

THE STUDY OF POETRY¹

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THE FUNCTION OF A UNIVERSITY

THE inauguration of a new institution of university rank is a fitting occasion for reviewing the field which such institutions exist in order to cover; for going back for a moment to first principles, and endeavouring to state, in the simplest terms, why such institutions exist, and what they may effect towards the moulding of a new generation, and the elevation of civic and national life. Different universities, according to the circumstances of their foundation and history, can shew different reasons for their existence and for being such as they are. But all of them, whatever the date of their origin, whatever the place of their settlement, have come into being in response to certain demands of the place and the time. All of them have been founded with a purpose single in its nature, though diverse in its manifestations. That purpose is to make stated and secured provision for the higher needs of a civilised community. The needs, like the pursuits, of a community are many. But its civilisation is one. It is the object of a university to gather up that civilisation, to analyse and study its separate elements in order to recombine them at a higher power, and thus to give conscious direction to the human mind in its knowledge of the past, its understanding of the present, and its power over the future. Its office is to store up, to sort out, and to impart knowledge; and by doing so it accumulates, organises,

¹ A discourse prepared for the inauguration of the Rice Institute, by Professor John William Mackail, formerly Professor of Poetry in Oxford University.

and gives forth power. Knowledge is power, according to the old saying; it is latent or stored power. Conversely, power is knowledge transformed into energy; knowledge in action. Education, the process which goes on in a concentrated form and at high pressure in a university, is a mechanism by which the potential energy of the human mind is developed, disciplined, cleared for action. Knowledge is indeed an end in itself, and one which has a value that may properly be called inestimable, since it cannot be expressed in the terms of any other value. Riches, comfort, health, fame, influence, beneficence, are things of which knowledge pursued for its own sake and as an end in itself takes no heed. But while knowledge is or may be an end, education is only a means: a means to knowledge, for such as desire knowledge for its own sake; but for all who pass through it and undergo its influence, a means to the practice and conduct of life.

Hence in any community the idea of a university, the sort of education which a university will be planned and meant to give, will depend on the kind of life which that community desires, aspires towards, sets before itself as worth attaining. In the ancient world the earliest institutions to which the name can in any sense be applied were religious colleges —schools of the prophets, as they are called in the Old Testament, or training-colleges of the priests, as they existed and flourished in Babylonia or in Egypt. The knowledge and power after which they sought, which they accumulated, recorded, and transmitted, were the knowledge of and the power over supernatural forces. For these supernatural forces were then, according to the common belief, what governed the life of mankind and held it at their mercy; to understand them and their ways, and thus to gain the power of foreseeing their action, propitiating their favour, giving

this or that direction to their working, was no mere matter of abstract study or idle speculation: it was most severely and immediately practical; it lay at the root of individual and national prosperity. Without education in this all-important and all-embracing knowledge, industry and commerce, arts and manufactures, the conduct of war and peace, were blind and helpless: in a word, life was impossible.

Out of that world rose, after many ages, what we know as the classical civilisation. This was the work of Greece, carried on and consolidated by Rome. The universities of the Græco-Roman world belong to the same period which saw, for the first time, the rise of a trained governing class of organisers and administrators. Hence in these universities the subjects pre-eminently studied were those necessary for such a class: oratory, law, politics, and finance. At the same time the creation of a trained governing class set free those who did not belong to it, whether excluded by birth and fortune or holding aloof by choice from active pursuit of the duties attaching to the work of government. These, and especially the latter class, those who deliberately abstained from active public life, might now pursue knowledge for its own sake; and other universities arose which, in response to this new demand, devoted themselves to the sciences: on the one hand, to the pure or abstract sciences, those of the human mind, like grammar and logic and metaphysics, and those of the physical world, like botany or chemistry or astronomy; and, on the other hand, to the applied sciences, such as engineering or mechanics or medicine, or to those sciences which are also arts, like rhetoric or music.

When, in the Middle Ages, men began to gather together the wreckage of the ancient civilisation and to reorganise life on a fresh basis, their notion of a university was fun-

damentally different. For the mediæval notion of the world was that it was something limited, precise, and ascertainable. It was something of which complete knowledge was possible; and to give this complete rounded knowledge was the function of education. The forms of life were prescribed by dogma; and the substance of life, on all its sides and in all its manifestations, was what could be comprehended in these forms. Just as theology was fixed and bounded by the authoritative doctrines of a universal or Catholic Church; just as political and social life was fixed and bounded by the equally authoritative constitutions of the universal Roman Empire, which held sway over men's minds long after it had itself ceased to exist except as a memory of the past or a dream of the future: in like manner and to a like degree were the form and the content of all knowledge determined and limited. Treatises were written *de omni scibili*, 'concerning everything which is capable of being known.' This was an ideal, in so far as few, if any, had the vigour of mind, the industry, acuteness, and patience, that were required for its attainment. But it was, given these qualities in the student, an attainable ideal. A university professed to offer, its students came prepared to receive, universal knowledge. The mediæval curriculum—the *trivium* and *quadrivium* of educational legislators—was the same everywhere; was one, complete, and unalterable. Study might be pursued further in certain branches of it than in others; but that was only in so far as the student failed to complete the full course which would leave nothing more to learn or to know. The *Summa Theologiæ*, the sum and substance, over all its range and into all its details, of divine knowledge, was actually put together and written down; the *Summa Scientiæ*, the sum and substance of secular knowledge, was the under side, as it were, of that other fabric, and could not extend beyond its limits.

That is to say, all learning, both liberal and technical, was the province of a university; the scope and limits of all learning were imposed from without by a dogmatic and omnipotent theology, and whatever knowledge lay beyond these limits was either proscribed as sinful, or its existence was denied.

Hence the human mind was not only bounded but crippled. Practice did not, indeed, follow theory to its rigid consequences. Schools of medicine, of civil law, even of natural science, grew up here and there, and flourished precariously under the jealous eyes of the Church. Art grew up of itself, without any systematic art-training. Architecture and engineering were in the hands of guilds, where knowledge was transmitted, in theory and practice, as a secret treasure from father to son or from master to apprentice. Painting and the sister arts wrought out a tradition of their own. Poetry insisted on making itself heard, but was discountenanced as heathen vanity or worse. The brilliant culture of Provence, which had gone out of Europe to the Arabs for a new and larger life, was crushed by armed force, and perished under the sword of the so-called Crusaders or in the fires of the Inquisition. Even at the end of the Middle Ages, and when the new world of the Renaissance was forming itself, Chaucer, the first of our own poets, ended by a formal and express disavowal of his own poetry, revoking and retracting it (all except legends of saints, and homilies, and books of morality and devotion) as vanity and sin. Physical science was equally suspect, and was subject, down to the time of Galileo and later, to equally jealous control and equally vindictive persecution.

This tyranny of theology lasted long enough to affect the modern universities likewise, down to a time which is within living memory. It was not broken either by the Reforma-

tion or by what is called the Revival of Learning. For the Reformation, as indeed its name implies if we consider its real meaning, only recast that tyranny in a new shape, 'reformed' it and imposed it afresh on the human mind; and the Revival of Learning was a partial, imperfect and agonising struggle to regain that freedom of the intelligence on which all freedom and all progress ultimately depend. The pre-Revolutionary foundations in the American Colonies, like Harvard (the mother and head of American universities) and Yale (created in the first year of that eighteenth century which was the liberating age of human thought), were theological colleges, restricted by the tenets of Puritanism, and regarding all kinds of secular learning as subsidiary elements towards theological training. Fifty years after the foundation of Yale the first decisive step towards the liberation of knowledge was taken. The University of Pennsylvania, founded on lines laid down by Benjamin Franklin in 1751, led the way in the English-speaking world towards the conception of a seat of learning in which learning should be unrestricted by dogma and have no limits set to it other than the limits of human intelligence and capacity. That foundation, originated by men who were to be the creators of the American Commonwealth, was an achievement in the field of human thought which marks a new epoch, just as the foundation of the Republic a generation later marks an epoch in the political and social life of mankind.

The step then gained has never been lost. More and more surely, as time went on, the declaration of intellectual independence made by those pioneers of the modern world became a profession of faith and a standard of conduct throughout the international commonwealth of learning. Progress was slow: it was not until 1871 that religious tests were removed from the ancient universities of Oxford and

Cambridge; here, as elsewhere, the creators of the United States led the way, and the American Republic followed them in the advance towards a new conception and a new conduct of life. It became, in the full sense of the words, a New World.

That world existed at first, and for long, only as a sketch or outline: it drove its outposts forward through virgin forest or over empty prairie; the advancing tide, however swift its actual advance, required generations to fill up the channels laid for it and widen out into lakes and seas; the foundations were pushed on, here and there, at random, and the earliest superstructures built upon them were often slight and mean. It was not until after the Civil War that the American nation, secure in its unity and conscious of its greatness, began to organise its own higher education, and to realise the full culture of the human faculties as a function of its national life. Since then the growth, in all the States of the Union, of institutions of liberal and technical learning has been rapid and vast. Yet even so, it has hardly kept pace with the enormous growth of population, of civic organisation, and of material resources. The new institution now being inaugurated at Houston is one among many such new foundations, and they will not be the last. The foundations are laid, but the structure towards which they are laid is only begun.

But while the number of American universities is steadily growing, the ideal of an American university is undergoing no less striking and fruitful an expansion. It is being recognised that a university, or any institution of university rank, must have a sphere of study and of influence as wide as the whole width of human activity. It can no longer confine itself to some special study; it can no longer be merely a theological seminary, or a school of letters, or a training-college

of commerce, or a collection of laboratories and workshops. Its function and scope must be universal. It must proclaim the unity of all knowledge, the kinship of the arts and sciences, the mutual interdependence of all study and research towards the conquest of nature and the complete civilisation of man. To this task there are no bounds; beyond the widening frontiers of knowledge lie ever more and more unexplored territories. To the Republic of Learning no limits are set by the ocean. The growth of knowledge is the growth of power; the organisation and communication of knowledge are the organisation and communication of power; and that power is not merely a power over what is known, but a power and a will and an endless purpose to know more.

It is, then, matter of congratulation that the founders of this institution have determined that its studies shall not be confined to any single branch of knowledge, but that the technical and professional instruction which it will offer shall be liberalised by organic connection with art and letters. In the stately and ample surroundings which have been planned, with the large and varied equipment which is being provided, the Rice Institute gives welcome promise of rising to the height of the opportunity presented to it. By a wise munificence, it will offer its education free to its students; it will lay no tax upon the acquisition of knowledge. By an equally wise breadth of view, it will base professional and technical training on a liberal general education, and will thus affirm the human side of science, commerce, and industry, no less than the scientific, commercial, and industrial value of art and letters—of “the so-called humanities,” to quote a phrase from the authoritative statement of its Governing Board, which derive that name from a recognition of the fact that human life, at its broadest and fullest, is the

subject-matter alike of all academic study and of all civic endeavour. It is proposed to assign no upper limit to the educational activity of the Institute; nor, indeed, is it right that any such limit should be fixed except that fixed by Nature herself—the limit of human activity and capacity. But its upward growth will be on broad foundations; its roots will draw life from a large and rich soil; and the hope may be expressed that its lateral radiating growth will, no less than its upward growth, be subject to no imposed limit. For only thus can its full natural expansion be achieved and its organic vitality secured.

Among the “humanities”—among those studies or pursuits in which the noblest instincts of human nature are fostered and its highest aspirations sustained—poetry takes a high, if not the highest, place. As language is the universal and necessary instrument of thought, and as thought is the source and motive power of all action, invention, and creation, so poetry is the organ of language and thought at their highest power, in their most intense and most vitalising manifestation. It will not, therefore, be irrelevant to the inception of a new university to consider more closely, first, what poetry is, and then—a matter of no less moment and of a practical importance which will appear in the development of the discussion—what is the task or function of poetry in the modern world.