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Poetry: Songs of Self or Pictures of Paradise?

Poetry, the tuneless melody of the Muses, has been penned for many purposes. To sing of sorrow and unrequited love, to praise the natural beauties of leaf and lake, to immortalize the dazzling beauty of one's beloved, all these and more have been reasons for writing poetry. However, without a true understanding of what poetry is and what purpose it serves, one's poetry will be shallow and meaningless, centered in self. To create meaningful poetry, the poet must have a purpose deeper than serving self. Although Walt Whitman views poetry as mere self-expression or an outlet for self-centered emotion, Emily Dickinson and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow write the most excellent poetry which depicts their visions of an ideal world because their poetry illustrates virtue, proclaims truth, and reveals beauty.

To poets such as Walt Whitman, poetry is a method to express one's emotions, likes, or dislikes. Emerson holds this view of poetry, saying, "The poet also resigns himself to his mood, and that thought which agitated him is expressed" (Emerson 273). In writing poetry, the author's primary motivating force is himself; from his thoughts he draws his subject matter. When he has an idea, nothing will suit him but to first surrender himself to this idea or feeling, and then express it to the world through his poetry. Concurring with Emersonian philosophy, Whitman's poetry serves as an outlet for one's feelings.

In his masterpiece *Song of Myself* Whitman expresses his feelings and knowledge of himself. "Dow-hearted doubters dull and excluded,/Frivolous, sullen, moping, angry affected,

dishearten'd, atheistical,/I know every one of you, I know the sea of torment, doubt, despair, and unbelief," laments Whitman (Whitman 43.27-30). Through heavy, pounding rhythms and varied vocabulary, Whitman pours out his feelings of doubt and despair, expressing the mood which he is experiencing, as Emerson says the poet ought to do. Furthermore, Whitman waxes eloquent on themes of himself, proclaiming himself as his key motif. "If I worship one thing more than another it shall be the spread of my/ own body, or any part of it,/ Translucent mould of me it shall be you!" (Whitman 24.36-38). The rest of the poem continues in a similar vein, an ode to man, and to one man in particular. Self-expression is the essence of Whitman's poetry. Therefore, if Emerson is correct in his estimation of poetry as expression of one's feelings, then Whitman's 52 stanza song to himself is the pinnacle of poetry.

On the contrary, DeToqueville asserts that true poetry is a vision of something outside the poet. Poetry is more than expression of self, or lines and stanzas on a page; it is "the search for and depiction of the ideal" (DeTocqueville 458). When writing poetry, the poet should not seek to describe the world merely as he sees it, but how he believes it should be. The best poetry is that which creates a new world for the reader, capturing images of perfection and weaving them together to create something new. For DeTocqueville, the purpose of poetry is not "to represent the true, but to adorn it, and to offer a superior image to the mind" (DeTocqueville 458). Rather than bare statements of fact, poetry should present the most beautiful images to the reader. However, presenting truth is a major component of poetry, though not the essential purpose. Though poetry is not intended solely to present statements of fact, the best poetry will be that which is true, as well as good and beautiful. To become poetry that reflects the world truly, three characteristics—goodness, truth, and beauty—are needed.

The first purpose of poetry is the illustration of virtue. Not only must a good poem display a certain standard of right and wrong, it must uphold good while condemning evil. Longfellow's "The Song of Hiawatha" sets a specific standard of right for Hiawatha. When Hiawatha is commanded by the youth to "Make a bed for me to lie in,/Where the rain may fall upon me,/ Where the sun may come and warm me" he obeys, and is rewarded for his obedience by the gift of corn for him and his people (Longfellow, "Hiawatha's Fasting" 2.23-25). As Longfellow draws attention to Hiawatha's virtues, he calls the audience not only to see and appreciate good but to act upon it, as poetry ought. Longfellow's poem sets certain actions, particularly obedience, as definite virtues to be emulated.

However, Whitman's poetry blatantly rejects goodness, proclaiming the author to be "not the poet of goodness only, I do not decline to be the poet of wickedness also./ What blurt is this about virtue and about vice?" (Whitman 22.18-19). In Whitman's eyes, the key element of poetry is self, and both goodness and evil are merely aids to discovering and being oneself. Whitman neither condemns evil nor upholds good; indeed he does not even praise evil nor revile good, but remains indifferent to both. "Evil propels me and reform of evil propels me, I stand indifferent," utters the writer, showing his utter disregard for goodness, the first criteria for true poetry (Whitman 22.21).

In addition, poetry ought to proclaim some essential truth to its readers. Its purpose is not only to depict a scene or story, but to present truth. Through the story of Hiawatha's fight with the young god Mondamin and subsequent receiving of the gods' gift of maize, Longfellow illustrates, "How by struggle and by labor/ [One] may receive what [he] has prayed for" (Longfellow 1.33-34). Longfellow's poem makes a specific point; only by hard work will one reap rewards. By working and waiting, Hiawatha's prayers are answered, and the gods' gift of

corn is bestowed upon the people. Poetry ought to avoid mere venting of emotions while speaking absolute, relevant truth unto its audience, as Longfellow's does. In doing so, *Song of Hiawatha* fulfills the second criteria of poetry in illuminating truth to its readers.

Unlike Longfellow, Whitman also ignores this essential mark of good poetry, choosing instead to proclaim his subjective feelings rather than objective truth. Preferring to dwell only on himself, Whitman declares, "Your facts are useful, and yet they are not my dwelling,/ I but enter by them to an area of my dwelling" (Whitman 23.17-19). Using truth as a method to its own ends when convenient, but discarding them when they are not, Whitman's poetry presents to the readers no vital truth which they may incorporate into their lives. However, as the title clearly indicates, *Song of Myself* is filled with praises of "Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan the son,/ Turbulent, fleshy, sensual, eating, drinking and breeding" (Whitman 24.1-2). His primary theme here and throughout the poem is not focused on speaking truth to his audience or conveying anything worth knowing. Instead he merely uses poetry as a platform to proclaim self. Here as in the issue of goodness, Whitman fails to live up to the standard of good poetry.

Revealing beauty is the final purpose of poetry. In his descriptions, Longfellow paints a vivid scene of "a youth approaching,/ Dressed in garments green and yellow,/ Coming through the purple twilight" (Longfellow 1.9-11). With colorful adjectives is shown the beauty of a young man coming to Hiawatha at the end of the day, clothed in the colors of the woods and framed with a royal coronet of golden hair. Also, beauty is displayed within the poem through a melodic rhythm and further descriptions. By repeating key phrases, keeping a steady flowing meter, and describing the scenery, Longfellow incorporates the beauty of his setting with the beauty of his words, fulfilling the third requirement for poetry.

In beauty too, Whitman fails to meet this even more crucial standard for the best sort of poetry. In description of his own body Whitman proclaims, “The scent of these arm-pits finer than prayer,/ This head more than churches, bibles, and all the creeds” (Whitman 24.35-36). While Longfellow’s vision of beauty weaves images of the gods with a rhythmic melody, the most beautiful image Whitman can present to the reader is his own sweaty body. Praising his own aroma as a finer scent than prayer, Whitman’s attempts at depicting beauty fall into mere exaltation of self. His form too, lacks Longfellow’s flowing style as he fails to incorporate any sort of structure into his poetry. Without a consistent rhyme scheme, meter, or indeed any other form of consistency from one line to the next, Whitman’s poetry is instead the formless ramblings of a self-absorbed man.

Contrary to Whitman, Emily Dickinson’s use of goodness, truth, and beauty masterfully achieves the standard for good poetry, as she weaves images of nature and beauty with strongly punctuated, vibrant words. Her poem number 729 embodies all the criteria for poetry—goodness, truth, and beauty—in one brief but brilliant poetic image. First, Dickinson illustrates a primary virtue, loyalty, through this poem. “Alter! When the Hills do—,” she pleads to an unknown man, urging him to change only when unchanging nature does (Dickinson line 1). When the hills change, when the sun questions himself, when the heavens and the earth pass away, only then will she change or waver in her love. With images of nature in all its glory, Dickinson pleads for the virtue of constancy, promising faithfulness and requesting it in return.

Dickinson’s poem also proclaims truth in her image of ideal love. She promises her lover that she will have had her fill of his love “...When the Daffodil/ Doth of the Dew—” (Dickinson lines 5-6). Throughout the poem, Dickinson uses images in nature, such as the radiant daffodil, unchanging hills, and ever-shining sun, to illustrate the truth that true love never changes, and

never fades. When the daffodil becomes tired of the nourishing dew, only then does she want her lover to tire of her love. She too determines to follow the example of nature and never tire of her lover's affection. The truth of constant love is painted through Dickinson's images of nature in her poetry.

Finally, Emily Dickinson's poetry contains the third crucial element of good poetry, namely beauty. With her images of nature in all its glory, Dickinson conveys her message in a way that is clear and direct as well as beautiful in both form and content. "Falter! When the Sun/ Question if His Glory/ Be the Perfect One—," she commands (Dickinson lines 2-4). The image Dickinson paints of the sun, ever-shining in all its glory, resplendently confident in itself, resembles a confident lover, never questioning the beloved. In addition, the beauty of her poetry manifests itself in form, with rhyming quatrains, alliteration, and a bold meter punctuated by exclamations commanding the lover to follow certain actions. Through images of nature as well as structured rhyme and meter, Dickinson's poetry clearly possesses beauty, the third mark of good poetry.

Because Dickinson and Longfellow's poetry demonstrates virtue, declares truth, and displays beauty, they fulfill poetry's purpose of depicting the ideal whereas Whitman's poetry fails in all three categories while viewing poetry as self-expression or an outlet for self-centered emotion. The best poetry is not merely an ode to self, but an image of perfection. To depict this ideal, three essentials are needed in poetry—goodness, truth, and beauty. By upholding good and condemning evil, poetry meets the first criteria of illustrating virtue. In addition, the best poetry will express some key truth or intent. Finally, poetry must reveal not only external beauty through form, but reveal the inherent beauty of goodness and truth. The greatest poetry is that which is not merely an artistic expression of the poet's emotions, but an articulation of some

vital purpose or image. To write truly good and beautiful poetry, the poet must not sing odes to oneself, but use his words to paint a picture of an ideal world. Through poetry, the poet takes his readers out of themselves, and on a journey to paradise.

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