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## Poetry, Life, Literature

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*Poetry, Life, Literature.*

-- Lawrence Kimmel

“Poetry is more philosophical and more worthy of serious attention than history”, Aristotle

“No evil can touch one who looks upon beauty; he feels at one with the world”, Goethe

“Now Ireland has her madness and her weather still, for poetry makes nothing happen.”, W.H.Auden

“A rose, by any other name, would smell as sweet” Shakespeare

The question and theme of the poetry of life reaches deep into the essential questions of human existence. In the sense that poetry is the central core of literature, it is essential to the meaning of our lives. This question does not necessarily place human life, nor indeed biological life at the center of inquiry. We will examine the sense in which life itself is poetry, and great literature--in this essay we will refer only to that--is recognized by its capacity to capture and express that poetry. When it does this it penetrates to the heart of human accord and resonance with creation, and so merits the title “universal” or “immortal” literature. A better description would be: fundamental, essential poetry.

I

Poetry in/of Life

The question of the poetry of life in literature presents two separate and related possibilities of reference. If it is life itself which is poetic and the subject of agency, the problematic of creativity is complex indeed. A separate and more usual way of approach is to consider that it is the living of life that is poetic or not. Both are interesting questions, and perhaps collapse into one in the context of literature. The poet T.S.Eliot put the question in choruses from “The Rock”: “Where is the Life we have lost in living?” which may serve as an occasion for noting a difference between life and living. One can lose one’s life in the living of it, measured out in coffee spoons. Shakespeare’s heroic reminder that the coward dies many times before his death has an everyday corollary that the dead can go on living, without passion and without poetry in their

hearts. On the other side of it, one can raise her individual life to the poetic in losing it, as greater love hath no man than to lay down his life for another.

Life as such, merely to be alive, is surely not poetic, with the possible exception of the moment of birth. If lived life is poetic, it requires more than a continued presence. If poetry is anything it is affirmation, neither resignation nor endurance will satisfy. From this point of view, it is not life but a sense of engaged life which carries the poetic. Life understood as poetic counterpoint to death, is love. Where death itself is without meaning, so is life, and the dead continue to live or not, indifferent to the poetry of life. Where there is no love, or care, no concern, no celebration, nothing to sing, no impulse to dance, then life is without poetry.

Nothing ensures the poetic in life, and there are many ways in which it may be lost. One cannot always mark the day the music died, but it is a sure symptom when there are no songs in the hearts of a people. Poetry can arise in poverty, find its voice under oppression, it only dies when there is no longer remembrance or hope, joy or despair, only when the possibilities of life no longer make a difference in the lives of those who have them. The poetry of life requires only the courage of its expression, but courage is often lost in its forgetfulness, more often lost through ease and indifference than pain or hardship. Eliot's *Straw Men*, *Gerontians*, and *J. Alfred Prufrocks* all lament their loss of life in living as a result of thinking too much and feeling too little, in only thinking, and rethinking, before the taking of tea. From the standpoint of the *Hollow Men*, the poetic requires the passion of pressing the moment to its crisis, a thing to be avoided, then lamented.

To analyze the poetry of life in literature, the prior question of what in/of life is poetic, or perhaps better, how is life poetic, needs answering. It is only then we can address what and how such poetry is expressed and embodied in literature. If we stay with the perspective of a lived life, what conditions are requisite to the poetic? We might begin with the borderline case of children: is innocence a possible source of poetry? The life of the child itself may be an expression of the poetics of life; it is a separate question whether the child is capable of giving expression to her life in art. An initial intuition would suggest that knowledge and awareness are required to live one's life poetically.

The poetry of life itself may be a happening, but poetry in literature is a *making*. *Poiesis*, the Greek word “to make”, is also a making space. It requires not only reflective self-consciousness, but the imaginative distance to form a separate world. We can mark this difference in the child’s perception and expression of her world, and the capacity to structure the meaning of this seeing, or hearing. The empirical question of what age is art possible for the child is aside from our present concern, but clearly it connects. Presumably it does not require a poet to live poetically, but we might insist that some maturity of understanding is necessary--or not.

Poetic expression may be realized through other modes than art--through actions and relationships for example--all of which contribute to a poetic life. If that is so, then a poetic life does not require language and hence not literature. If it is not dependent on, or a reflection of literature, the poetic would seem to constitute an independent phenomenon, so that different modes and mediums--life and literature--may express this same content and meaning. In which case, life and literature are to be understood as analogues of some separate conceptual domain of the poetic. It is possible that the poetic vision is the same in literature and life, and only the expression is variable--verbal, visual, aural in literature, visceral in life.

Since our context is literature, not the whole of the arts, access to an analogue is to be sought here. Presumably we can articulate what the poetic in literature is--the problem is on the other side. What is **not** meant by the poetry of life, surely, is to make life into a fiction, in which one manipulates persons as if they were characters in a novel, moving pieces by design about on a board.

There are then, two approaches to the relation of poetry and life. The first is that life itself, and not merely the living of it, is poetic--that there is a lyrical and creative aspect to life itself, to nature, that invites the expression “poetry *of* life.” It is a different matter to conceive of poetry as focused on or limited to the process of living, requiring human consideration and action. We will consider the latter first as the easier question, more commonly found in literature.

## II

### Poetry and Philosophy, Lives and Literature

There is a line in one of G.B.Shaw's plays, I think *Man and Superman*, in which a character remarks to the effect that one should not confuse the poet and the lover, the former only wants the feeling in order to write about it. This mirrors, but is also modified by another famous remark of Shaw's that those who can, do; those who can't, teach. Shaw clearly thought that art, in his case literature, was a mode of action of some sort, different in kind from mere feeling and talking, and set apart from the casual or instructive discourse of everyday living. Socrates may be taken as further modifying Shaw's second claim; for Socrates teaching is clearly a *doing* something, or it is not teaching. That life and literature are not the same takes no great wisdom to see, nor wit to distinguish. There are connections and convergences which merit investigation, however, vital connections which can make a life into what Heidegger called "a poetic dwelling", and the literature which mirrors or embodies it memorable or immortal.

One might suppose that every life considered as a story and lived as an adventure is, so far, poetic; every life which is really a life, every life which affirms the wholeness of life, is poetic. *Poiesis* is appropriately applied to any human activity which is actively constructive. We are inclined, however, and with reason, to reserve "poetic" for the field of creative activity wherein the imagination is engaged to form singular works of art. But art is poetic arguably to the degree its substance and energy are gathered from the creative experience of life. Art is poetic only when it captures and expresses the elemental poetry of life itself. The catch, again, is that life is only poetic under the conception of art. There is a circle here, of course. The trick is to understand that this is inevitable when one is speaking of art and life, and the point speaks to the force of their interdependence.

The many languages of art and the genres of literature--drama, lyric, epic, novel, poem--frame and give expression to those passions which are the source of life, in which living beings take delight in their very existence. Poetry comes to life only where life is poetic, where the poet, painter, and composer can touch the joyful expression which is life itself. When we ask that art be true to life, we do not mean the routine of daily subsistence, we mean life fully open to its own possibilities. The literature of a people is the expression and repository of those possibilities.

It may be thought that there are two very different choices one can make about one's life, less severe than those given to Achilles, though no less important: to live a poetic life, or a philosophical life. Are these different in kind--the one creative, the other critical-- or can they be reconciled and integrated? On the surface of it, it would seem that to walk in beauty and to pursue the truth are not only compatible, but interdependent. It is primarily our continued conception of hermetically sealed disciplines which would seem to argue the other way. But philosophy began with the Greeks in just this unfortunate and I believe historically arbitrary way, by defining philosophy in opposition to the poetic. It might be preferable simply to ignore this beginning except that it determined the direction philosophy was to take, and still constrains the boundaries of inquiry.

The genius of the Greeks, and their legacy to the world was precisely the production of literature. The Greeks were not alone nor the first to connect literature and life--think of the great epic of *Gilgamesh*. Every archaic culture has produced myth, stories of creation, of heroism, of endurance, stories through which to understand their own lives, their history and character. Whether in oral or literate traditions, stories, the stuff of literature attests to a poetic impulse at the root of all human life and culture. But the Greeks transformed and shaped crude stories of elemental beings into a rich literature of dramatic, lyric, epic, historical, and philosophical genres, and in the process increased the capacity for the self-expression and understanding of human life. Homer and Sophocles, Thucydides, Aristophanes, and Plato are still an essential part of the cultural education of every Western child.

But it is also here in the Classical period with Socrates, that philosophical discourse became critically preclusive. His important initial commitment to a life of thought wedded serious and systematic inquiry to the task of learning how to live well. It is not so clear, however, that living well in the Socratic sense, is to live poetically; in fact it seems to be the reverse. The dialectic of critical inquiry was to replace the epic, lyric, and dramatic expressions which had depicted passionate, heroic, and tragic life at its ebb and flow, as Shakespeare would later put it. So although philosophy directly connects literature with life, the early Greek philosophers did *not* mean "live poetically"--as if one's life were the expression of a poem, having beauty, coherence, passion. Rather,

they meant “live rationally.” To live well in the philosophical sense was to subject one’s motives, actions, relationships, desires, to rational review, to develop a critical comportment toward one’s own life. In the Socratic expression, only the critically examined life is worth living, not the poetic or aesthetic life, the life of art, or for that matter, any other life--the life of commerce or agriculture.

The Greek god of rationality was a jealous god which was to have no other before it. Although literature and life connect closely for philosophy, by the time Aristotle refines the details of how to live well, it has become, in modern terms, a gentleman’s life, an aristocrat’s leisure, and rationally exclusive. If such remains the paradigm of the philosophical life, it cannot be poetic. Any directive that constrains the full potential and dimensions of human experience and expression, even if it serves a form of truth, is not an affirmation of life and does not exist in beauty, does not reach through to the poetry of life itself. Having said that, I fully believe there are other ways of conceiving, practicing, and living philosophy which are poetic.

Both the philosophical and poetic *life* require a self-conscious distance from everyday existence. One is not alive poetically, one can only live poetically. This requires thought, imagination, resolution, and action, not mere existence. The distancing of philosophical inquiry is thus not merely conceptual and rational, but aesthetic--nor can philosophical distance dispense with poetic engagement. Sartre reminded us that one can think backwards, but only live forwards. Life is ongoing, however it be conceived, the only question is that of quality and direction.

In Greek and traditional philosophy there is critical contrast not with mundane existence, but with alternative framings of life through the use and kinds of conceptual distance. Perhaps in Greek culture the break with ordinary existence had already been achieved in the great literature which preceded philosophy. Philosophy could then presuppose a high level of inquiry, so that the only concern of the *aristos*, (*arete*, virtue) is for excellence--not excellence compared with ordinary and mundane existence, but rather with contending versions of the good life, the life of excellence. For Socrates, the Sophists were only the current occasion of competition, touting the rhetorical skills needed for public power and advancement. From a philosophical point of view, the older and deeper contextual competition for the soul of the Greeks was to be found in epic

poetry and tragic drama. It is surely important that Socrates and Plato could bring criticism against Homer and the tragic dramatists out of a profound respect, that their criticism was a form of compliment as well as complement.

The difficulty of conceiving of Classical philosophy in this generous light, is in part the ironic tone and comportment of Socratic inquiry: it does not itself seem generous. It appears rather to be a process of debunking every other form of discourse. There is, however, a procedural point which I believe has never been made clear in Greek philosophy. Socrates' respect for critical discourse itself must be taken as sufficient evidence not to discredit or dismiss the interlocutors. His ironic comportment and barbed humor often leaves the modern student thinking that the whole thing is a setup: that there is no honor in disputing with Socrates, and that Plato only makes use of a preconceived litany, with an audience of stock characters and strawmen. It would be a service to the whole of the Platonic corpus and to the history of philosophy to read the Dialogues such that the honor of inquiry and engaged discourse is taken for granted.

That Socrates is waging a contest in which he "always wins" is not so. Indeed if that were the case, then Plato has only created a version of the super-Sophist, consistent with Aristophanes' comic portrait of Socrates in *The Clouds*. The contemporary assumption that argumentative discourse can only be adversarial is testimony to the insight of the Sophists into the aggressive end of human nature. The analogue of a television series in which Perry Mason always emerges victorious and the poor, dumb prosecutor looks pathetic and resentful is unfortunately a common enough reading model for the student. But clearly this is wrong in Plato's case, and in philosophy, where it is genuine. It is crucial if seldom sufficient to remind students that Socrates marks his success not against the interlocutors, but against what he believes to be possible and accessible, the Truth. He inevitably falls short; that the interlocutors do so as well, is not quite to the point. It is rather that Truth is what is important; discourse is philosophically valuable not on its own terms, but in service only to the truth. What is required for our purposes is to find a less preclusive analogue to this commitment in *poiesis*, in the idea of life itself as a poetic task, and literature as an expression of that poetry.

### III

The Poetry of life.

Let us now consider the second approach to the connection between poetry, life, and literature by addressing not poetry *in* life, but the poetry *of* life. What distinguishes the poetic, whether of life or in literature, is *poiesis* the essence of which is creative activity. This is, of course, what life is and means: creation. In this rudimentary sense life *is* poetry. Literature takes up this creative energy from life, discovers resonance in its very being, and gives expression to the energy drawn from the impulse. It is not difficult to determine the relation between life and literature, they have the same source in creative and compelling affirmation. The poetic in literature is thus an extension of the creative and expressive intensity of the life force itself. Literature takes many forms, settles into various genres, but poetry and the poetic in whatever mode of literature it is found, is singular: it does not re-present, describe, explain, or imitate nature; simply, it affirms life.

There are many ways to look at the universe, the mystery of the creation and created. No final choice between expanding bubble or rubber band theory in physics--proto or meta--will dissolve the fact of mystery. The origins of life are not shrouded in mystery, they constitute a mystery. Literature has an advantage in that it has no need to resolve or dispel mystery. To celebrate life in literature is not to proclaim life a mystery, it is simply to participate in the poetry of its continuance. There are two stories that fit this originating portrait of the creative energy and expression of life. The first is to picture a vast empty and cold universe and imagine a creative spark of life generated in a vast darkness which somehow sustains itself. Another equally useful story is that the universe itself is alive, is full of life. Organic life is only one of its limitless forms; the cycles of birth and death are not limited to the organic, and moreover are just ways of marking time. Finally, ultimately, life is energy and motion.

There are cultures and literatures in which the continuance of creative force is taken as given. The native American tradition and form of life recognizes that all things are alive: the earth is alive, the stones and trees and rivers are alive, the stars are alive... In these two stories, the beauty of life, its poetry, is its affirmation, wholeness, integrity. This does not require symmetry--another means of limiting measurement. The poet priest Gerard Manley Hopkins nicely put it: "Glory be to God for dappled things...all things counter, original, spare, strange,/ Whatever is fickle, freckled/With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazle, dim/ He fathers forth whose beauty is past change." Poetry in

literature, as of life, however diverse in expression or form, must be and is of a piece, whole, integral to the celebration of life. When it is that, the poet, the reader, the listener feels that quickening and deep resonance in her own being.

#### IV

#### Poetry in Literature

What is to be learned about life through poetic literature? The force and life of poetry is found in the presencing within its expression, through sound and rhythm, of the sense and substance of its reference. The opening line of Homer's great epic, the *Iliad*, begins "The Wrath of Peleus' son, O Muse, resound..." What makes this line poetic is not the description of a fictive figure in a Greek epic: Achilles comes alive in the embodiment of that force of character wrought by the poet's words (Dryden's translation). Somehow the tone of wrath is felt in the expression, through the language itself. There is not room in this essay to undertake an anatomy of poetic language and expression, but we need to mention these essentials: the human capacity and tradition of the story (*mythos*), and the capacity of language (*poiesis*) through story and image to appeal directly to the senses (*aesthesos*)--to embody phenomena in language. In poetry at its very best-- poetry which is genuinely poetic, what critics call aesthetically effective--the appeal directly to sensuous apprehension means that we are presented not with concepts to consider, but phenomena to assimilate and understand.

A poem does what prose does not, calls attention to itself and focuses the intensity of its subject in such a way that it is embodied in the language. Schopenhauer persuasively argues that music is the most elemental form of art, in that it is pure expression. While literature and painting must in some sense represent what they are about, music expresses what it is without reference to anything else. Music *is* what it expresses. One could further extend Schopenhauer's point, however, to say that poetry is the transformation of language into music, music into language, it gives an articulate voice to sound. If music is the language of the soul, poetry is the soul of its language.

Prose is referential in the sense that we are directed away from the language to a referent not present in the language. Poetry condenses phenomena into the contextual sense of the expression itself. Again, the philosophical writer who perhaps best captures this sense of universal immediacy of the genuinely poetic is Schopenhauer. Although he

is not speaking specifically of poetry, his analytic remarks fit the thesis we are considering here. Schopenhauer conceives and portrays the acute aesthetic sense of artistic experience as the concrete perception of the universal (he has in mind Plato's *eidos*, but an ordinary notion of "ideal" will work as well.) A poetic experience of the world is always of the immediate thing itself, but it is perceived and expressed in such a way that the universal is manifest in it. In aesthetic viewing or poetic expression of a person or painting, she appears as the concrete particular she is but at the same time transformed. She becomes, for example, not a naked body in the immediacy of desire, but rather a nude figure apart from any individual interest or desire. The poetic is the expression of the universal in the particular, and the aesthetic response is precisely to see in the naked body of this woman, the form of beauty which is woman herself. The poetics of this vision constitutes a phenomenology of the feminine.

The movement in the poetic here is not conceptual abstraction, but aesthetic resonance: the universal is brought to life within the concrete experience of the particular. Typically, the poetic is an ecstatic experience of only a moment of rapture, as if looking into the secret form of life itself. Schopenhauer clearly suggests that the most authentic-- in our terms here, poetic--existence, is one in which the genius of this moment grows into a way of life. Whether or not this is possible for most of us, one way of measuring the greatness of a poet is to remark on the duration as well as intensity of such moments of vision which become integral in her work and character as an artist. It is doubtful that any human being has ever been without the experience of at least one such moment which makes up the poetry of life. It is within our capacity as human beings to live in this way. The poetic is natural to all life, but it requires both intensity and simplicity to be realized.

Schopenhauer's philosophical analysis can be read as directions on how to experience the world aesthetically. His thesis is in accord with Browning's remark that the poet lends out his eyes to see with (*Fra Lippo Lippi*), and with the idea that Monet's paintings are exercises in learning how to see. It is in this sense that art, at its very best as poetic, as well as at its worst as camp and kitsch, is didactic: we learn how to see and so live well, or else are distracted into the common ease of enjoyment. But, for those brief moments of ecstasy in art, we are at one with the poetry of life.

What is important in the poetry of life and literature is to see into the heart of paradox. Intrinsic to poetry is the paradox of time and place. "...What's time? Leave Now for dogs and apes! Man has forever." (Browning). In poetry there is always and never "Now", there is always and never "Here". "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow, creeps in this petty pace from day to day..." Which and whose tomorrows? Macbeth's and mine, everyone's and anyone's. "...And all our pleasures are like yesterdays." (John Donne): Which and whose pleasures? The same. In Shakespeare's works, even the "*Histories*" carry the poetic presencing of distance: "This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England." Richard II's England? Shakespeare's England? Yes, and also anyone's homeland. "...Come, let us sit upon the ground, And tell sad stories of the deaths of kings." English Kings? Yes, and also the sad fact and common lot of all life, that its genius is a plaything of time, over which death holds dominion. The secret of the poetic is that this foreknowledge of inevitable and real pain is diminished in its effect by the sharing of stories. Death is not always tragic and life as lived is not always poetic. The transforming energy of art, however, is in this way generative of poetic life, and redemptive of human mortality.

## V

### Poetry and Tragedy: the beautiful, and the sublime

Turning to literature proper to search for examples of the poetry of life, two genres seem most promising--poetry and tragic drama. Each represents a quite different if not opposite expression of the poetic in literature. This difference, in turn, may provide a crucial insight into a basic division of the poetic in life. Hopefully it will not require much print to support the idea that poetry and tragedy are two fundamental paradigms of literature, its two most definitive genres: poetry as elemental to, and tragedy as comprehensive of, the experience of human existence.

Poetry, as the closest expression to *poiesis* which defines the creative process of art, perhaps requires no justification here at all. Tragic drama, on almost all accounts beginning with Aristotle's *Poetics*, has been regarded as the inner core of concentric circles which constitute the totality of literature. Its defining status has been argued on many aesthetic levels, usually, that it is the most complex and comprehensive of all literary forms and the most difficult both to write and comprehend. But the most

important aspect of this art form is its intimate connection with the life experience of any thoughtful person. The tragic vision of this drama uncovers a depth expression of the human condition itself. It confronts the singular and difficult fact of human existence that the human being knows she is going to die, that suffering is the lot of human beings, and that life is a struggle every individual will lose. The art of tragedy is to show the nobility of this inevitable failure, the magnificence of the human spirit which faces up to this knowledge, that strives with and against the relentless logic of time and existence.

There are two basic intuitions here, which concern a fundamental difference between the poetry *of* life, and poetry *in* life. This difference is related to the two primary effects and traditional achievements of literature and art: the beautiful, and the sublime. First, the poetry *of* life is natural in the sense that it is a seamless flow of energy that accommodates all things, all variations, meets with no obstacles, is pure affirmation. The poetry of this motion is what we understand and comprehend as beauty: in the glory of a rainbow and the glow of a sunset we see a fittingness of all things, as in a fine summer day when we feel as one with the whole of life. In literature, the genre of poetry proper is a mirror of this natural flow; in its simplest description, it is affirmation. On this account, poetry is the celebration of beauty, the expression of the beautiful. This idea can be carried through at length to discern features of consequence for understanding poetry. For example the innocence of a child carries a kind of natural beauty, a life-poetry of its own. Although literary poetry is not always in its expression a purity of this sort, it does cultivate an innocence of perception not unlike that of the child who conceives no distance or defense, feels nothing alien to her interests or regard. Where poetry is not a direct expression of this natural acceptance and affirmation, it is an attempt to retrieve innocence, a feeling of oneness with the world. Where poetry is not direct affirmation of life it is an appeal for reconciliation with life. Poetry seeks the rhythm of the natural metabolism of time; the paradigm of this genre is a poetics of confluence

In direct contrast with this, the poetry *in* life is a poetics of conflict. The struggle of human life is “unnatural” in the sense that it is centered in the conflict of human aspiration set against earth and time. The constructive effort of the human being is no longer in natural accord with time and space, but seeks to contend with and conquer both, to substitute its own rhythm and measure. The literary analogue of this poetics of conflict

is tragic drama, which strives not for an expression of beauty in life, but for a sense of the sublime in human suffering. The tragic vision is not one of reconciliation with the oneness of life, but the self-realization of the inevitability of defeat intrinsic to the human condition. Tragic drama reaches into the depths of human aspiration and discovers there a nobility of spirit commensurate with the human being's conception of himself as a creature caught between god and beast. Not content with being a beast and incapable of becoming a god, tragic drama intensifies the conflict of the human individual with herself, the tearing conflict of knowledge and passion. Shakespeare memorably and typically understates the point in Hamlet's distancing from the passion of engagement, in the familiar oft quoted soliloquy:

“What a piece of work is a man! How able in reason!  
How infinite in faculty! in form!...in action how like an angel!  
in apprehension how like a god! the beauty of the world!  
the paragon of animals...this quintessence of dust!  
Man delights not me...”

Tragic drama eschews the wisdom of reconciliation, and the beauty of letting be what is. It is the story of the individual's passion to be unique, to overcome with passion the inevitability of logic, to surpass what is possible.

It is now taken as given that the point of tragedy is the self-realization of the tragic hero. This was Aristotle's attempt to make tragedy conform in the end to the dictates of rationality and show the superiority of knowledge and reason over passion. This is a mistake in that it is a proposal which would reduce tragic vision to an exercise in unreason, and assimilate the poetics of tragedy back into reconciliation and the poetics of beauty. That this can be done is evidenced by the success Aristotle's *Poetics* still commands. The recommendation of this essay, however, is that we keep an open mind about the matter. Kant's distinction between beauty and sublimity, altered by Schopenhauer, and dramatized by Nietzsche, that the genius of tragic drama requires worshipping at the shrines of two gods--Apollo and Dionysos--suggests that the poetics of tragedy may best be understood not as resolution, but as creating an aesthetic tension, a dynamic portrait of unresolved conflict within the human condition itself.

Having said this, I should add the obvious codicil, already alluded to above, that literature is a more complex phenomenon than any critical rule can or should hope to

accommodate. Tragic drama of course contains poetry of exceeding beauty, and there are poems that brook tragic vision. There are, in Karsten Harries' expression, metaphors of collusion and collision in both genres. Any extended metaphor of Shakespeare, in his Tragedies, Histories, or Sonnets, contends for laurels in either category. Poems abound with tragic vision. Consider two familiar modern examples from the work of Yeats, who is the subject of Auden's remark quoted at the beginning of this essay. The first is a vision out of *animus mundi* which ends *The second Coming* with the lines "...and what rough beast its hour come round at last, slouches toward Bethlehem to be born?". The second example is a condensed image of lust and carnage which comprehends so much of Greek epic and tragic literature in Yeats' lines from "Leda and the Swan": "...A shudder in the loins engenders there/ The broken wall, the burning roof and tower,/ And Agamemnon dead." The simple beauty of affirmation in such images has given way to the sublime passion of tragic vision.

What all this suggests is that the fundamental mode of poetry is being, and its reconciling effect a poetics of beauty. The contrasting and complementary mode of tragedy is action, and its conflicting tensions a poetics of sublimity. In life too, there are optional perspectives, and we live them all. The poetry in and of life is not reducible to these two literary paradigms, but they serve as limits. Recall the pundit's remark that for those who think, life is a comedy, for those who feel, a tragedy. Every oversimplification which becomes memorable has its lesson. We have not discussed the poetics of the comic, or the tragicomic, the poetics of work and leisure, of enjoyment and worship. These too, form the fabric of our lives. We must in closing return to our original point, that life itself is poetic, and the mode of its *poiesis* is a continuous process of motion and change, growth and decay, death and regeneration. There are no final limits here, and that, of course, is the beauty of it.