

What Poetry Means to Me

L. J. Ayers, '36

One day I entered a public library in search of a periodical. While there my attention was drawn to an old man who seemed so interested in a book, that he did not look up as I sat down beside him at the reading table. Turning over the pages for the article I desired, I heard him muttering to himself. Looking at him more closely I was struck with the earnestness of his face. He seemed very much like one lost in prayer. Curiosity overcame me. I peeped over his shoulder and received the surprise of my life. He had a volume of Pope's works, and was repeating over and over these verses from, "The Universal Prayer:"

*"If I am right thy grace impart
Still in the right to stay
If I am wrong, oh teach my heart
To find the better way.
Teach me to feel another's woe
To hide the fault I see
That mercy I to others show,
That mercy show to me."*

I can see him yet as he sat there old and unkempt, unconscious to everything around him but the beauty of the poem. What poetry meant to him I cannot say, but it seemed to me that both he and I had something akin to each other at that moment. Poetry meant something to both of us. To him that poem was a living prayer, a language he could understand and love, but could not speak.

Poetry to him means the same to me. I love poetry. I almost worship it. I understand it. I read it continually. But I cannot speak the language of poets. I cannot write poetry.

What we lack in one talent, we possess in another. I can understand poetry and see the poet's meaning from his lines. I can see the poet in his joys, sorrows, loves and hates. I follow him along the road of his life. To me every one of his poems are milestones left behind to guide other men along the same path. I can see Coleridge in his last days writing his, "Remorse" and the last stanza of the boatman's song,

*"Hark! The cadence dies away
On the quiet moonlit sea,
The boatmen rest their oars and say,
Miserere Domini!"*

reveals to me clearly his mood at the approach of death and his prayer for mercy to help him in that last hour. Byron also before he dies, looks back regretfully over his life and says in one of his last poems:

*"My days are in the yellow leaf,
The flowers and fruits of love are gone:
The worm, the canker, and the grief
Are mine alone."*

These two men, and many others also, express their sorrow and repentance and pray for mercy and forgiveness in the only way they know, by poetry.

Have you ever felt like they? Alone, in the evening quiet, a little tug of sorrow and sadness pulls at your heart. You are perhaps looking over your life. You could have done better sometimes, but the past is over and gone. It cannot be repaired. The future is unknown. You feel like praying but the words will not come. You need someone to comfort you. If, oh, if then you could read some of the poems of Gray, Young and others of the same school, you would find someone who understood perfectly how you felt. Someone, who once felt like you do now, but who, unlike you had the talent to turn their sadness into poetry.

You may be in a lighter mood, flowing over with laughter and light-heartedness. Turn over the works of Burns to his "Tam O'Shanter," the Falstaff of Scotland, and laugh from the time "Tam gets fou and unco happy" at the inn until he and Maggie are pursued by the demons on their way home, in the course of which poor Maggie loses "Her ain grey tail" in escaping from the imps. Then follow Cowper's "John Gilpin" from beginning to end. If you cannot laugh then, you will never laugh. But if you wish to learn, read over these poems again. In the end you will laugh, when you catch the drift of the quaint humour. But there is more to both of these poems than their humour. From Burns we see the old Scottish superstitions and folklore attached to valleys, moors and bogs. From Cowper we get the picture of a dignified country

gentleman, whose dignity is woefully shattered by the behaviour of his horse. From both these poems we get some knowledge of both England's and Scotland's rural life.

Poets have written about it, are writing to-day, and will continue to use it as their theme until time and the world is no more. What is that subject? Nature. Possibly it appeals to you. You admire its beauty and freshness. To you it is an everchanging scene. Always beautiful, alluring and grand. Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter may come and go many times in your life, but you eagerly welcome them as something always the same but different. Shelley, Wordsworth and many other poets have written beautiful and inspiring poems on this subject. With them you pass from flowers to clouds, and brooks to oceans, and shrubs to forests in complete harmony and beauty. You cannot help but realize the love of nature these men possessed. You must admire these men, who in spite of many difficulties, laboured on to leave to you and me in poetry and verse the mute beauty of nature.

You may enjoy reading poetry for its romantic content. Old ballads and legends of knights in armor, distressed maidens, old castles, feuds, wars, and things of such a nature as this run in your mind. In Sir Walter Scott you will find your wish gratified. With him you read thrilling tales of seventeenth and eighteenth century characters. Vivid to the extreme, he is, with all the polish of a skilled writer, one who knows his work and characters better than any other writer I know. In "The Lay of Rosabelle" he puts these words into the mouth of the old minstrel,

*"O listen, listen, ladies gay!
No haughty feat of arms I tell;
Soft is the note, and sad the lay,
That mourns the lovely Rosabelle,"*

and then follows the story of her death by drowning. Its soft musical verses full of beauty and sadness make you love the writer. You almost wish he were here so you could express your appreciation to him personally.

Some people have a yearning for the mystic and eccentric. They like this kind of writing both in poetry and prose. In poetry they single out Blake and literally gorge themselves on his works. His songs of innocence and experience are full of vague references to the spiritual

world. His poem on the "Tiger" is simply one beautiful thought that has come to each one of us at some time or another. Two lines in one of the verses strike me as more than ordinary,

*"Did He smile his work to see ?
Did He who made the lamb make thee ?"*

And so we see whether we are sorrowful or sad, or in any mood whatever, and need a companion to comfort or cheer us, we turn to the poets and their poetry. They are always near to guide us. They have left behind their life work. If we ignore it, is it our own loss; but if we respect it, that is, if we make use of their poetry every day of our lives, we shall draw from their works the solace and comfort we need, and their lives of hardship will not have been in vain. Thus from the lines of Byron we more than ever realize the truth of the words,

*"Lives of great men all remind us
We must make our lives sublime
And departing leave behind us
Footprints on the sands of time."*



Just at the age 'twixt boy and youth,
When thought is speech, and speech is truth.

—Scott.

To make a happy fireside clime
To wee 'uns and wife,
That's the true pathos and sublime
Of human life.

—Burns.

But sorrow returned with the dawning of morn,
And the voice in my dreaming ear melted away.

—Campbell.