

ENJOYMENT OF POETRY

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Enjoyment of Poetry by Max Eastman

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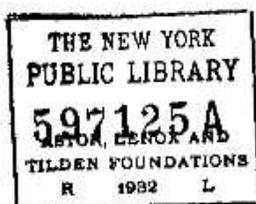
MAX EASTMAN

FORMERLY ASSOCIATE IN PHILOSOPHY AT COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY, AUTHOR
OF "COLORS OF LIFE—POEMS AND SONGS AND SONNETS,"
"JOURNALISM VERSUS ART," ETC.

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PREFACE AND SUMMARY

THE purpose of this book is to increase enjoyment. That the poetic in every-day perception and conversation should be known for what it is, and not separated from the poetic in literature, is to my mind essential to the full appreciation of either. And that poetry in general should be cut off from those unhealthy associations that a leisure-class decadence has given to the word, is of value to the enterprise of enjoying life.

I have drawn the distinction between the poetic and the practical as it appears in my own experience, with little respect for academic or literary classifications. In this way I believed I should stay closer to my chief purpose; I should also be more likely to contribute to scientific truth.

It seems to me that a study of books must be either science—that is, the chemistry and physics of their make-up, and the psychology of their author and his readers—or else history, an account of the general conditions and consequence of their production. Otherwise it is practically nothing at all. And most of what we call "lit-

erary" comment and criticism is indeed neither science nor history. I hope that my book will promote a tendency away from this kind of exercise.

A misfortune incident to all education is the fact that those who elect to be teachers are scholars. They esteem knowledge not for its use in attaining other values, but as a value in itself; and hence they put an undue emphasis upon what is formal and nice about it, leaving out what is less pleasing to the instinct for classification but more needful to the art of life. This misfortune is especially heavy in the study of literature. Indeed, the very separation of the study of literature from that of the subjects it deals with, suggests the barren and formal character of it. As usually taught for three years to postgraduates in our universities, it is not worth spending three weeks upon. The best lovers of literature know this, and the academic world will some day know it and will cast about for a real science which they may teach to those who are going to read literature to the young. That science will be psychology in its widest sense. For psychology is a knowledge that is general without being merely formal. It will reveal and explain, not the scholastic conventions about literary structure, nor the verbiage of commentators, but the substantial

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values that are common to the material of all literature. I hope that my book may add impetus to this change in education.

Perhaps, also, by emphasizing the fact that things are, and continue to be, what the poet calls them, whatever else they may be or be named by the scientist, it will add some strength to that affirmatively sceptical philosophy upon which it is founded.

But these aims are all secondary. The chief purpose is to extend to others the service of a distinction which has made the world more enjoyable to me.

In chapter one I have shown how this distinction first appears in the attitudes of different people, or the same people in different moods, toward their experience—toward actions, things, emotions, images, ideas. I have shown that the poetic attitude prevails in childhood.

In chapter two I have shown how the distinction appears wherever names are newly applied, in the origin and growth of language, in slang, in expletives, in conversation, in books, and in the disputes of metaphysics.

In chapter three I have pointed out the two acts, choice and comparison, which are discoverable in every new application of a name, and dis-

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tinguished practical choice and comparison from poetic.

In chapter four I have explained why choice and why comparison assist the poetic impulse, the impulse to realize.

In chapter five I have shown that realization is often more poignant in the absence than in the presence of things.

In chapter six I have explained how choice and comparison appear in pure poetry, which is the verbal realization of things in their absence, and in poetic discourse. I have related the "figures of speech," so called, to the common poetic use of modifiers, they all being examples either of choice or comparison.

In chapter seven I have shown what I believe to be the primitive and basic relation of rhythm to the mood of realization.

In chapters eight, nine, ten, and eleven I have explained in detail how the technique of poetry applies to the realization of distinguishable elements in imagined experience—actions, things, emotions, ideas. I have introduced examples of poetry that has given me the greatest enjoyment, and I have illustrated the application of psychological, instead of rhetorical, concepts to its analysis.

In chapter twelve I have set forth values which

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poetry may have, not as a realization of other things, but as a thing to be realized for itself. I have done this briefly, because it contributes little to what is already contained in other books.

In chapter thirteen I have related the knowledge of poetry to the art of enjoying it. I have dwelt separately upon the poetry of experience and that of imagination through language, and I have stated that the best path to the enjoyment of the latter lies through the creation of it.

In chapter fourteen I have given the general principles that I think relate to the creation of rhythmical English.

In chapter fifteen I have praised poetry for its practical value, pointing out both its accidental value as an enhancer of meanings, and the value that pertains to its own essence. I have suggested that the latter will increase in proportion as we draw more perfectly the line between knowledge and mythology, and compel ourselves to resort for exaltation to an enthusiastic welcome of the world as it is or as it may be, and for religion to a consciousness of the final mystery of its being.