

Perspectives on Moral & Spiritual Values in Literature

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In the 1960s a committee was formed in Sacramento by what was then known as the California Junior College Faculty Association to consider ways in which moral and spiritual values might be more effectively emphasized in the curricula of the community colleges. Responding to the recommendations of the committee, the late Professor Timothy Fetter assumed the responsibility of leadership to implement a specific program for moral and spiritual renewal on the campus of Santa Barbara City College. The ensuing social unrest of that decade shifted the focus of our attention, and we have heard little discussion of these values since.

Occasionally an article appears in professional journals to assure us, however, that humanists continue to be concerned about moral and spiritual values in the educational process. William J. Bennett, for example, published in the past summer edition of the *Educational Record: the Magazine of Higher Education*, an essay entitled "The Humanities, the Universities, and Public Policy," in which he directs attention to "the humanists' task to educate each generation about the intellectual, spiritual, moral and political birthright to which it is heir . . ." Even the quality of government in these United States, Mr. Bennett proposes, depends on the flow of public policy from moral and spiritual values.¹ I invite you to consider with me such values as they are represented in literature of the past and present, and to share with me perspectives on the enduring relevance of literature to the human business of living, loving and aging.

But first we must acknowledge what appears to be the reason for the diminished emphasis on moral and spiritual values in contemporary education. Those of us who teach the humanities might confess to a degree of disquietude concerning the very status of our course offerings because we know that for more than a century courses in science and technology have seemed to hold the preeminent place in the curricula of institutions of higher learning. And in the final decades of the present century not only does the conflict between scientific and humanistic goals for higher education remain unresolved; but the issues implicit in the conflict, I believe, are of even more consequence than they were at the end of the nineteenth century.

Matthew Arnold, in an essay entitled "Literature and Science," which was presented as a lecture in 1883 during the writer's American tour, stated confidently that humane letters were not "in much danger of being thrust out from their leading place in education, in spite of the array of authorities against them . . ." So long as human nature is what it is, their attractions will remain irresistible." Although Arnold believed that other matters would be "crowded into education" and that there would follow "perhaps a period of unsettlement and confusion and false tendency," he held firm in his persuasion that in the end the humane letters would not lose their leading place.

If they lose it for a time, they will get it back again.
We shall be brought back to them by our wants and aspirations. And a poor humanist may possess his soul in patience . . . and still have a happy faith that the nature of things works silently on behalf of the studies which he loves, and that, while we shall all have to acquaint ourselves with the great results reached by modern science, and to give ourselves as much training in its disciplines as we can conveniently carry, yet the majority of men will always require humane letters; and so much

the more, as they have the more and greater results of science to relate to the need in man for conduct, and to the need in him for beauty.²

While we may wish for the vindication of Arnold's prognosis, we can no longer, I think, share his confidence. In the end, however, I wonder if it really matters much whether or not science and technology exceed the belles lettres in alleged importance in the curriculum. The fact remains that literature has long held, and continues to hold, a place of signal importance in the curriculum simply because it proffers us practical instruction in the conduct of our lives. Matthew Arnold was quite right in affirming that the permanent appeal of the humane letters is assured because they address themselves to the deepest needs and aspirations of the heart.

We do not, of course, overlook the astonishing achievements of science and technology during the past century; the fact that we have been able to harness (if not bridle) nuclear energy, that we can travel to any part of the globe in a matter of hours, that we have journeyed to the moon, that we have annihilated certain dreaded diseases testify abundantly to the immense worth of science. But such accomplishments have not only failed to release modern man from spiritual malaise; if anything, they appear to have made him more acutely aware of his moral and spiritual impoverishment, of his need-as Arnold put it-for conduct, and of his need for beauty.

The predominant materialistic, atheistic, and existential intellectual stance of the 1980s was anticipated a century ago by Arnold as well as by some of his contemporaries, including Thomas Hardy. Arnold, for example, strikes an inexorably melancholy note in "Dover Beach" when he tells us that

... the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

Thomas Hardy is equally devastating when he describes "An aged thrush, frail, gaunt, and small," who in the face of growing gloom, sang an ecstatic song which might have made the poet think (were he less knowledgeable) that

... there trembled through
His happy good-night air
Some blessed Hope, whereof he knew
And I [that is, the poet] was unaware.

The twentieth century has relentlessly confirmed these Victorians' assessment of man's plight; and the philosophy implicit in such poems as these has perpetuated in us feelings of alienation and isolation more poignant, perhaps, than in any previous period of human history.

On the Supersession of Humanism

What I have described as the malaise of modern man can be largely attributed, I believe, to the loss of religious faith subsequent to the early sixteenth century. The Renaissance marked the demise of scholasticism, with its purblind acceptance of established authority-particularly the authority of the Old and New testament scriptures, and the rise of humanism, with its spirit of skepticism and intellectual inquiry. No longer certain of the firm foundation of Christian faith-nor persuaded by the medieval view expressed by Egeus in Chaucer's Knight's Tale that

This world nys but a thurghfare ful of wo
And we been pilgrymes, passynge to and fro
(This world is but a thoroughfare full of woe,
And we are pilgrims passing to and fro);

and being still less sure that the point of man's terrestrial pilgrimage is preparation for dessert in heaven, post- Renaissance man had to begin to look within himself for meaning, for the answers to his soul's questions.

In his essay on "Poetry and Crisis," which first appeared in 1938, Martin Turnell reminds us that prior to the Renaissance "Man was living in a clearly defined universe with a heaven above and a hell beneath. The poet was a member of a community united by a common faith. He had a common subject matter-the visible world as given in sense experience and the invisible world defined by faith." Turnell proposes that "it is precisely the certainty, not only about the existence, but also about the goodness of the created world, that accounts for one of the principal differences between medieval and modern poetry." He then proceeds to compare passages from two representative poems, the one medieval, the other modern, which illustrate his point. The first of these is the opening lines of the General Prologue to Chaucer's Canterbury Tales:

Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote
The droghthe of March hath perced to the roote,
And bathed every veyne in swich licour
Of which vertu engendred is the flour;
Whan Zephirus eek with his sweet breeth
Inspired hath in every holt and heeth
The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne
Hath in the Ram his halve cours yronne,
And smale foweles maken melodye,
That slepen al the nyght with open yè
(So priketh hem nature in hir corages),--
Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages,
And palmeres for to seken straunge strondes,
To ferne halwes, knowthe in sondry londes;
And specially from every shires ende
Of Engelond to Canterbury they wende,
The hooly blisful martir for to seke,
That hem hath holpen whan that they were seeke.

The author of "Poetry and Crisis" notes that the "spontaneous joy" of Chaucer in external nature, and the harmony and stability implicit in his reflection of the advent of spring, contrast sharply with the morose, even morbid mood which characterizes the opening lines of T.S. Eliot's "The Wasteland."

April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain,
Winter kept us warm, covering

Earth in a forgetful snow, feeding
A little life with dried tubers. . . .

Essentially, as Turnell notes, Chaucer rejoices in something possessed, whereas Eliot is overwhelmed by a sense of something irrevocably lost.³

We may adduce another example from a lesser-known modern poet whose lines suggest a further dimension of restlessness, even bitterness. The poem is "Spring," by Edna St. Vincent Millay.

To what purpose, April, do you return again?
Beauty is not enough.
You can no longer quiet me with the redness
Of little leaves opening stickily.
I know what I know.
The sun is hot on my neck as I observe
The spikes of the crocus.
The smell of the earth is good.
It is apparent that there is no death.
But what does that signify?
Not only under ground are the brains of men
Eaten by maggots.
Life in itself
Is nothing.
An empty cup, a flight of uncarpeted stairs,
It is not enough that yearly, down this hill,
April
Comes like an idiot, babbling and strewing flowers.

It is evident that in Millay's poem we have come a long way indeed from Chaucer's resolute faith in divine purpose. Modern men and women do not possess the blessed assurance that God over-rules in the affairs of individuals and of mankind collectively that is reflected in the literature of the Middle Ages. We do not, in submission to the will of God, repeat with Alighieri Dante the memorable line from the *Paradiso*: *e la sue voluntate e nostra pace* (And your will is our peace).

However, in spite of lost religious moorings which resulted in the fragmentation of poetry subsequent to the Renaissance, we can find in the later poetry, as in the poetry of the Middle Ages, sustenance for the soul, ideas and images which can meet our need for right conduct and our need for beauty. We cannot all believe with Matthew Arnold that poetry will one day replace religion. But those who have weighed traditional religion in the balance and found it wanting, may, in a sense, find a surrogate in poetry; for truth is wherever you find it. Perspicuous poets have been lending their minds out to us for centuries. It is ours to appropriate what they have to offer us for right conduct, and for beauty.

On Living

What, then, does literature have to say about the conduct of our lives? Are the ethics of the past really relevant to the present? If they are, to what extent are they relevant? We can attempt to answer these questions by noting a few examples, although one can hardly hope in an hour's address to do more than merely suggest some of the possibilities for discovering moral and spiritual values in literature.

First, I call your attention to "The Battle of Maldon," translated from the West Saxon dialect of Old English. The retreat of many English warriors has resulted in certain defeat for the stalwart commander Birhtnoth. But the hero boldly exhorts those who have stood fast in the fight with these words:

Purpose shall be the firmer, heart the keener,
courage shall be the more, as our might lessens.

Two further examples of medieval values are represented in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, a poem written by an anonymous poet in the difficult dialect of England's Northwest Midlands—a poem which is, by consensus, the finest among the Middle English Romances. Sir Gawain instructs us in truth and in courtesy. Truth (*troth* in Middle English) has to do with commitment—, that is, with faithfulness to one's given word; and courtesy (*curteisye*) is associated with multifarious virtues which define true nobility. The setting of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is King Arthur's Court at Camelot. While the noble company of knights and ladies are assembled for a Christmas feast, a stranger knight of impressive physical stature, one bedecked in green from head to toe, challenges Arthur's knights to a Christmas game. He asks for a volunteer to come forward and chop his head off. Sir Gawain accepts the challenge, whereupon the Green Knight elicits a promise from Gawain that he will seek out the challenger a year and a day hence to receive a return blow. In spite of the anguish of the entire court, Sir Gawain sets out on All Hallow's Day to keep his oath.

It was unthinkable that St. Mary's knight should not be faithful to his plighted troth even in the face of death. His journey in North Wales in search of the Green Chapel to which he was directed brought him on Christmas Day within sight of a great castle, where he was welcomed by the lord of the castle, his lady, and an old woman. In spite of the fact that the lord of the castle has planned three days of hunting, he nevertheless invites Gawain to remain in the castle with the lady. And he further proposes an exchange of winnings: Each is to present to the other what he has won on each of three successive days. On the first day the lady of the castle attempts to seduce Gawain, but he accepts only the favor of a kiss. When the lord returns after the first day's hunt, he presents the young knight with a deer; and Gawain responds with one kiss. Again on the second day the lady tries to force her attentions on Gawain but succeeds only in giving him two kisses. That evening Gawain receives the prize of a boar; and the lord, two kisses from Gawain. Although on the third day the lady is more ardent still in demonstrating her affections, Gawain remains steadfastly chaste. But in addition to the three kisses he receives from the lady of the castle, he also accepts the gift of a magic girdle which she promises will protect him from death when he meets the Green Knight to receive the return blow. The temptation was great, for Gawain loved his life; he accepts the baldric. When the lord returns from the chase on that third night, Gawain gives him three kisses, but he ignominiously fails to render the prize of the girdle. New Year's Day arrives and Gawain must go to meet his fate at the Green Chapel. Twice he flinches as the axe begins to fall on his head; but he steels himself to receive the third blow, the result of which is nothing more than a nick on the neck. The Green Knight reveals his identity: he is Sir Bercilak de Hautdesert, the lord of the castle where Gawain had been entertained. The old hag, Morgan-le-Fay, vindictive fairy sister of King Arthur, was responsible for the shape-shifting of the lord of the castle. The purpose of the plot was to bring shame upon Arthur's court.

Gawain emerges as a champion of *curteisye*—he had not betrayed the trust of the lord of the castle by making a cuckold of him; and as a champion of *troth*—he proved faithful to his given word. However, he was not perfect. He had received a gift of a girdle which he failed to acknowledge. And, to make matters worse, he took the girdle only because of fear for his life. Gawain turned from trust in God to dependence upon magic. His transgression, however trifling it may have seemed to fellow knights at Camelot who only laughed about it, troubled Gawain deeply. But through his small failure he learned the lessons of contrition and humility.

The word *curteisye* is closely associated with another Middle English word, *gentillesse*, a term defined for us by the old hag in Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Tale*. This story, like *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, also has its setting in Arthur's court at Camelot. A handsome young knight has been found guilty of rape and is sentenced to die. But the queen, influenced by the weeping of the ladies of the court, commutes the sentence. The knight may save his life if, within a year and a day, he can find the answer to the question, What do women most desire? The youth inquires near and far but becomes quite disheartened by the variety of answers. They include wealth and treasure, jollity and pleasure, gorgeous clothes, fun in bed, many husbands, freedom to do as one pleases. Since no two women agree on the answer—and because his period of grace has nearly expired—the knight begins his journey back to court with sorrow and apprehension. On the way he meets a loathsome old hag who, on condition that the knight do the next thing she requires of him, whispers in his ear the answer to his question. With a spring in his step the knight returns to recite his answer to the queen. The thing that women most

desire, he tells her, is sovereignty in marriage. The entire court rejoices because the knight has saved his life by giving the correct answer. But the old hag makes a sudden appearance and tells the queen that it was she who supplied the knight with the answer to the question. The man, she avowed, had agreed to do the next thing she required of him. Her requirement is that he marry her. The knight, non-plused, cries out, "Take all my goods, but leave my body free." In the end, he must keep his word. The wedding night was heavy.

Great was the anguish churning in his head
When he and she were piloted to bed;
He wallowed back and forth in desperate style.
His ancient wife lay smiling all the while;
At last she said 'Bless us! Is this, my dear,
How knights and wives get on together here?
Are these the laws of good King Arthur's house?
Are knights of his all so contemptuous? 4

When the unhappy knight tells the hag that nothing can be put right between them because she is low-bred, poor, old and ugly, the woman responds with a lengthy discourse on gentillesse. True nobility, she declares, has nothing to do with who our parents are: "Gentle is he that does a gentle deed." With respect to her poverty, she argues that God himself chose a life of poverty. Besides, she says,

The truly poor are they who whine and fret
And covet what they cannot hope to get.
And he that, having nothing, covets not,
Is rich, though you may think he is a sot.

To amplify her argument, the hag quotes the Latin poet Juvenal:

The poor can sing and dance in the relief
Of having nothing that will tempt a thief.

As far as her age and ugliness are concerned, she tells him,

You need not fear to be a cuckold then.
Filth and old age. I'm sure you will agree,
Are powerful wardens upon chastity.

Upon concluding her speech, the old woman gives the knight two choices: to have her old and ugly, but faithful as a wife; or young and beautiful, but unfaithful. The decision is much too difficult for the young man, and he wisely defers to her judgment. "And have I won the mastery?" she asks. She has indeed; and she rewards the knight by transforming herself into a beautiful young lady and by satisfying his worldly appetites. Curteisye, and gentillesse, then, have nothing to do with externals. True nobility derives from the inner man and is recognized by courteous behavior, independent of an individual's family connections, wealth, youth, or good looks. The transformation of a fellow human being may, quite possibly, be dependent upon our removal of the blinders obstructing our vision, or upon our having enough imagination to recognize our ideal in an unfamiliar, even ugly, form.

Still another value is reflected in the poetry of Shelley and of Browning: Shelley, in "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty," by way of explaining the reason why ideal beauty is not in permanent residence with mortal men and women, makes clear the value of the struggle of life, as such. Did we not have to strive to attain our goals, we would be bereft of the very reason for our being. Addressing the Spirit of Beauty, the poet says,

Love, Hope, and Self-esteem, like clouds depart
And come, for some uncertain moments lent.
Man were immortal, and omnipotent,
Didst thou, unknown and awful as thou art,
Keep with thy glorious train firm state within his heart.

Browning, English poet of a subsequent generation, echoes Shelley's doctrine of the worth of the quest itself, without respect, necessarily, to the achievement of goals. The important factor is purpose, or determination. Four brief passages from the dramatic monologues reinforce the argument. The first appears in "Rabbi Ben Ezra":

What I aspired to be,
And was not, comforts me.

Success in life, the lines suggest, is measured by aspiration, not by accomplishment. "Andrea del Sarto" tells us that

. . . a man's reach should exceed his grasp,
Or what's a heaven for?

And David, the shepherd boy, as he recounts the story of his playing his harp before the troubled King of Israel, utters these words in the monologue entitled "Saul":

What stops my despair?
This-tis not what man Does which exalts him,
but what man Would do!

Finally, a student bearing the body of a schoolmaster in the poem called "A Grammarian's Funeral," eulogizes the pedant thus:

The purpose and determination of the dedicated scholar-professor are exemplary indeed, regardless of the degree of merit we may assign to the assiduous pursuit of the complexities of Greek grammar. The grammarian's apparent failure merely camouflages his high success.

To illustrate further what Browning means when he tells us that a man's reach should exceed his grasp, we may look to lines from Alexander Pope's "Essay on Criticism." The image, framed in heroic couplets, has to do with intellectual ambition-the pursuit of knowledge. We climb the lofty Alpine peak and are amazed to discover at the summit that we have merely reached a vantage point from which to view the next mountain height. Pope declares,

A little learning is a dangerous thing;
Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian spring.
There shallow draughts intoxicate the brain,
And drinking largely sobers us again.
Fired at first sight with what the Muse imparts,
In fearless youth we tempt the heights of arts,
While from the bounded level of our mind

Short views we take, nor see the lengths behind;
But more advanced, behold with strange surprise
New distant scenes of endless science rise!
So pleased at first the towering alps we try,
Mount o'er the vales, and seem to tread the sky.
The eternal snows appear already past,
And the first clouds and mountains seem the last;
But, those attained, we tremble to survey
The growing labors of the lengthened way,
The increasing prospect tires our wandering eyes,
Hills peep o'er hills, and Alps on Alps arise!

Alfred, Lord Tennyson, in a quite different figure of speech, suggests the same illimitable bounds of knowledge and experience in "Ulysses."

I am part of all that I have met;
Yet all experience is an arch wherethrough
Gleams that untraveled world whose margin fades
Forever and forever when I move.

Before shifting our attention from ethics to esthetics, with reference to the conduct of our lives, I suggest one additional personal virtue: the willingness to take risks. "Curiosity," by Alastair Reid, speaks for itself.

Curiosity

may have killed the cat; more likely
the cat was just unlucky, or else curious
to see what death was like, having no cause
to go on licking paws, or fathering
litter on litter of kittens, predictably.
Nevertheless, to be curious
is dangerous enough. To distrust
what is always said, what seems,
to ask old questions, interfere in dreams,
leave home, smell rats, have hunches
do not endear cats to those doggy circles
where well-smelt baskets, suitable wives, good
lunches
are the order of things, and where prevails
much wagging of incurious heads and tails.

Face it. Curiosity
will not cause us to die-
only lack of it will.
Never to want to see
the other side of the hill
or that improbable country
where living is an idyll
(although a probable hell)
would kill us all.
Only the curious
have, if they live, a tale
worth telling at all.

Dogs say cats love too much, are irresponsible,
are changeable, marry too many wives,
desert their children, chill all dinner tables

with tales of their nine lives.
Well, they are lucky. Let them be
nine-lived and contradictory,
curious enough to change, prepared to pay
the cat price, which is to die
and die again and again,
each time with no less pain.
A cat minority of one
is all that can be counted on
to tell the truth. And what cats have to tell
on each return from hell
is this: that dying is what the living do,
that dying is what the loving do, and
that dead dogs are those who do not know
that dying is what, to live, each has to do.

Besides giving us direction in matters of personal comportment, literature teaches us response to natural beauty. If our days, to borrow Wordsworth's phrase, are, in fact, "bound each to each by natural piety" (by which the poet means that if each day of our lives is characterized by appreciation of natural beauty), our lives will indeed be richer and fuller. Wordsworth recognized the danger in an industrial society of man's losing touch with nature. In one of his best-known sonnets, he indicts the materialism of his age and reminds us that the compensation in terms of things for the sacrifice of natural beauty is most inadequate. Evoking images of the sea nymphs Proteus and Triton as symbolic representatives of the primitive beauty of earth, Wordsworth declares that he would surrender the amenities of modern living if, by so doing, he could recover the ineffable loss of the joy that nature is capable of inducing in us.

The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;
Little we see in Nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!
The Sea that bares her bosom to the moon,
The winds that will be howling at all hours,
And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers,
For this, for everything, we are out of tune;
It moves us not.-Great God! I'd rather be
A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn;
So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;
Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;
Or hear old Triton blow his wreathed horn.

In the same spirit-that is, acknowledging the surpassing value of spiritual treasures over material ones-Sara Teasdale enjoins us, in a poem called "Barter," to "Spend all (we) have for loveliness," for "Life has loveliness to sell." And Edna St. Vincent Millay reveals a deeply sensitive response to natural beauty in a lyric which she entitles "God's World": the measure of beauty the world offers her is almost more than she can bear.

O world, I cannot hold thee close enough!
Thy winds, thy wide gray skies!
Thy mists that roll and rise!
Thy woods, this autumn day, that ache and sag
And all but cry with color! That gaunt crag
To crush! To lift the lean of that black bluff!
World, world, I cannot get thee close enough!
Long have I known a glory in it all,
But never knew I this;
Here such a passion is
As stretcheth me apart. Lord I do fear
Thou'st made the world too beautiful this year.
My soul is all but out of me,-let fall
No burning leaf; prithee, let no bird call.

The ecstasy which loveliness summons us to experience is emphatic in these lines from Browning's "Saul":

On Loving

But beauty, however much it may minister to the deepest needs of the human heart, is clearly not enough; we need love. In another moving composition of Sara Teasdale's ("Spring Night") the author describes the exquisite beauty of the park with its "drowsy lights along the paths/ . . . dim and pearly." The "misty lake" is "gold and gleaming," and its "mirrored lights like sunken swords,/Glimmer and shake." In the two concluding stanzas she queries,

Oh, is it not enough to be
Here with this beauty over me?
My throat should ache with praise, and I
Should kneel in joy beneath the sky.
O beauty, are you not enough?
Why am I crying after love?
With youth, a singing voice, and eyes
To take earth's wonder with surprise?

Why have I put off my pride,
Why am I unsatisfied,-
I, for whom the pensive night
Binds her cloudy hair with light,-
I, for whom all beauty burns
Like incense in a million urns?
O beauty, are you not enough?
Why am I crying after love?

The question why may be unanswerable; the yearning is simply there. But literature does provide help with the answer how. I recently heard a therapist-counselor proclaim on a television program that our loving living is in proportion to our living loving-that is, to our living as loving persons. However, we can only learn to love others if we first have learned to love ourselves. This I take to be the meaning of the second great commandment, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Self-love involves self acceptance and self-dependence. Arnold, in a poem bearing the title "Self-Dependence," describes a view of sea and stars from the prow of a vessel. He implores stars and waters to renew the "mighty charm" he once felt in his heart because of their power to calm and compose him. The answer comes to the poet through the night air:

"Wouldst thou be as these are? Live as they.
Unaffrighted by the silence round them,
Undistracted by the sights they see,
These demand not that the things without them
Yield them love, amusement, sympathy.

"And with joy the stars perform their shining,
And the sea its long moon-silvered roll;
For self-poised they live, nor pine with noting
All the fever of some differing soul.

"Bounded by themselves, and unregardful
In what state God's other works may be,

In their own tasks all their powers pouring,
These attain the mighty life you see."

O air-borne voice! long since, severely clear,
A cry like thine in mine own heart I hear:
"Resolve to be thyself, and know that he
Who finds himself loses his misery!"

Finding ourselves, loving ourselves, is what makes it possible for us to extend love to others.

Of course, loving another person is not so simple a thing as Christopher Marlowe's shepherd represents it to be in the celebrated pastoral lyric, entitled "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love." The youthful speaker proposes unpretentiously,

Come live with me and be my love,
And we will all the pleasures prove
That valleys, groves, hills, and fields,
Woods, or steepy mountain yields.

Sharing together the delights of nature may be enough to influence the lady to move in with the lad and be his love. But cohabitation in itself hardly guarantees the lovers' felicity.

We do, however, discover in "The Ecstasy," a seventeenth century poem by John Donne, the paragon of love—a love which first joins minds and souls together. The spiritual union being so firm, then, that "no change can invade" the new soul made of the two separate souls of the lovers, the poet asks, ". . . so long, so far/ Our bodies why do we forbear?" It is right that . . . "pure lovers' souls descend/ T'affections, and to faculties/ Which sense may reach and apprehend . . ." The physical consummation of a spiritual union is here represented as it is: the ultimate in human love.

Perhaps the sublimest statement of the nature of true love is Shakespeare's Sonnet 116, the theme of which is, true love is eternal.

Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments. Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove,
O no! it is an ever-fixed mark
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
It is the star to every wandering bark,
Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.
Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
Within his bending sickle's compass come;
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.
If this be error and upon me proved,
I never writ, nor no man ever loved.

On Aging

Literature can teach us not only how to live and how to love; it can instruct us, too, in how to grow old with grace and with joy. Browning's Rabbi, whose monologue we alluded to earlier, begins his discourse with the lines

Grow old along with me!
The best is yet to be,
The last of life, for which the first was made;
Our times are in His hand
Who saith, "A whole I planned,
Youth shows but half; trust God: see all nor be afraid!"

We can be confident that the last half of life will be the better half only if we resolve that it will be so. "An aged man," says William Butler Yeats,

. . . is but a paltry thing,
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless
Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing
For every tatter in its mortal dress . . .

The soul of man or woman, "fastened to a dying animal," can only clap its hands and sing if he or she has received instruction in singing. And the only "singing school" is the study of "Monuments of [the soul's] own magnificence." In other words, the creative arts are the source of joy in later years. Our mind, or soul, is attached to a moribund physical organism (a tattered coat upon a stick) unless we have learned to share in the great intellectual and artistic accomplishments of our species: "And therefore," explains the speaker of the lines, "I have sailed the seas and come/ To the holy City of Byzantium." The more we succumb to bodily weaknesses, the greater becomes our need to draw upon the magnificent resources of art. It is the resources of art in general, and of literature in particular—that is, the exploration of the "Monuments of unaging intellect" of which Yeats speaks—which empower us in our declining years to pursue new dimensions of intellectual experience with ever greater pleasure and satisfaction.

John Keats, perplexed like the rest of us by "the paradox of earth cradling life and then entombing it,"⁵ suggests a resolution of the question of death in his ode "To Autumn," written in 1819, just two years before he was to die of tuberculosis at the age of twenty-six. This poet rejoices in the season of autumn for its own sake. Recalling the many voices raised in praise of spring, but discovering serene loveliness in the season of harvest-harbinger though it be of winter and death—Keats asks,

Where are the songs of spring? Ay, where are they?
Think not of them, thou hast thy music too . . .

Surely Keats, who projected a view of himself as "a sick eagle looking at the sky,"⁶ knew that he possessed great talent and that he had little time left to exercise it. But he achieved in his poetry a reconciliation of the opposites of pleasure and pain, of joy and sorrow, and of life and death. It is prescribed that we cannot have the one without the other: death is the concomitant of life.

In his early work a disciple of Keats, Lord Tennyson reminds us in "Ulysses"—and this is my final example— that although "Death closes all," it remains that "Old age hath yet his honor and his toil." Addressing himself to his fellow mariners, Ulysses says,

How dull it is to pause, to make an end,
To rust unburnished, not to shine in use!
As though to breathe were life!
Life piled on life Were all too little, and of one to me Little remains; but every hour is saved
From that eternal silence, something more,
A bringer of new things; and vile it were
For some three suns to store and hoard myself,
And this gray spirit yearning in desire
To follow knowledge like a sinking star,
Beyond the utmost bound of human thought

....
Come my friends,
'Tis not too late to seek a newer world

....
Though much is taken, much abides; and though
We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are-
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

What has been offered here is a small sampling of the works of English and American writers who, through their artistic medium, have mirrored universal values, moral and spiritual. We must give attention to these values if we are to realize the good life-if we are to meet the need within us, individually and collectively, for right conduct, and for beauty.

NOTES

1. See 62 (1981): 30-34.
2. Gerald B. Kauver and Gerald C. Sorensen, eds., *The Victorian Mind* (New York, 1969), pp. 34-51.
3. In Nathan A. Scott, Jr., *The New Orpheus: Essays Toward a Christian Poetic* (New York, 1964), pp. 305-327.
4. Translations cited from *The Canterbury Tales in Modern English* by Nevill Coghill. *Geoffrey Chaucer: The Canterbury Tales* (Penguin Book, 1959).
5. From Carl Sandburg's definition of poetry in Louis Untermeyer, *Poetry: Its Appreciation and Enjoyment* (New York, 1934), p. 11.
6. "On Seeing the Elgin Marbles."