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## Preamble

THIS volume contains various essays which have appeared here and there, and which deal with the poet's state and the art of verse; but there is hardly anything to be found in it that would explain poetry itself.

Poetry, an ambiguous term, sometimes means a feeling that leads to creation, and sometimes, a production that tends to affect us.

The first case refers to an emotion whose peculiar effect is to fashion for itself in us and through us a WORLD that corresponds to it.

By the second sense of this word is meant a certain industry that may be thought about. It strives to produce and reproduce in others the creative state I spoke of, through the special means of articulate language. It tries, for example, to suggest a world that will give rise to the emotion just mentioned. The peak of this art is reached, in relation to a particular reader, when for the perfect and necessary expression of the effect produced on him by a work, he can find only that work itself.

But the first meaning signifies for us a kind of mystery. Poetry is at the very meeting point of mind and life—two indefinable essences.

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Those in whom this mystery occurs mostly content themselves with their awareness of it. They simply accept this wonderful gift of being moved to create.

As passive or active poets, they endure or pursue pleasure without knowledge. Indeed it is commonly held that these two moods are mutually exclusive; that it is dangerous, perhaps impious, to want to unite them in one person. In the sphere of sensibility this opinion is incontestable—on condition that one labels as “sensibility” anything nonintelligent and divine.

But where are the perils by which no one is attracted?

Certain persons, then—although not very many—are not resigned to being merely favored by nature with a certain causeless gift. Not without pain and resistance do they admit that paroxysms and pleasures of such a high order are not completed and resolved in intellectual contemplation.

Far from thinking that the clear, distinct operations of the mind are opposed to poetry, these headstrong persons claim that the ambition to analyze and to grasp the poetic essence, besides being in itself in conformity with the general tendency of our will to intelligence, and exercising to the full our powers of understanding, is indeed essential to the dignity of the muse—or rather of all the muses, for at present I am speaking generally of all our powers of ideal invention.

In fact, however sensuous and passionate poetry may be, however inseparable from certain ravishments, and although at times it goes even to the point of disorder, one can easily show that it is still linked to the most precise faculties of the intelligence, for if it is in its principle a kind of emotion, it is a peculiar type of emotion, that wants to create its own figures. The mystic and the lover can remain in the sphere of the ineffable; but the poet’s contemplation or transports tend to

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fashion an exact and lasting expression within the real world.

Passion and emotions give us an intimate shock and affect us by surprise. Sometimes they release secret forces in us that suddenly disrupt the soul; sometimes they waste our energies in mad disordered impulses that are explicable only by the moment's overflow; at other times, they drive us to more or less reasonable and reasoned acts, tending to the attainment of some object whose possession or destruction will restore our peace of the moment before and our freedom for some moments after.

But sometimes these particularly deep states of disturbance or emotion give rise to inexplicable bursts of expressive activity whose immediate effects are forms produced in the mind, rhythms, unexpected relations between hidden points in the soul which, although remote from each other until that moment and, as it were, unconscious of each other at ordinary times, suddenly seem made to correspond as though they were parts of an agreement or of a pre-established event. We then feel that there is within us a certain Whole of which only fragments are required by ordinary circumstances. We also observe the initial disorder of consciousness giving birth to the beginnings of order, becoming mingled with projects and promises; a thousand potential perfections arise from imperfection, accidents provoke essences—and a whole creation or formation by contrasts, symmetries, and harmonies is revealed, takes shape in the mind, and at the same time evades thought, only allowing itself to be surmised.

But since I am speaking of emotions in connection with poetry, I may here make a remark that bears a relation to the general scheme of my reflections.

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Poets—I mean those persons who are especially prone to feeling poetically—are not very different from other men in respect to the intensity of the emotions they feel in circumstances that move everyone. They are not much more profoundly touched than anyone else by what touches everyone—although, with their talents, they may quite often make one think so. But, on the other hand, they can be clearly distinguished from the majority of people by the ease with which they are extremely moved by things that move no one else, and by their faculty for providing themselves with a host of passions, amazing states of mind, and vivid feelings that need only the slightest pretext to be born from nothing and grow excited. In a way, poets possess within themselves infinitely more answers than ordinary life has questions to put to them; and this provides them with that perpetually latent, superabundant, and, as it were, irritable richness which at the slightest provocation brings forth treasures and even worlds.

This greatness of effect combined with this smallness of cause is quite simply what marks the essential poetic temperament.

But is not this the very character of our nervous system? Is it not the remarkable function of this system to substitute the controllable appearance for the unseizable, insurmountable, and inconsistent reality? Hence this agent and mysterious apparatus of life, seeing that its function is to compose all differences, to make what no longer exists act on what is, make what is absent present to us, and produce great effects by insignificant means, offers us, in short, everything needed for the beginnings of Poetry.

A poet, in sum, is an individual in whom the agility, subtlety, ubiquity, and fecundity of this all-powerful economy are found in the highest degree.

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If one knew a little more about it, one could hope in consequence to form a fairly clear idea of the poetic essence. But we are far from possessing this central science. The devotees of analysis, of whom I said just now that they are not resigned to being merely the playthings of their talents, are soon aware that the problem of the invention of forms and ideas is one of the most delicate that a speculative and practiced intelligence can set itself. Everything in this field of research must be created—and not only the means, the methods, the terms, and the notions—but also, and above all, the very object of our curiosity must be defined.

A little metaphysics, a little mysticism, and much mythology will for a long time yet be all we have to take the place of positive knowledge in this kind of question.