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A RESPONSE TO THE CHARGE THAT POETRY IS DIFFICULT

L. ERIC GREINKE

Modern poetry, more than the poetry of any other period has been accused of being difficult. My response to this charge is that it is true, but that this distinction of being difficult is one to be rather valued than not. The main reason for this difficulty is the development of the metaphor as the major element of modern poetry. This is not to say that the metaphor did not exist in pre-modern poems but that it has an importance in modern poetry that it did not have in previous times. In the past poetry has relied a great deal on explicit statement, but since the influence of the French symbolists the modern poet has come to the idea of the integrity of words, and this concept has made poetry the exacting art form that it is today. Poetry today is utterly dependent on the poet's knowledge of the poetic tradition and his ability to be creative in the light of that tradition. I have often heard the further charge that poets today write for each other: for a limited number of people who have enough sensitivity and education to be able to at least partially understand difficult poems and metaphors. Poetry, they charge, is no longer written for the 'common man', whoever that is. I would agree to this too, but again I state that I would not have it any other way. Certainly there is a place for poetry that is easily accessible without sweat, but this is not to be compared with poetry that is exactly tuned to advance the tradition of the art form. I am not saying that poems should not be emotional or entertaining, they must be these things or they lose their charm. What I am saying is that they must not be only pretty-sounding or entertaining. The function of poetry is to do these things while at the same time advancing the consciousness of mankind. Poetry from the Romantic period, with the possible exception of Coleridge, should not be compared to modern poetry simply because it does not set out to accomplish the same goals. Auden says in his well known poem, "In Memory of W.B. Yeats" that poetry makes nothing happen. I do not agree with that. Poetry does create a reality of its own, and by doing so it expands the racial consciousness of mankind. Modern poetry is difficult because it has to be in order for it to accomplish what it can.
Modern poetry, more than the poetry of any other period has been accused of being difficult. My response to this charge is that it is true, but that this distinction of being difficult is one to be rather valued than not. The main reason for this difficulty is the development of the metaphor as the major element of modern poetry. This is not to say that the metaphor did not exist in pre-modern poems but that it has an importance in modern poetry that it did not have in previous times. In the past poetry has relied a great deal on explicit statement, but since the influence of the French symbolists the modern poet has come to the idea of the integrity of words, and this concept has made poetry the exacting art form that it is today. Poetry today is utterly dependent on the poet's knowledge of the poetic tradition and his ability to be creative in the light of that tradition. I have often heard the further charge that poets today write for each other: for a limited number of people who have enough sensitivity and education to be able to at least partially understand difficult poems and metaphors. Poetry, they charge, is no longer written for the 'common man', whatever that is. I would agree to this too, but again I state that I would not have it any other way. Certainly there is a place for poetry that is easily accessible without sweat, but this is not to be compared with poetry that is exactly tuned to advance the tradition of the art form. I am not saying that poems should not be emotional or entertaining, they must be these things or they loose their charm. What I am saying is that they must not be only pretty-sounding or entertaining. The function of poetry is to do these things while at the same time advancing the consciousness of mankind. Poetry from the Romantic period, with the possible exception of Coleridge, should not be compared to modern poetry simply because it does not set out to accomplish the same goals. Auden says in his well known poem, "In Memory of W.B. Yeats" that poetry makes nothing happen. I do not agree with that. Poetry does create a reality of its own, and by doing so it expands the racial consciousness of mankind. Modern poetry is difficult because it has to be in order for it to accomplish what it can.