that that superiority consists in. It is not the critic's business to explain *why* we should react as we do to the qualities present in a work of art—that, perhaps, cannot be done even by the psychologist—but to detect those qualities, to distinguish between them, to disengage and unfold them, as it were, and exhibit them for the inspection of the reader—this, surely, is an essential task of criticism. And this is something that Swinburne entirely fails to do.

Now, for myself, when the writers I have already mentioned present themselves to my mind, I find that, like the common reader, I naturally think of some of them as being 'great' in a sense in which others of them are not: Tolstoy, but not Trollope; Wordsworth, but not Gray. And while it is difficult to say just what this 'greatness' is, it is plain that it is not simply a matter of literary excellence, whatever literary excellence may be. Still less does it depend upon what class of literature their works belong to—a novelist can be great in this sense as well as a poet; a lyrical poet as well as the writer of an epic.

Now if I am not to be relegated, with Swinburne and William

Michael Rossetti, to the class of the merely enraptured, I must give some account of why I should feel this; of what it is in a poet that impels me to call him great.

In trying to answer this question, I do not begin, or hope to end, with a definition either of greatness or of poetry itself. Critics have defined poetry in many ways, and prescribed various aims for poets: the poet's aim is self-expression; the poet's aim is communication; poetry is making; poetry is play; poetry is an essence; poetry is prayer. Poets themselves are conscious in varying degrees of their aims; some write, like Milton, with a carefully formulated purpose; others 'pipe but as the linnet sings', like the author of *Songs of Innocence*; some, like Coleridge, bring their poems to birth 'as recollection or the drug decides'. And poetry acts upon the reader in various ways: a poem may please our ears, it may feed our imaginations, it may stir our emotions; it may, for a moment or for much more than a moment, alter profoundly our consciousness of the world around us and our attitude towards it.

Speaking for myself, I must say that the more I think about literature, the harder it becomes to define it and its subordinate provinces, and the less profitable any attempt at a precise or logical definition seems to be. The boundaries that divide prose from poetry, for instance, and poetry from verse, become shadowy under inspection and disappear. And so it is with greatness; many things have been suggested by critics as its essential mark—originality of mind, imaginative power, nobility of nature, power of influencing others; one cannot say, about greatness any more than about poetry itself, that there is one right way of using the word and all other ways of using it are wrong. Therefore I shall not attempt to impose a definition, but shall rather try simply to sort out my impressions in the light, so to speak, of my own linguistic habits, and to trace them to their source in the writer or his work.

You may have noticed that though I have spoken of great poets, I have so far refrained from speaking of great poetry. And this has been instinctive; the word 'great' suggests itself to me less easily in connexion with a work than with a writer; it does not come naturally to me to speak of a great line, a great stanza, or a great sonnet. If I do this, nine times out of ten it is no more than a careless and emphatic way of saying that I think the line or passage in question especially moving or impressive; it is not 'true' greatness that I am thinking of.

If I do, so to speak, catch myself out attributing 'true' greatness to a poem, I find on reflection that it is usually to a work on a large scale, not to a couplet, an epigram, or a sonnet; and on further reflection it almost always turns out that in calling it great I was really thinking more about the author than about the work itself; that what impelled me to call it great (as would be the case if I called it a masterpiece, or a work of genius) was something much more closely connected with its author, much more directly and fully expressive of something in him, than is (say) its beauty or technical perfection. Of course, it is to its author that a work of art owes all its attributes; it is what it is because he, being what he was, made it so. But some of the qualities we attribute to a work of art are really qualities not of the work but of its creator; when we say that a work is 'original' (for instance) or 'daring' we are really speaking as much about the creator as about the work itself; and when we call a poem great I do not think that the word has any meaning except by reference to an author, actual or supposed.

A very simple test convinces me of this. Suppose a line of poetry strikes me as beautiful, and I am then told that the sequence of words that it consists of came together purely by chance, or as the result of a typographical confusion; I should not, in that event, alter my judgement and think that it was any the less beautiful a line for that. But if I had judged it to be great, then the news that the sequence of words that it consists of came into existence quite fortuitously would, I think, cause me to change my opinion; to call a chance collocation of words an example of poetic greatness would simply, to my way of thinking, be nonsense.¹

Common speech lends support to this view of the matter: we do not naturally call a sunset, or a fine mountain panorama, 'great', however beautiful or 'glorious' we think it, however deeply we are affected by its beauty. And that, surely, is because there is no author to whom we can refer it—the view from my window is a landscape without a painter, the sunset is a poem

¹ There are difficulties about the view that greatness is really attributable to the author rather than to the work. Can a work of composite authorship—say, the *Iliad*—be great? Must we wait till we know the authorship of a poem before we can judge whether it is great or not? What about forgeries? What about the poem that is the product of automatic writing? These difficulties disappear if we suppose that when we think of a work of art as great there is always a suppressed protasis in our thought: 'This is a great work *if and in so far as it is the sincere product of a single mind.*' I insert 'sincere' in order to exclude pastiche and forgery.

without a poet. It is not because it is not a work of art, for things other than works of art—an action, or even, in certain contexts, a gesture—can affect us with this sense of greatness just as authentically as does a picture or a poem. It is because the landscape and the sunset do not—like the action or the gesture—reflect a personality.

If you think of Nature as expressing the personality of the Creator, then you may indeed call a landscape great:

The glorious firmament on high
With all the blue ethereal sky
The spangled Heavens, a shining frame,
Their great Original proclaim.

Addison might have called a sunset, or the night sky, 'great', but that is because to him creation proclaimed its great Original.

Of course it is upon his poetry that a poet's title to greatness rests: there are no mute inglorious Miltons—or, rather, the mute Miltons remain inglorious—and since it is through his poems that we come to know the poet's greatness it is only natural to apply the epithet to his work as well as to himself.

And of course the word 'great' is very commonly applied to poems, as it is to poets, simply as an epithet of vague laudation. *The Ancient Mariner* and *The Rape of the Lock*, Gray's *Elegy* and *The Waste Land*, *Lycidas* and *The Lotus Eaters*—all these would no doubt qualify for inclusion in a collection of Great Poems; each of them is an example of poetic excellence of one kind or another. This is simply the popular notion of greatness—established excellence—used with reference to the poem instead of to the poet. But on reflection, we distinguish between 'great' poems just as we do between 'great' poets; we recognize a difference between the merely excellent on the one hand and the 'truly' great on the other. *The Rape of the Lock* is a perfect poem; but is it great as *Tintern Abbey* is great? *The Vanity of Human Wishes* is a splendid poem; is it 'truly' great, like *Samson Agonistes*?

Reflecting, then, on my instinctive use of the word 'great' in connexion with poetry, I find that I associate it naturally with the author rather than with his work, and that when I apply it to the work it is something about the author that I have in mind. Critics have not always approached the matter in this way. From the time of Aristotle until the end of the eighteenth century, they looked upon greatness as a quality inhering in the poem itself, and necessarily connected with its subject: a

poem could not be great, they concluded, unless its subject was sublime.¹

'A Heroick Poem, truly such,' says Dryden, 'is undoubtedly the greatest work which the Soul of Man is capable to perform. . . . The action of it is always one, entire and great. . . . Even the least portions . . . must be of the Epick kind; all things must be Grave, Majestical, and Sublime.' 'The file of Heroick Poets', he goes on to tell us, 'is very short. There have been but one great *Ilias*, and one *Aeneis*, in so many ages. . . . *Spencer* has a better plea for *Fairy-Queen*, had his action been finish'd, or had been one. And *Milton*, if the Devil had not been his Heroe, instead of *Adam*.'

Dr. Johnson had no doubts about the greatness of *Paradise Lost*: 'considered with respect to design,' he says, '[it] may claim the first place, and with respect to performance the second, among the productions of the human mind.' True, in discussing it he speaks of Milton's 'appetite for greatness' and tells us that 'The poet, whatever be done, is always great'; but even when he says this he has his eye not on the man but on the poem and its subject: 'The subject of an epic poem is naturally an event of great importance. That of Milton is . . . the fate of worlds. . . . Great events can be hastened or retarded only by persons of elevated dignity. Before the greatness displayed in Milton's poem all other greatness shrinks away.' What is the greatness displayed? Is it Milton's greatness? No: it is the greatness of the subject: 'The weakest of his agents are the highest and noblest of human beings, the original parents of mankind.' If Milton is great it is simply because he can rise to the heights of this exalted theme: 'The characteristick quality of his poem is sublimity. He sometimes descends to the elegant, but his element is the great.'²

Of course, even critics in the classical tradition did not judge the greatness of a poem by reference simply to its subject: they required the poet to display powers of invention and execution worthy of his theme;³ and there was one lonely critic who burst

¹ 'Their [the Greeks'] theory and practice alike, the admirable treatise of Aristotle, and the unrivalled works of their poets, exclaim with a thousand tongues—"All depends upon the subject; choose a fitting action, penetrate yourself with the feeling of its situations; this done, everything else will follow"' (M. Arnold, Preface to the 'New Edition' of his *Poems*, 1853).

² 'He can occasionally invest himself with grace, but his natural port is gigantick loftiness. Algarotti [he adds in a note] terms it *gigantesca sublimità Miltoniana*.'

³ Johnson himself, at the close of his Milton essay, hints at the need for something more than judgement and skill in execution: 'the highest praise of

the bonds of that tradition and sought the source of greatness in the author himself. Longinus—that figure of mystery, who is never mentioned by any classical writer, whose treatise lay hid until the Renaissance had run its course (it was not published until the middle of the sixteenth century) and to whom Boileau and Pope paid lip-service but nothing more—Longinus placed first among the elements of sublimity in literature—before intensity of emotion, skill in composition, taste in expression, and all the classical armoury—grandeur of conception; and grandeur of conception was for him a quality existing not in what is conceived but in the mind or nature that conceives it: ὑψος—he declared—μεγαλοφροσύνης ἀπήχημα: Sublimity is the echo of greatness of mind.

To see the greatness of a poem as the reflection of something in the poet's mind, to conceive of the poet as conferring greatness on his theme and not, so to speak, as living (or writing) up to its inherent greatness—before that idea could take possession of English criticism there had to be a revolution in the critic's way of looking at his subject.

The author of this revolution—so far as any individual deserves the credit for it—was Coleridge. There are many strands in the texture of Coleridge's criticism; indeed to talk of 'texture' is to pay it a compliment it hardly deserves—it is too often a tangle of unfinished thoughts, crossing and contradicting each other, impossible to reconcile, and hard enough sometimes even to elucidate. But in one clear conviction Coleridge never wavered: the poem could not be judged apart from its author. 'What is poetry? is so nearly the same question, with what is a poet? that the answer to one is involved in the solution of the other.' And the greatness of the poet's work depends, according to Coleridge, upon the profundity of his mind: 'No man was ever yet a great poet, without being at the same time a profound philosopher.'¹

genius', he declares, 'is original invention'; *Paradise Lost* is 'not the greatest of heroick poems, only because it is not the first'. The remark is thrown in almost as a postscript: if Johnson had stayed to develop it, he would surely have perceived that, unless by original invention he meant mere novelty, he was admitting that greatness was an attribute primarily of the poet himself and only secondarily of his work. Even so, he would no doubt have maintained that it could only be exhibited by treating a subject of adequate sublimity: 'great events . . . hastened or retarded by persons of elevated dignity'—a poet could prove his greatness only by writing on such themes as these.

¹ Characteristically, he blurs the clarity of this by adding an unhelpful metaphor: 'For poetry is the blossom and fragrance of all human knowledge, human thoughts, human passions, emotions, language.' This is really very little better than William Michael Rossetti.

Of course Coleridge is not using the word 'philosopher' in any technical sense; he does not mean that the greatness of a poet depends on the validity of his metaphysics. What he requires as an element of 'original poetic genius' is, in his own words, 'depth and energy of thought'.

It is not surprising that Coleridge's approach to the greatness of *Paradise Lost* was the opposite of Dr. Johnson's: 'In the *Paradise Lost*', he says, 'the sublimest parts are revelations of Milton's own mind, producing itself and evolving its own greatness. . . . In all modern poetry', he continues, there is 'a fleeting away of external things, the mind or subject greater than the object; the reflective character predominant.'

Even as Coleridge was writing, a change was making itself felt in English literature, and that change reflected his own philosophical temper,¹ his incorrigible tendency to take large views, his terrible appetite for ideas, and his morbidly sensitive and introspective temperament. A wider range of subjects, a greater variety of methods of treatment, became accessible to writers. Poetry, and literature generally, came to be thought of less as a craft and more as a means of self-expression. That was why the nineteenth century saw an unprecedented flowering of the personal lyric and the novel—the literary forms in which the writer can most fully and freely express his deepest feelings and convey his attitude towards human nature and life at large.

Walter Pater seized on this distinctive character of his own age when in his essay on Charles Lamb he suggested that the temper of the nineteenth century was to be distinguished from that of the eighteenth by a 'deeper subjectivity', an 'intenser and closer living with itself'.

¹ Coleridge's own ideal of an epic poem was so high as to be unattainable. Writing to his friend Joseph Cottle, he tells him how he would prepare for the composition of an epic:

'I should not think of devoting less than twenty years to an epic poem. Ten years to collect materials and warm my mind with universal science. I would be a tolerable mathematician. I would thoroughly understand Mechanics; Hydrostatics; Optics, and Astronomy; Botany, Metallurgy; Fossilism; Chemistry; Geology; Anatomy; Medicine; then the mind of Man; then the minds of men, in all Travels, Voyages and Histories. So I would spend ten years; the next five in the composition of the poem, and the last five in the revision of it.'

We have come far, in a dozen years, from Dr. Johnson. No need, now, for the great poet to choose 'persons of elevated dignity', to treat them in a style of 'gigantic loftiness'. Not that, indeed, but how much more, is now required of him!

In prose, one can trace this increasing subjectivity from *Peregrine Pickle*, through *Persuasion* and *The Egoist* and *The Golden Bowl*, to *Ulysses* and the novels of Virginia Woolf. One can trace it in verse from *The Task* through *The Prelude* and *In Memoriam* and *Modern Love* to *The Waste Land*.

No one today would dream of suggesting that the greatness of a piece of writing depended on the inherent sublimity of its subject. If we look for greatness, for instance, in Thomas Hardy, we are as ready to find it in his lyrics as in *The Dynasts*, among great events and 'persons of elevated dignity'.¹

This change of outlook can be traced very clearly in the criticism of Matthew Arnold. In the Preface to the first collection of his *Poems*, published when he was barely thirty, Arnold stated the classic, the Aristotelian, the Johnsonian doctrine with hardly a qualification:

I fearlessly assert [he declared] that Hermann and Dorothea, Childe Harold, Jocelyn, *The Excursion*, leave the reader cold in comparison with the effect produced upon him by the latter books of the *Iliad*, by the *Oresteia*, or by the episode of Dido. And why is this? Simply because in the three latter cases the action is greater, the personages nobler, the situations more intense: and this is the true basis of the interest in a poetical work, and this alone.²

¹ It is a strange thing that Pater, who preached so persuasively the gospel of art for its own sake, should have believed that the greatness of a work of art depends upon its subject, and that he should have declared this belief at the end of his 'Essay on Style'—the essay in which he expounded the doctrine that music 'is the ideal of art precisely because in music it is impossible to distinguish the form from the substance or matter, the subject from the expression'. Having defined 'the condition . . . of all good art', he proceeds:

'Good art, but not necessarily great art; the distinction between great art and good art depending immediately, as regards literature at all events, not on its form, but on the matter. . . . It is on the quality of the matter it informs or controls, its compass, its variety, its alliance to great ends, or the depth of the note of revolt, or the largeness of hope in it, that the greatness of literary art depends, as *The Divine Comedy*, *Paradise Lost*, *Les Misérables*, *The English Bible*, are great art.'

I cannot quote the passage in full, or enter into the difficulties it entails. The description of great art seems at once too broad (can '*The English Bible*', any more than *The Golden Treasury*, be a great work of art?) and too narrow (for it must be limited to literature, as Pater seems to be aware, uneasily). It reads almost as if it were inserted at the end of the essay as an after-thought.

² Arnold goes on to oppose himself expressly to the subjective tendency described above: 'The modern critic not only permits a false practice; he absolutely prescribes false aims. "A true allegory of the state of one's own mind in a representative history", the Poet is told, "is perhaps the highest thing that one can attempt in the way of poetry." And accordingly he attempts

Now it is both a merit and a defect in Arnold that he always writes as if he were arguing, he has always vividly before him a man he wants to convince, and something he wants to convince him of. This keeps his style alive, but it tempts him to overstatement. And in this Preface, his desire to refute the then current doctrine that 'the Poet . . . must leave the exhausted past, and draw his subjects from matters of present import'—a view that is still with us (the poet must 'be contemporary', must 'express his age', must 'reflect the contemporary consciousness'), a view of which I would say, like Arnold, 'This view I believe to be completely false'—Arnold's desire, I say, to refute this view led him to overstate the virtues of the ancients, the classical writers of Greece and Rome, to embrace too readily the classical view of poetic greatness, and to assert, as he does without qualification, what he calls 'the all-importance of the choice of a subject'.

Ten years or so later, Arnold had come to take a different view. It was in the 'Lectures on Translating Homer', delivered in 1861-2, that he offered his famous definition of the Grand Style: 'The Grand Style', he said, 'arises whenever a noble nature poetically gifted treats with simplicity or severity a serious subject.' And Arnold went on to say that Homer worked *entirely* in the grand style, and to offer Homer, Virgil, Dante, and Milton as 'eminent specimens' of that style.

Now to say this is surely to get yourself into a difficulty.¹ Homer is capable of grandeur, but to say that he is always grand is to use the word in an unnatural sense. Homer and Virgil resemble each other, no doubt, in many respects, but one respect in which they do not resemble each other is style. Dante and Milton have much in common; a style is one thing they do not have in common. And Arnold failed, I think, to rescue himself from that difficulty by his device of dividing his 'Grand Style' into two grand styles—the 'grand style simple' and 'the grand style severe'—which in fact have no common quality, least of all grandeur.

The truth is that Arnold's conclusions, again, were coloured—one might say vitiated—by the context in which he was speaking. He was really thinking about poetic greatness, but he was pre-

 it. An allegory of the state of one's own mind, the highest problem of an art which imitates actions! No, assuredly, it is not, it never can be so: no great poetical work has ever been produced with such an aim.'

¹ As later critics pointed out: see Saintsbury, 'Shakespeare and the Grand Style', in *Essays and Studies by Members of the English Association*, i, 1910; John Bailey, 'The Grand Style: An Attempt at a Definition', *ibid.* ii, 1911; and Saintsbury, 'Dante and the Grand Style', *ibid.* iii, 1912.

occupied with style because his immediate business was to demonstrate to his audience the right kind of style for a translation of Homer, who happened to be (in his view) a great poet. The poets he chose as his examples, the passages he offered as touchstones, are by no means all of them specimens of the grand style; but they are all of them examples of poetic greatness. And this fact, which shows itself between the lines in the 'Lectures on Translating Homer',¹ emerges clearly in the three later essays in which he speaks his last word on the subject.²

In his essay on Wordsworth, Arnold picks up his phrase of nearly twenty years before and displays it in a different light. 'Long ago', he says, 'in speaking of Homer, I said that the noble and profound application of ideas to life is the most essential part of poetic greatness.' It is true; he did say so, but only in passing, almost parenthetically, in the course of his attempt to define the grand style. What was then offered as the criterion of the grand style is now explicitly made the criterion of the great poet, for he goes on, 'A great poet receives his distinctive character of superiority from his application, under the conditions immutably fixed by the laws of poetic beauty and poetic truth, from his application, I say, to his subject, whatever it may be, of the ideas "On man, on nature, and on human life", which he has acquired for himself.' What he is now seeking to define is the great poet, not the grand style; and subject, once 'all-important', has receded to the background—'whatever the subject may be'.

A page or two later comes the dictum, 'It is important, therefore, to hold fast to this: that poetry is at bottom a criticism of life; that the greatness of a poet—it is the *great* poet that he is concerned with—lies in his powerful and beautiful application of ideas to life, to the question: How to live'.

This famous pronouncement dominated English criticism till the end of the nineteenth century; since then it has come under heavy fire. The element in it that has drawn that fire has been,

¹ There is a significant sentence in the Lectures on Homer; Arnold says that 'the insurmountable obstacle to believing the Iliad a consolidated work of several poets is this—that the work of great masters is unique; and the Iliad has a great master's genuine stamp, and that stamp is the *grand style*'.

² These three essays appeared in successive years: the preface to his selection from Wordsworth in 1879, the General Introduction to Ward's *English Poets* in 1880, and the preface to his selection from Byron in 1881. All these were reprinted in the second series of *Essays in Criticism* which came out, just after his death, in 1888—the very year in which Pater's 'Essay on Style' appeared in *The Fortnightly*.

of course, the ethical element—the suggestion that it is the poet's business to teach us how to live. Arnold was himself at pains to disclaim any such doctrine; he protested that he did not mean to say that the poet was concerned to inculcate a system of morals, or that poetry was essentially didactic—nor, indeed, was that what Arnold did say. He said that the poet's greatness consisted not in teaching us how to live, but in the 'powerful and beautiful application of ideas' to that question—a very different thing from the providing of an answer to it. 'A large sense', he declared, 'is of course to be given to the term *moral*. Whatever bears upon the question, "how to live," comes under it.'

One must not probe too deeply into Arnold's analysis; he did not, perhaps, ask himself very clearly what he meant by the 'subject' of a poem or by the 'application' of ideas to a question, and the possibility of writing an entirely 'pure' or 'abstract' poetry, never, no doubt, entered his mind. But the importance of 'subject' in any limited sense seems to diminish at each stage of his thought on the matter. He said that a serious subject was a pre-requisite of the grand style; but, later, that a poet's greatness springs from his application of certain ideas to his subject 'whatever it may be'; and, finally, that greatness lies simply in the powerful and beautiful application of ideas to life. I think he would have been inclined—and increasingly inclined—to say that the greatness of a poem depends upon what the poet brings to his subject, and not upon that subject's inherent sublimity.

The doctrine of the 'subjectiveness' of the subject is pushed almost to its extreme limit by Henry James.

The one measure of the worth of a given subject, [says James] the question about it that, rightly answered, disposes of all others—[is] 'Is it valid, in a word, is it genuine, is it sincere, the result of some direct impression or perception of life?' . . . There is [he continues] no more nutritive or suggestive truth in this connexion than that of the effect dependence of the 'moral' sense of a work of art on the amount of felt life concerned in producing it. The question comes back thus, obviously, to the kind and degree of the artist's prime sensibility, which is the soil out of which his subject springs. The quality and capacity of that soil, its ability to 'grow' with due freshness and straightness any vision of life, represents, strongly or weakly, the projected morality. That element is but another name for the more or less close connexion of the subject with some mark made on the intelligence, with some sincere experience.¹

¹ From the preface to *The Portrait of a Lady* in the New York edition of James's works. James continues:

'The house of fiction has in short not one window, but a million—a

Plainly James did not think of the subject as something lying outside the work itself, as a piece (as it were) of reality that the work represents or describes.¹ For him there was the thing seen or felt or heard about; there was the artist's sensibility;

number of pierceable windows not to be reckoned, rather; every one of which has been pierced, or is still pierceable in its vast front, by the need of the individual vision and by the pressure of the individual will . . . at each of them stands a figure with a pair of eyes. . . . The spreading field, the human scene, is the "choice of subject"; the pierced aperture, either broad or balconied or slit-like and low-browed, is the "literary form"; but they are, singly or together, as nothing without the posted presence of the watcher—without, in other words, the consciousness of the artist. Tell me what the artist is, and I will tell you of what he has *been* conscious. Thereby I shall express to you at once his boundless freedom and his "moral" reference.'

¹ To say that a work of art has a subject is, surely, to say, at the least, that its creator recognizes, if not refers to, a reality outside the work itself. The precise meaning of the word varies according to the *genre* the work belongs to; a portrait is 'of' its subject; a poem is probably best described as being 'about' its subject, where it can be said to have one. A discussion of the meaning of 'subject' in literature might well take the form of a discussion of the various possible meanings of the word 'about'. Sometimes what we call the subject is no more than a theme, sometimes (in some lyrics, for instance) it is barely even that, only an occasion. How many subjects has a novel?

The difficulty of identifying anything as its subject often makes it hard for the poet to find a title for a lyric; and the abstract painter, who rejects all reference to external reality, is in the same dilemma. So, writing of his picture 'Boon' (T 253 in the Tate Gallery), James Brooks declares:

'The painting is completely abstract—having been developed from an improvised start and held into a non-figurative channel. As to the title, the name originates as identification only, but generally the painting and the title share a kind of meaning later. I used to number my paintings, then later letter them, calling them A, B, or C, down to Z, purely according to their sequence in that year of production. Neither of these systems worked well. Neither I nor anyone else could remember individual paintings by that system.

'Now I use the same sequence, but complete the initial with a made-up word, without too much attention to its evocative value, depending on its long association with the picture to develop a meaning. The titles are an attempt to avoid a name whose associations will be read into the picture.'

Evidently the artist is afraid that if he gives his picture a significant, evocative title, the picture will acquire a subject (for the spectator) from that title (a strange reversal of the ordinary process whereby the title is derived from the subject); it therefore has to be given a null title, yet one different enough from other titles to be remembered in association with the picture; then, somehow, 'a meaning' for the picture 'develops' from that association.

there was the work itself—the ‘subject’ was what the writer made of his experience; in a work of the creative imagination it was indistinguishable from the substance of the work: the subject of *The Wings of the Dove* was the imagined experience of Milly Theale, not the real experience of Minnie Temple.

If, then, greatness is, or ultimately depends upon, something in the artist’s nature or sensibility, what is that ‘something’? What is it in the artist, writer, or poet, that distinguishes him as great? Let me make clear my method of approaching this question. I am not allotting marks or awarding prizes; I am not even making any judgement about literary merit; I am not saying who ‘deserves’ to be called great; I am simply looking for the common quality or combination of qualities that distinguishes those to whom I—and, I imagine, most critics, would instinctively and unreflectingly apply the title—say, Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, Dante, Virgil, Sophocles.

‘One knows fairly well what one means by great art’, wrote Ezra Pound; ‘One means something more or less proportionate to one’s experience. . . . It is for some such reason that all criticism should be professedly personal criticism. In the end the critic can only say “I like it”, or “I am moved”, or something of that sort. When he has shown us himself we are able to understand him.’ ‘Thus, in painting’, Pound continues, ‘I mean something or other vaguely associated in my mind with work labelled Dürer, and Rembrandt, and Velasquez. . . . And in poetry I mean something or other associated with the names of a dozen or more writers’.¹ Very well; but the critic must, as Pound half admits, say more than ‘I am moved’; he must show us what it is that moves him, and explain the ‘something’ that his ‘great’ painters and writers have in common. For myself, the best explanation I can give is this: *if a poet persuades me by his poetry that he has looked deep into things; that, so looking, he sees them as somehow parts of a universal whole; and that he has responded to this vision with an appropriate emotion; and if the poetry by which he persuades me of this moves me as poetry—then, and only then, I would call him great.*²

¹ ‘The Serious Artist’, in *Literary Essays*, 1954, pp. 55–56. Pound is less happy when he attempts a ‘closer analysis’, identifying great art with ‘maximum efficiency of expression’, and holding it to be ‘of necessity a part of good art’.

² It is necessary to add the proviso, ‘If his poetry moves me as poetry’, because there is no reason in the nature of things, as far as I can see, why a man who possesses the other qualifications of a great poet should possess also

The great poet need not, of course, be a philosophical or a religious poet; he need not be, in the ordinary relations of life, what we call a good man. But he must persuade me by his poetry, whatever its subject, of his insight into 'the architecture of life', and of the adequacy of his natural response to what he sees.

If that is the great poet, great poetry is simply the poetry, whatever its subject, by which such a poet makes me aware of his greatness.

The elements that, on this view, go to make poetic greatness may be variously combined, and may be displayed in varying degrees at different points in a poet's work; and it makes sense to say that of two great poets one is greater than another. But plainly this is a field in which precise measurement and precise definition are impossible, and if two critics disagree about whether a particular poet is great or not, there is no way of proving that one of them is right and the other wrong. If I am asked to define depth of insight, I can do so no more than Matthew Arnold could define what he meant by nobility of nature; if anyone asks what is an appropriate emotional response, I can only say, as Arnold said of the grand style, that you must feel it in order to know what it is.

There is a school of thought that would banish from criticism words that refer to attributes whose presence cannot be checked, and their extent measured, by criteria which all would accept as valid. The great, the beautiful, the noble, the cheap, the vulgar, the sentimental—such terms find no place in scientific criticism and discussion of them can amount to no more than a comparison of personal impressions. Greatness, as I have tried to describe it, is certainly such a conception, and some of the terms one is compelled to use in trying to elucidate it may be so uncertain in their connotation as to be, strictly, meaningless; using them, one cannot prove or convince. But there is surely a middle course between the nebulous raptures of Swinburne on the one hand and 'the submission of silent wonder' on the other. Reflecting upon poetry with these ideas in mind, one may at least clear up dark places in one's own thought and learn to choose and arrange one's words so that they are not self-contradictory; one may reveal fresh aspects and features of poetry, to one's self and others.

the peculiar power of communicating his vision in poetic form. The potentially great poet might be a bad poet, and our description must be framed so as to exclude him.

If one reaches a definition or description of the category of the great by reflecting on examples that clearly fall within it, one can best test it by considering cases falling on its border-line.

Let me begin with one whom Ben Jonson called 'the first poet in the world for some things'. John Donne was certainly that, and he was something more than that. His poetry was a vivid expression of his strong and strange personality; by means of it he really altered not only the way that poets wrote but the way that people felt towards each other all over England for nearly a hundred years.

But, searching Donne's poems from end to end, I nowhere find that sense of the universal which seems to me a necessary note of greatness; the ardour of his passion, and his unremitting introspection, do not allow him ever, either in his love-poems or in his religious poetry, to forget himself and the object of his devotion. He is, perhaps, too personal a poet to be great. Compare him with his contemporary Shakespeare: Shakespeare founded no school, and impressed himself so little on his work that we have not the faintest idea what he was like. But to compare Donne with Shakespeare is to see the difference between a great poet and one who is merely superb.

A great poet must be able to lose or to forget his own personality; he must be capable of being calm; ardour, one might almost say, is the enemy of greatness. That, perhaps, is why so few love-poets have been 'truly' great in their lyrical expression of their own passion (does Shakespeare prove his greatness *in this sense* by his Sonnets, 'great' though, plainly, they often are in the ordinary sense of the word?), and why some of the most intense and moving of devotional poets fall short of 'true' greatness. There is no more exciting, no more passionate, love-poet in any language than Catullus; but if you set him beside Virgil you will instantly see that Virgil has an insight, a depth of vision, and a range of imagination for which you will search Catullus in vain. Devotional poetry touched great heights in Crashaw and in Christina Rossetti; set the one beside Milton and the other beside Wordsworth and you become aware of a whole world of feeling that is closed to their intensity.

Poetic genius is one thing, poetic greatness is another. Blake was, I suppose, a genius; he was also—I would not dispute Housman's judgement—the most poetical of English poets. And he abounds in gnomic utterances of an apocalyptic kind:

To see a World in a grain of sand
And a Heaven in a wild flower.

But Blake was a visionary: I am not persuaded by his poetry that he was anything but a passive vehicle for his visions, when he says that what he wrote was dictated to him by an angel he speaks the truth, and he is denying his own claim to greatness.

Take an example from the novel. Trollope was at least as copious in invention as Tolstoy, he had as sharp an eye, he was as adept in the shaping and telling of a story—in the mechanics of his art. But no one would dream of calling him a great novelist in the sense in which Tolstoy was great. And that is not because Tolstoy worked on a large canvas, described earth-shaking events, and spread himself in philosophical reflections upon them. It is because Tolstoy saw deeply into life, while Trollope only copied it.

There is no end to the series of examples one could take, and to test this or any other such description by applying it to individual writers is certainly an amusing and may be an instructive game. But to make the game worth playing, to throw fresh light on the qualities of the writers chosen or on the implications of the description itself, one would have to examine each example more closely than is possible in a single hour. I would rather use the time available in considering how the writer by using words, and other creative artists by using other media, are able to achieve greatness of this kind.¹

In ordinary speech, we apply the word 'great' to the painter, the musician, the sculptor, the architect, as readily as we apply it to the writer of poetry or prose; and we apply it to all of them without distinction, taking it for granted, apparently, that they may all be great in the same way. If we are giving the word 'great' its popular meaning, no difficulty arises: of course an artist, whatever his medium, can in his own field be excellent or eminent. But is the same true of 'real' greatness, as we have described it? Can those other artists persuade us by their art

¹ I pass by the interesting question how far 'real'—like 'popular'—greatness can be achieved in other than artistic fields. The general, the judge, the statesman, the mathematician—can these be truly great in the same sense as the poet and the painter? And what of the performers and interpreters—the actor, the dancer, the musical conductor or executant? In each case the test, it seems, must be: does his *métier* allow him to express the richness of his nature and the depth of his vision of life? Was Newton, in this sense, great? was Einstein? was Capablanca? Each was, in his own field of intellect, a genius. To have revolutionized thought in any field implies, no doubt, imagination and intellectual courage, and (if the field is an extensive one—I doubt if the chess-board is wide enough) some vision of the universe; but does it require any richness of nature or the capacity for noble emotions?

of their insight into the unity of things and of the adequacy of their response to what they see? Can a man, simply by arranging sounds or shapes or lines or coloured surfaces, convey to us his reading of life and his attitude towards it, as the writer can convey them by arranging words?

The writer, because his medium is more fully articulate than theirs, might seem to be better equipped than other artists for recording his insight into reality and conveying to others his feelings about it. Of his rivals, the painter has a more promising medium than the musician, for if he is a 'figurative' and not an 'abstract' painter he can work upon our emotions by representing, or suggesting, or reminding us of scenes and objects, people and life.¹ And this the painter does, though it is often hard to say how much a picture's effect upon us is due to the representation, to the 'subject' and its associations, how much to its purely visual element, and how much to the relations between the two, to the fact that this scene, this object, is presented to us in just this way.

'And yet it is beautiful', wrote Virginia Woolf of a sordid interior by Sickert, 'satisfactory; complete in some way. Perhaps it is the flash of the stuffed birds in the glass case, or the relation of the chest of drawers to the woman's body; anyhow, there is a quality in that picture which makes me feel that though the publican is done for, and his disillusion complete, still in the other world of which he is mysteriously a part without knowing it, beauty and order prevail; all is right there'—or, as she sums it up in a single sentence, 'the chest of drawers and the arm convince us that all is well with the world as a whole'.

What Virginia Woolf is describing is not greatness but the painter's mysterious power—a power displayed by many painters who are far from being 'great'—of delighting us, moving us, exhilarating us, appealing to our sense of beauty and order, enhancing our sense of the value of life.²

¹ How far is 'representational' art imitative, and how far is it simply suggestive, of 'reality'? Does the figurative painter make something that is 'like' what his picture represents, or does he create a set of conditions which cheat us, so to speak, into thinking that it is so? These are interesting and difficult questions, but irrelevant to the present inquiry.

² Matthew Arnold in his essay on *Maurice de Guérin* (written before 1865) describes this power; he is speaking of poetry, but what he says describes equally well, if not better, the power of the painter—he might be writing about a still-life by Cézanne:

'The grand power of poetry is its interpretative power; by which I mean, not a power of drawing out in black and white an explanation of the mystery of the universe, but the power of so dealing with things as to

The painter can do this by placing the arm in a right relation to the chest of drawers; he can do it by painting a landscape or a still life—the flash of the stuffed birds in the glass case—he can do it, even, by a purely abstract and non-representational picture. For apparently the human frame is so constructed that certain combinations of colours and forms, and certain features (for instance, symmetry, repetition, and particular space relations) in what is presented to our eyes, affect not only our senses but our emotions, and they can do this without any reference to external ‘reality’—no need of the bird, the glass case, the arm, the chest of drawers. A simpler age explained this as an effect of mystical or mathematical virtues inherent in the visual pattern; fuller knowledge suggests that we should look for the cause rather, or also, in our own visceral and nervous organization. Whatever the explanation (if, indeed, anything that is really an explanation is possible), it is the fact that we can be genuinely and deeply moved and excited by a purely abstract work of art¹ or by a chance collocation of things seen in nature itself—a cluster of pebbles on the beach or clouds in the sky, or a constellation of splashes on the wall.

awaken in us a wonderfully full, new, and intimate sense of them; and of our relations with them. When this sense is awakened in us, as to objects without us, we feel ourselves to be in contact with the essential nature of these objects, to be no longer bewildered and oppressed by them, but to have the secret, and to be in harmony with them; and this feeling calms and satisfies us as no other can. Poetry, indeed, interprets in another way besides this; but one of its two ways of interpreting, of exercising its highest power, is by awakening this sense in us. I will not now inquire whether this sense is illusive, whether it can be proved not to be illusive, whether it does absolutely make us possess the real nature of things; all I say is, that poetry can awaken it in us, and that to awaken it is one of the highest powers of poetry.’

I must repeat, that Arnold here is describing, as it seems to me, the peculiar power of the creative artist—not the special attribute of the great artist. To the great artist belongs, perhaps, that ‘other way’ of ‘interpreting’, which Arnold refers to, but does not describe.

¹ We *can* be; but of course many—probably most—of the people, and not only the young people, who say that they are moved or excited by an ‘abstract’ work of art (and the same is true of their professed reaction to analogous works of literature) are not so moved at all; they are simply pretending, and their pretence often deceives themselves as well as others. They are moved by a desire not to be, or be thought, *arrière-garde*; by mere considerations of fashion; and (often) by a genuine taste for novelty and adventure and a distaste for the conventional and the accepted as such. And, *mutatis mutandis*, exactly the same is true of many—probably most—of the people, and not only the old people, who say that they are deeply moved by the Old Masters, or by Shakespeare.

It is true also that the unmeaning lines and forms of the non-figurative artist may possess a splendour or refinement or meanness or vulgarity that betrays something of his inner self; he may reveal himself through them as he might through his aimless scribbles on the blotting-paper.¹

But if he is to achieve greatness as I have described it, the artist must do more than excite us, or lay bare his personality; he must convey to us the depth of his insight into life, and the adequacy of his response to what he sees. And that is what a really great painter manages to do; that is what Rembrandt does, for instance, by his 'Prodigal Son' in the Hermitage and by his self-portrait at Ken Wood; that is what Titian does by his 'Pietà' in the Accademia and Tintoretto by his 'Crucifixion' in the Scuola di S. Rocco. It can be done by a painter of landscapes—Turner does it—perhaps, more mysteriously, by a painter of still-lives. But can it be done by a purely 'abstract' painter, who renounces all reference to reality, including the distortion of it? I dare not be dogmatic, but it appears to me that the answer must be 'No'. A great picture must have some recognizable, intelligible, reference to a reality outside itself.

The case of music seems to be very different. The composer, though his is the most abstract of all arts,² for his medium does not enable him to convey thoughts or represent objects, can, despite the apparent intractability of his medium, achieve that greatness which is open to the figurative artist or to the poet, who has language at his disposal. Beethoven not only was a more accomplished composer than (say) Clementi, he saw more deeply into life and responded more nobly to what he saw. And we are convinced of this without the interposition between the composer and ourselves of a single word or thought, or idea, or reference to a reality outside the work itself, simply by listening to the sequences of sounds that he designed. Beethoven's greatness

¹ Character and personality reveal themselves also in our bodies, and not only in the organs that express, or undergo change in accompaniment to, our emotions: 'His jaw was too square and set and his figure too straight and stiff: these things suggested a want of easy consonance with the deeper rhythms of life.' We do not have to look far among our own acquaintance to find the mean ear, the brute nose, and the criminal back.

² Architecture approaches music in this respect, and approaches it the more closely the nearer it is itself to pure decoration. But architecture may be more or less intimately connected with practical human purposes, and it is easier to see how an architect could communicate his insight into life and his attitude towards it by planning a city than to see how he could communicate it by designing an obelisk.

as a composer consists in his power of persuading us by means of his music of the nobility of his vision of life.¹

The painter's apparent advantage, then, would seem to be illusory; indeed, the advantage is with the musician, who in his entirely abstract medium can achieve something that is beyond the power of the 'abstract' painter, something that a painter can only achieve if he uses a figurative, representational art.

I see no reason why we should be surprised by this state of affairs. It is due simply to the way we are made—the luck, so to speak, of the senses: they do not all stand (why, after all, should they?) on the same footing in this respect. Critics, perplexed and dissatisfied, have tried to persuade themselves and others that it is not so. Thoré, for instance, more than a hundred years ago, suggested that perfumes could be as expressive as lines or colours, and he envisaged an *art des parfums* which would enable him to stage scent-dramas, addressed to the audience (if 'audience' is the right word) solely through their sense of smell.² But unfortunately in this respect sight and hearing are far ahead of the other senses, and to hold that they are all on the same footing as artistic media, and that 'abstract' visual art must therefore be capable of exercising as great a sway over our emotions as music, is simply another manifestation of the hopeful egalitarianism of the present day.

What, then, in this matter is the position of the writer? A glance at the other arts has suggested that their practitioners can convey to us a reading of life and the nature of their response to it, without having recourse to the intellect—or at any rate to its discursive faculty. The painter, it is true, may have to call in the aid of representation, and much of his power to move us springs from a recognizable reference to a reality external to his work; but the musician dispenses with even that much of reference to 'reality'; and neither of them uses a word³ or conveys a thought.

¹ Clementi's reading of life may, of course, have been as profound as Beethoven's; but his failure to persuade us of this by means of his music prevents him from being accounted as great a composer.

² 'Avec les parfums on peut exprimer toute la création aussi bien qu'avec les lignes ou la couleur. . . . Seulement la peinture et la sculpture représentent directement les objets . . . tandis que les parfums, comme la musique, reveillent l'intuition des choses. . . . Vous jouerez des drames, des comédies et même des vaudevilles en parfums' (Thoré, *L'Art des Parfums*, 1836).

³ The composer of songs or operas or 'programme music' avails himself, of course, of words and action which make an explicit reference to an external

The writer's medium is language, and words are our most efficient means of conveying thoughts and ideas, and are used more often in order to convey them¹ than for any other purpose. The writer can tell us articulately and explicitly what he sees in things and what he thinks and feels about them. Of course, especially if he is a poet, he often uses words for other purposes than conveying thoughts, and there has been a strong tendency, ever since the days of the Symbolists, to exalt the non-intellectual functions of words in poetry—their evocative and suggestive power and their power to move us simply by their sound and through the appeal of rhythm and metre to the ear. Critics and poets have been led to exalt or exploit these powers of language partly in revolt from Arnold's supposed doctrine that poetry should be a criticism of life, partly as a result of discoveries in psychology, and partly under the influence of French symbolist doctrines which set up the abstract art of music as a model for poets. It has even been suggested that a poet ought to purge his work of all intellectual content as of an impurity, and that by so doing he will exalt it to the condition of the pure art of music.

Poetry, we are reminded by these doctrinaires, is written not with ideas, but with words. The epigram is attractive, but the antithesis it states is misleading. It is often taken to mean that poetry is written not with ideas but with sounds. In fact poetry is written with symbols that stand for sounds of a particular kind, those sounds which by convention convey ideas and compose articulate speech. So the epigram should be restated: poetry is made up not only of sounds but also of ideas—'ideas' including thoughts and the whole world of images that the use of words can evoke. Of course, that restatement tells us only what has in fact been the practice of most poets in the past; there is no reason why a poet, if he wishes, should not exclude from his writing, to a greater or lesser degree, the intellectual element; he need not make statements; he may give us a succession of images without intelligible connexion; or, like Gertrude Stein, a succession of words strung together with little grammatical connexion and with meaning hammered out of them by repetition; or, like the Russian futurists who invented a

reality. But the great musician *can* achieve his effect without any such reference.

¹ Or to conceal them—but then by conveying other thoughts or ideas. Of course, words are rarely used in order to convey thought and nothing else; but they are so used sometimes, e.g. in legal documents and scientific treatises.

'trans-sense' language of their own to which there is no dictionary, a rigmarole from which every trace of significance has vanished. A poet may, if he wishes, do any of these things; there is no need to provide him with any justification—least of all the false one that because the poet moves us by something else besides what he actually tells us, and because other artists move us without telling us anything at all, the poet ought to try to move us without telling us anything at all, and that the less he tells us the purer, and the more like music, his poetry will be.

The idea that if you remove from poetry the intellectual element what is left is music, or something in the nature of music, is demonstrably false. The test is simple: read a poem—I will not weight the scales unfairly by choosing an intellectual and cacophonous poet like Donne, but (say) a series of Pope's heroic couplets or a stanza of Swinburne at his most melodious—read such a poem to someone ignorant of the English language. He may well derive pleasure from what he hears, but that pleasure will have nothing (except that it reaches him through the ear) in common with the pleasure he would derive from hearing a concert of orchestral music or a tune played on a single instrument. He hears spoken words, not notes or combinations of notes.

Of course an artist in language can so use it as to give pleasure to the ear. But a great deal of the pleasure that, listening to poetry, we think purely auditory, is in truth dependent on our understanding what the sounds stand for—it is the pleasure of recognition, of appreciating the *rightness* of the sound.¹ And although it is true that there is a song, a heard pattern, in poetry, it is not a purely auditory pattern; it cannot be fully appreciated unless the hearer understands what is being said. A certain rhythm pleases us as contributing to the expression of a certain sentiment; the pleasure to the ear of pause, suspension, emphasis, rise and fall, depends upon their being placed rightly with reference to the sense.²

¹ Lo, where Macotis sleeps, and hardly flows
The freezing Tanais through a waste of snows—

What we may call the exquisite beauty of the sound of these lines would not be appreciated by someone who did not know what they meant. And to one who did not know English the sound of them would give, at best, a very, very faint indication of what that meaning is. Some words may sound whiter or colder than others, but that is as far as we can go.

² 'My true love hath my heart and I have his': substitute the word 'lover' for 'true love' and the poetical effect of the line is ruined. This is not because of the change in sense, which is nugatory; nor because of the change in sound,

It is not always because they are vainly aspiring to attain to the 'condition of music' that poets reduce the intelligible element in their work. Sometimes they are reproducing, more or less exactly, the flow of images through a dreaming mind; sometimes attempting to convey, more directly than can be done by statement, their feelings, physical or emotional; sometimes invoking the symbolic potency of certain images or ideas. Traditional poets have done all these things, but fitfully and by glimpses, infusing into the emotional elements a more or less dominant intelligible theme or subject. If we analyse their work we often find that it owes its effectiveness far more to the unintelligible than to the intelligible element in it. But in the last half-century, poets have gone much farther along these lines than ever before, and strange and effective experiments have been made in the abandonment of meaning.

Such poets renounce—as does the abstract painter—the chief weapon in their armoury, their main link with the reader's mind. But that, after all, is their affair, and they have every right to insist on being judged simply by the results that they produce; if they can move us or intrigue us by their phantasmagoria of images, by a verbal pattern, or by the mysterious communication of a mood, it is beside the point to complain that their method is illegitimate or that the result presents 'difficulties'—or impossibilities—to the discursive intellect, to which it never was addressed.

Yet one may wonder whether, by denying himself three-quarters of the potentiality of his medium, by abolishing subject, and intelligible reference to a recognizable reality outside his work, the poet has not disabled himself from achieving greatness of the kind we have been discussing.

Now
 Say nay,
 Sir no say,
 Death to the yes
 The yes to death, the yesman and the answer,
 Should he who split his children with a cure
 Have brotherless his sister on the handsaw.

That is a careful pattern. But it is difficult to see how poetry

for to one who did not understand the sense, the one line sounds as musical as the other; it is because slight metrical irregularity—a spondee for an iamb in the second foot, an extra accent on 'love'—gives us two long, lingering syllables at a point where, the meaning being what it is, they are emotionally effective.

composed entirely of patterns such as that can communicate a reading of life, a vision of reality; the insight, if insight there is, remains private to the author.

Here are the opening lines of another poem by the same writer:

Because the pleasure-bird whistles after the hot wires,
 Shall the blind horse sing sweeter?
 Convenient bird and beast lie lodged to suffer
 The supper and knives of a mood.

That is a sample of poetry that affects the reader by a succession of images which have little or no intelligible connexion with each other or recognizable reference to a world common to the poet and his reader. By means of a body of work in this manner a poet might give us a panorama of his imaginative world, much as he might by telling us a long succession of his dreams; and strong threads of personality might run through the tapestry and colour it; so that, like the dream-teller, he might in this way convey to us something about himself. He might excite us by his imagery and intrigue us by suggestions of symbolism. But if Dylan Thomas had written always in this manner, I do not think he could have communicated his insight into life and his response to it in such a way as to persuade us of his greatness, and I wait to be convinced by example that such a poet can be great.

It does not follow, of course, that the great poets persuade us of their greatness by directly or intelligibly communicating their vision or describing their response to it. Wordsworth is continually reminding us of the source from which his greatness springs—his sense of 'something far more deeply interfused', his power of seeing 'into the life of things', his sensitivity to the influence of natural objects. But it is not when he tells us of this most directly, when he presents himself as the bearer of a message, that he most persuades us that he is a great poet.

One impulse from a vernal wood
 May teach us more of man
 Of moral evil and of good
 Than all the sages can.

There is Wordsworth's message, the secret of his greatness, unfolded plain for all to see. But if you listen carefully to that transmission of the message, you will perceive that the line goes

dead after the first half-dozen words—a stanza begun by Wordsworth has been completed by Longfellow. A line of poetry is followed by three lines of doggerel.

‘One impulse from a vernal wood’—those words alone (they make no statement, they do not even form a sentence) are enough to convey the insight and the response that, expressed in verse, impel us to call Wordsworth a great poet. The very word ‘impulse’ in its context in that line really contains all that we are explicitly told in the three lines that follow about the teachability of moral good and evil.

That line of poetry was evoked simply by ‘the influence of natural objects’; take now two stanzas that express feeling for another human being; the nature of the insight, the quality of the emotion, are the same, but here the poetry is sustained throughout the whole short poem:

A slumber did my spirit seal;
I had no human fears:
She seemed a thing that could not feel
The touch of earthly years.

No motion has she now, no force;
She neither hears nor sees,
Rolled round in earth’s diurnal course
With rocks, and stones, and trees.

I cannot imagine clearer or more perfect evidence of poetic greatness—insight, apprehension of an underlying unity in things, and a fitting emotional response poetically rendered.

I say ‘evidence’, for when we call poetry ‘great’ we are saying that it is a revelation of the greatness of the poet who wrote it. And here a troublesome question presents itself. How many such lines or poems must a man write to prove himself a great poet? Twenty poems, or half a dozen? A hundred lines, or fifty? Or would a single authentic poem, a single line of really great poetry, suffice to qualify him for the title?

If this is asked about greatness in the popular sense it is, I think, a frivolous question. We all feel, when we try to estimate the greatness that consists merely in eminence, that scale or size, magnitude of achievement, has something to do with it; and we all realize, surely, that one cannot in such a matter lay down any standard.

But if the questioner has in mind true greatness, if he means ‘How many such lines, or poems, of Wordsworth must we read before we can be certain of his greatness?’, then his question—

though it is no more capable of a precise answer—is a serious one and calls for consideration.

A poet's potentialities, his sensitiveness, the quality of his emotion in the face of ultimate realities, may reveal themselves more or less completely, in a single poem, a single stanza, a single line or phrase—'One impulse from a vernal wood.' 'To be right in great and memorable moments is perhaps the thing we should most desire for ourselves', said George Eliot: such moments may reveal the man.

But a moment is only a moment, and inspiration is fitful, and the great line may, I suppose, come once in a lifetime; it may even be a freak, and not represent the writer's true, his constant, self: 'Great lines by bad poets' would be an interesting study, and raise a difficult aesthetic problem.

Perhaps it is fortunate that I have no time to deal with puzzles such as these; but they will explain my reluctance to speak of a great poem or a great line—why I am inclined to say 'There is no great poetry; there are only great poets'. And I would answer the question 'How many such lines or poems must one read before one can safely call their author great?' by asking 'How many brave acts must a man perform before we can safely call him a brave man?'—'Enough', the answer must be, 'to enable us to recognize his courageous nature.' The full realization of a poet's greatness comes upon us gradually; we acquire our conviction of it cumulatively, by reading individual works or passages in his work; it is his power, fitful though it may be, of producing such work that constitutes his greatness: once appreciated, we can recognize it in a line or in a phrase.

The elements of poetic greatness, I have said, may be variously mixed. If Wordsworth is great by virtue of his power of vision, the greatness of Yeats proceeded rather from the richness of his nature, of his response to what he saw.

Yeats was certainly a great poet, and not only in the popular sense. More than that, he looked and conducted himself like a great poet; he had no doubt that he was one. He was, in the ordinary relations of life, a remarkable mixture of shrewdness and gullibility, of the vain and the magnanimous, the practical and the romantic. His personality was powerful, and he impressed it upon his work; he created a language and a world of his own. He left a large body of passionate and moving poetry recording his adventures in many fields of action, thought, and emotion. The richness of his imagination and the magnificence of his purely poetical gifts tended to overlay and obscure—as I

think they did with Shakespeare—the special gift of communicating his sense of the fundamental unity behind appearances. It is rarely that he seems to go straight to the centre of things. But I think he does this in, for instance, *The Cold Heaven*:

Suddenly I saw the cold and rook-delighting heaven
That seemed as though ice burned and was but the more ice,
And thereupon imagination and heart were driven
So wild that every casual thought of that and this
Vanished, and left but memories, that should be out of season
With the hot blood of youth, of love crossed long ago;
And I took all the blame out of all sense and reason,
Until I cried and trembled and rocked to and fro,
Riddled with light. Ah! when the ghost begins to quicken,
Confusion of the death-bed over, is it sent
Out naked on the roads, as the books say, and stricken
By the injustice of the skies for punishment?

There is a poem that concerns 'the influence of natural objects' and conveys the poet's insight into nature as surely as anything Wordsworth ever wrote, and with more eloquence and imaginative power than Wordsworth could command.

The richness of nature that is a chief element in Yeats's greatness as a poet shows itself clearly in these stanzas from *A Dialogue of Self and Soul*:

My Soul. Such fullness in that quarter overflows
And falls into the basin of the mind
That man is stricken deaf and dumb and blind,
For intellect no longer knows
Is from the Ought, or Knower from the Known—
That is to say, ascends to Heaven;
Only the dead can be forgiven;
But when I think of that my tongue's a stone.

My Self. A living man is blind and drinks his drop.
What matter if the ditches are impure?
What matter if I live it all once more?
Endure that toil of growing up;
The ignominy of boyhood; the distress
Of boyhood changing into man;
The unfinished man and his pain
Brought face to face with his own clumsiness;
The finished man among his enemies?—
I am content to follow to its source,
Every event in action or in thought;
Measure the lot; forgive myself the lot!

When such as I cast out remorse
 So great a sweetness flows into the breast
 We must laugh and we must sing,
 We are blest by everything
 Everything we look upon is blest.

'The echo of a mighty mind', 'the reflection of a noble nature': those phrases might, surely, have been coined to describe such poetry as that.

A noble nature: that, according to Matthew Arnold, is the first essential of a great poet. I have preferred to speak, less vividly and perhaps more vaguely, of the poet's appropriate response to his vision of the universe. But by substituting a colourless phrase for Arnold's 'noble' I have hidden, not eliminated, a metaphysical or moral judgement which cannot in the end be avoided.

Whether you intend it or not, whether you know it or not, whether you like it or not, by calling a poet or a poem great you are implying a judgement about the universe of which he and it are a part, and about the attitude that befits a human being who is aware of his situation in it.

If you say of a poet merely that he is excellent, or call his poem beautiful, or say that it has moved you, you imply no such judgement—indeed, if you say that you find a poem moving, perhaps you are, strictly, not making a judgement about the poem at all.

The difference between the description I have offered and that proposed by Arnold reflects rather a diversity of point of view than a divergence in critical judgement. My list of great poets would probably not differ much from his, and my reasons for calling them great are not so very different; it is partly that nowadays we are more fully aware of the unconscious foundations of our aesthetic judgements, partly that, being less confidently high-minded, we tend to express ourselves in less overtly ethical terms.

Arnold's references to the poet's noble nature and to the seriousness of his subject suggest requirements which we certainly do not acknowledge. True, the great poet must be capable of noble moments, he must see his subject in a universal context; but he need not be a saint or (*pace* Coleridge) a philosopher—and my description is intended to emphasize this. Perhaps the emphasis is superfluous—for, after all, Arnold did not really believe that Homer must have been a good man or that it is

impossible to write great poetry about a primrose. What he did believe, and what we, consciously or unconsciously, are implying when we call a poet or a poem great, is that the universe makes serious demands upon us and it is unworthy of a human being to dismiss it as a trivial affair. The great artist—poet, painter, composer of music—persuades us of this, and of his awareness of it, by playing each in his own way upon our minds and upon our senses.