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## Author's Preface

THE INTENTION in this book is to examine and analyse the essential nature of the phenomenon we call *poetry*; to seek an understanding of the power this art form exerts over mind and heart; to comprehend its potency; and to explain its perennial ability to command the respect of mankind. This examination will not attempt to explain away the inhering mystery nor allow aesthetic quality to be diminished by the process of literary analysis. I believe that sensitive observation may render the veils of poetry transparent without assailing its eternal supremacy in the Arts. The poetic Muse was, is, and will remain, foremost among the nine.

The sheer scale of the subject necessitates a certain compression in presentation. Since all major extant poetry is freely accessible, and to alleviate constraints of space I have used as examples representative extracts rather than complete poems. In quoting fragments of poetry, often tantalizingly brief, the expectation is that their power cumulatively, will convey an impression of poetry as a whole.

*Gestalt*, the German word meaning 'form', 'pattern', 'configuration', connotes the integration of a series of detailed perceptions into a complete experience or meaningful wholeness – an entity which is more than the sum of its parts. This book arose out of the certain knowledge that such a *gestalt* must exist as an emanation from poetry itself and that answers to questions *about* poetry lie *within* poetry. In these pages poets speak for themselves: poetry is its own voice. Where deductions are made or inferences drawn, they often stem from the poetry itself or from the actions and statements of poets.

The principal ideas constituting the foundation and coherence of art, music, and literature are also found in poetry. But poetry, more often than other forms of art, has been a vehicle for inspiration, in the sense that it surpasses old ways of seeing, hearing, thinking, and reacting. Poetry continues to be pre-eminent in evaluating and articulating the riches of the human spirit.

Just as in painting and sculpture, there is fine and gross, successful and unsuccessful, so it is with poetry. Since appreciation of any form of art arises in the mind and breast of the beholder, general taste and preference are subject to change. Nevertheless, the works of master poets have enjoyed a consistently high evaluation and have transcended cultural boundaries. If we examine the structure and development of poetry, its mysterious essential 'quality', though difficult to define, gradually

declares itself. The flow and turn of the lines draw the perceptive reader unerringly towards the essential meaning behind the spoken word, to the silence beyond sound. The best verse exemplifies the principle, 'Less is more'. Where there is understatement or omission, it is the more significant for having occurred in the context of poetry. Poetry formulates truth without recourse to religion or philosophy. To say it 'awakens the soul' is another description of its power to remind us that our innate knowledge is more trustworthy than any imposed external dogma or received morality. Poetry 'works' because it acknowledges the universality of human psychology; it unites emotion with reason and tempers imagination with understanding. In the work of the master poets, individuality is usually presented in the context of universality. For expressing spiritual freedom, beauty and love, poetry is the perfect vehicle. As an art form it is of its time but timeless: it is now, but it expresses eternity.

The work of certain writers reveals competence of such a high order that during the qualitative survey in this volume, ten poets seem naturally to have merited the description master poet. The master poet is a gentle guide who leads us by an extension of our own understanding; who by his 'absence of ego' reveals the manifest presence of the 'universal Self'. In his hands poetry is a direct pointing to reality. Shakespeare wrote:

And, since you know you cannot see yourself  
So well as by reflection, I, your glass,  
Will modestly discover to yourself  
That of yourself which you yet know not of.

*Julius Caesar, Act I, Scene ii*

The essential self is manifested at the expense of the personality and, as though to demonstrate this, Shakespeare seems almost transparent. As the subjective shadow cast by individuality diminishes, the objective reality is accorded more of its own radiance. Master poets cast no shadow; they do not stand in the light.

# Introduction

Maturing as a poet means maturing as the whole man.

W.B. Yeats

THE FINEST POETRY is consonant with wisdom, and by means of this universal language the poet speaks for the human race. With characteristic certitude Emerson defined the role of the poet: 'He stands among partial men for the complete man.' Poetry, like language, develops with the civilization from which it springs and of which it is a central part. Embodied in poetry is the influence of each successive culture from which it drew its inspiration and to which it gave expression. The unbroken stream of poetry carries resonances of the growth and decay of civilizations, the vicissitudes of wars, the effects of migrations and trading, the influences of religious belief. It expresses the aspirations and disappointments of the human race. As an art form, the phenomenon of poetry has developed in concert with the progress of mankind and, in early societies, we see the beginnings of poetry.

The remains of the earliest human beings, unearthed in Java, China and elsewhere, are thought to be at least half a million years old. Although Palaeolithic cave art demonstrates the superb skills of the early artists who decorated the walls of their rock shelters and caves, the culture had not yet invented writing. The span of time from that remote era to about 5000 BC is, therefore, usually referred to as prehistoric, or preliterate.

## Early Civilization

Poetry had its beginnings in the East with four gifted races, each with a distinguished culture, who flourished more than 4,000 years ago. The *Hamitic* people founded an empire in Egypt under great dynasties of kings; accounts of their deeds have come down to us in hieroglyphic inscriptions. The *Semitic* race which conquered Chaldea, uniting Sumer and Akkad, left records of their civilization on tablets of cuneiform inscriptions. The *Turanian* race founded a vast kingdom in China, where they evolved a sophisticated system of art, and a highly articulate literature. The *Aryans* were a pastoral expansionist people who flourished in India, with a fully developed language and a tradition of highly talented bards. (see Chapter 11 – India, p.235).

It was along the banks of rivers that the first civilizations were found: Mesopotamia straddled the Tigris and the Euphrates; Egypt stretched along the Nile; India arose along the Indus and the Ganges; and

China expanded eastwards from the region of the Wei and the Hwang Ho.

The lower areas of land enclosed by the Tigris and Euphrates rivers – in what is now Iraq – were known in ancient times both as Babylonia and Mesopotamia (from the Greek, meaning ‘between rivers’). The delta of this river system was called Sumer.

If the skill of writing and the advent of the city reveal the emergence of civilization, then the people of Sumer deserve the credit for having created the first civilization in world history. It was the Sumerians, speaking a non-Semitic language, who are credited with evolving the cuneiform system of writing and the earliest significant poetry. They are also considered to have invented wheeled vehicles and the plough. Writing leaves a record of poetry enabling later generations to appreciate both the extant poems and their preceding oral tradition.

The discovery in Egypt of cylinder seals similar in shape to those used in Sumer attests to contact between these two areas towards the end of the fourth millennium BC. There is a strong possibility that the Mesopotamian and Egyptian systems of writing were related.

### **The Beginnings of Western Culture**

With a clear indebtedness to the Egyptians and Mesopotamians, the inhabitants of Crete, Troy, and Mycenae created a wealthy, sophisticated commercial culture. But in 1250 BC the Mycenaean went to war against the Trojans, their power collapsed and the Aegean World was plunged into the so-called Dark Age. Then, around the 10th century BC a historic change occurred in this region; the Bronze Age gave way to the Iron Age throughout the Mediterranean area. In what we now call Greece, a culture arose which was to form the foundation of Western Civilization. By the 5th century BC, its accomplishments were such that subsequently this period has been regarded as one of the great eras of human achievement. Significantly, at this time in India, Buddhism was developing into a major spiritual and cultural force.

### **Poetry in Ancient Greece**

During the first 300 years of the Iron Age, the epic poems known as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were composed. Because these works deal with heroic themes, the early Iron Age has also been called the Heroic Age. As the years passed, Greek myth and religion became a mixture of folk-tales, primitive customs and traditional rituals that arose during the Heroic Age but, at the time, had not been structured into a coherent system. This task was undertaken by the poet Hesiod. The Greek people had always turned to their deities for explanations of natural phenomena and for an understanding of those psychological characteristics that they had come to recognize as part of themselves. But questions of social morality required human rather than divine solutions. For this, the Greeks looked to art and literature, rather than to prayer, for guidance and instruction.

Within this context, the vast scale of the poet's work is succinctly expressed in the celebrated remark: 'Homer gave the Greeks their heroes; Hesiod their gods.' It seems clear that, by quality of imagination and nobility of purpose, these men of genius defined the identity of a civilization. Their influence on ancient literature (prose as well as poetry) was persistent and profound. Epics by bardic poets depicted the exploits of warriors and heroes in long poems embodying a blend of history and legend. In the Heroic Age, especially in times of war, these poets helped to cultivate a sense of tribal identity and national pride; in periods of peace they extolled the virtues of farming and artisan craftsmanship.

The history of humanity is graced by the presence of the Greeks, the first people to be conscious of man's powers and his potential. They confronted the old world with reason and were aware of the ever-present mysterious and ineffable. We who are their descendants exult in their ascendancy and are mindful of our debt to them.

### **European Poetry and its Perspective**

Centuries later, poetry in Europe during the Middle Ages reflects a turn away from activity in the outer physical world to an inner realm of dream, vision, and speculation. The visionary poet, writing in allegory (*see* Glossary), deals with the origins and ends of things and with punishments and rewards. Divine intervention and displeasure are no longer wreaking havoc and indulgence of whim upon hapless victims of 'Fate'. With the development of Christianity, men are held to be responsible for their sinful behaviour and they develop a sense of guilt. Rewards and punishments are set out like a tariff in allegorical descriptions which chart the journey of the soul.

### **Humanism Enters Poetry**

With the Renaissance, poetry expresses and celebrates the arrival and development of humanism (*see* Glossary). This leads later to an exploration of human psychology, so ably presented by Shakespeare in his sonnets and his use of soliloquy in the great plays. From this important precursor, there developed the more tenuous spiritual psychology of W.B. Yeats and T.S. Eliot.

### **Searching for Beginnings**

The unfolding of poetry, this most careful art, began in the Ancient World. Poetry, like existence itself, is an ever-present force in human civilization. Time, man's measure of elapsed existence, is just one dimension of poetry's development. With the perspective of chronology we can look into the past for significant early examples of the poet's art.