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Mark Van Doren on Great Poems of Western Literature

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About the Author

One of America's most distinguished men of letters, Mark Van Doren has won a large and appreciative audience for his novels, his poetry, and his criticism. In 1940, he won the Pulitzer Prize for his *Collected Poems;* this was followed by his brilliant narrative poem, *The Mayfield Deer*. He has been a professor of English at Columbia University since 1942, and has also taught at St. John's College and the New School for Social Research.

MARK VAN DOREN ON GREAT POEMS OF WESTERN LITERATURE

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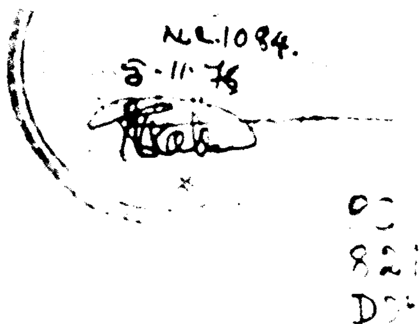

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To

CHARLES VAN DOREN

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Preface

THE NOBLE VOICE of Calliope, whom Hesiod called chiefest of the Muses, has sounded steadily since Homer. It has not sounded all of the time, but whenever it has sounded it has given strength to those through whom it spoke. It is the source of great poetry—of great story—and as such it is the subject of this book. Among the nine sons of Calliope whom I consider there are only three who do not name her. These are Byron, Wordsworth, and Homer himself. But the omission does not matter. It is she who makes them ambitious, and it is her voice which with varying success all nine are trying to match.

Their ten long poems, for Homer of course has two, are discussed in ten chapters which the reader is at liberty to take in any order he pleases; but I should prefer that he follow mine, for my subject is single, and this is the order in which I found it developing itself. Chronology is observed, but under categories that interest me more than the history of poetry, if there is such a thing, has ever done. The first four poems are epic, the next three are philosophical, the two after that are comic, and the last one is modern. This is a makeshift classification, particularly in the case of Wordsworth's poem with which I close, but I leave its defense to the chapters themselves, which will show how little or much the labels mean. They overlap from poet to poet, and they are interchangeable at times. But I must not anticipate my text.

The book has three heroes: Homer, Dante, and Chaucer. With them, that is, I find no fault; nor would I with Shakespeare if he were here. He is not here because he is a dramatic poet, and because I have discussed him in another book. In the six who remain I have thought it important to explain as best I could a relative failure. It is only relative, but that

does not make it unreal. A lack of candor toward the realities of poetry seems to me the capital crime in criticism, and so nothing can prevent me from saying, for instance, that Milton in my judgment does not wholly succeed. The legend that he does is the worst enemy of his reputation. We should love him for what he is, and for that alone; and so with Virgil, Lucretius, Spenser, Byron, Wordsworth. They are great, or they would not deserve our candor. They would not have survived, even, to invite it.

The nine poets seemed susceptible to treatment in a single volume not because they had a single subject or were conscious of a common enterprise. Chronology permitting, they refer to one another a good deal, and they share such themes as sin, courtesy, and peace; but that is not it either. Their merit as subject matter, quite apart from their intrinsic glory, is that they offer a perspective through poetry which nothing else can give. To know them is the only conceivable way of knowing what poetry can be, and is the only practical way of accumulating the nerve necessary for judgment. I do not suppose that all of my judgments are right, but I can claim that I have formed them in the most generous perspective available. To be satisfied with less than this much perspective is not to be sure that one is talking as much sense as one can.

What is a given poem about? What happens in it? What exists in it? If too little of the world is in it, why is that? If all of the world is there, by what miracle has this been done? Is tragedy or comedy at work, and what is the difference between those two, and what the resemblance? Are the facts of life accounted for in the unique way that poetry accounts for them, and is this poem something therefore that any man should read? Does its author know more, not less, than most men know? Such seem to me the great questions, though they are not regularly asked by criticism. A commoner question has to do with how the poem was written, in what style, and whether well or ill. It is better, I believe, to ask how the poem was conceived—with what wisdom the poet made those silent decisions which precede the composition of a single line. It is hard to find answers, and mine may be wrong in every case. But I confess that I have been am-

bitious in the endeavor, for I take poetry at its best to be a useful and a beautiful thing.

I am not an expert in any of these poems. I should like to be an expert in them all, considering them as one; but I do not make the claim. My approach is professional—or, as some experts would put it, amateur. I have not studied any poem, that is, to the exclusion of the rest. Those who do so study Homer or Dante or Milton are very valuable persons, but there are practical questions which they never attempt to answer. The difference between their poet and some other—they see it from one side, and so may not see it at all. I have tried to make these poems comment on one another as in fact I think they do. For they inhabit the same world, and stand or fall by the report of it they give. To be an expert in them all would be to have a perfect knowledge of the world. I do not make the claim.

I am content with the certainty that by most readers half of these poems will be read in translation. That is how I have read them myself, and that is how I have quoted them. It is an interesting fact that Homer wrote in Greek, but what anybody may find in him is vastly more interesting. Nobody fails to find in him, below the level of sound and style, the things that prove him a great poet. Nothing so clearly proves him one as that he survives translation. His structure, his story, is still evident and powerful; and this is true even when his English translator has used prose. I prefer prose translations in general, and only in the case of Lucretius have used verse: the verse of William Ellery Leonard, through which I first made the Roman's acquaintance. The translation I use is in each case the one I know best, nor would I defend it further. But I so much believe in translation that I have not scrupled to quote Chaucer in the modern English of Professor Krapp; and I have gone back to George Gilfillan's edition of Spenser because it is as free as possible of the antique orthography which keeps so many readers away from *The Faerie Queene*. I have removed every such handicap that I could, in the faith that no superfluous barrier should exist between the reader and the work. If I could do so without seeming wayward I would suggest that the reader imagine he was going through all of the English poems in translation.

Milton would thus be deprived of his famous style, but the result might be as edifying as it is in the case of Virgil, who without his style confesses his lack of the power to say what Homer in any language says. As for Dante, it never seems to matter how we read him. The immense poet is always there, as Shakespeare is said to be in Russian or Hungarian.

I have not cited book or line for my quotations, because I chose to hope that the reader, if he had not read all of the work in question, might soon do so for himself. If he already has, then he will recognize the quoted fragments. If he has not, he will be free to find a better set. Mine, clearly, are no substitute for the wholes from which they come. The wholes are what this volume has in mind, and they cannot be encountered by too many persons, or too many times.

M. V. D.

New York, 1945

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It is a pleasure to state my obligation to those students of Columbia University and St. John's College who have listened to me lecture on these poems and in ensuing discussions have corrected or improved my understanding of them.

I am especially grateful to Mr. Jacob Klein of St. John's College for suggesting the connection between Virgil and Plato which I consider in the chapter on the *Aeneid*, and for permitting me to benefit as I may from his remarkable insight.

Mark Van Doren on Great Poems of Western Literature

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Chapter 1

The Iliad

HOMER, with Shakespeare at his side, is still the sovereign poet. The phrase is Dante's, who is third in this strict company which excludes all others. Only these three—yet Chaucer is a fourth—are masters of the main art a poet must learn: the art of standing at the right distance from his matter, of keeping the right relation to it, and of using, along with the knowledge he brings, the knowledge he gains while he goes. With the poet, as with the historian, the position he takes is everything, and we shall not believe him unless he maintains it. But whereas the historian's distance must be great enough to permit a survey of the event from a point where its limits in time are always visible, the poet must seem to annihilate both time and distance—we enter the action, we are there as these things happen, we believe because we see and hear and touch. The distinction is not pure. The poet without perspective has no meaning, and the historian who cannot move up to the particulars of his choice, to battles and meetings and the sending and getting of messages, will not be read to the end. But as a distinction it will do. And Homer understood it perfectly.

Homer's scenes, and the incidents that fill them, are beheld as if in a long dream, or as if in memory. They are fiercely present, yet they have the brightness of things removed, of things threatened by darkness and only by miracle recalled. The ideas Homer had, and he may have had all possible ideas, were had in the right way: they did not prevent him from being a complete poet. Nothing prevented him from believing and loving the deeds and men that he saw, exactly as he saw them. This is the secret of his constant, surprising, and intimate power, a power that no successor has matched, so that he is still unique, the one, the only epic poet. The higher criticism of him is misguided, or is misunderstood, if it seems to deny the *identity* of a single artist who twice was

Chapter 2

The Odyssey

THE FIRST TWO SENTENCES of the *Odyssey* are enough to inform us that now we are in another world of poetry. "Tell me, O Muse, of the man of many devices, who wandered full many ways after he had sacked the sacred citadel of Troy. Many were the men whose cities he saw and whose mind he learned, aye, and many the woes he suffered in his heart upon the sea, seeking to win his own life and the return of his comrades." Many devices, many ways, many men, many cities, many minds, many woes, and upon the sea to boot—the view opens and becomes multiple. This world is wide, and there is so much to report about it that Homer cannot decide where to begin. "Of these things, goddess, daughter of Zeus, beginning where thou wilt—at some place or other—tell thou even to us."

Homer does know, of course, where such a tale should start. It is still the finest tale in print, and its author was no fumbler. It concerns itself with the final stage of Odysseus' journey home from Troy, and with his return to Ithaca in a disguise which lasts until all the necessary recognitions are accomplished, including that by the suitors who have infested his house, after which they are promptly dispatched. The beginning is this very house, where Telemachus, the young son whom Odysseus had left there twenty years before as an infant in arms, is stung by his mother Penelope's position—and furthermore is inspired by a visit from Pallas Athene, his father's intimate deity—to set forth in his chariot so that he may find out what he can about the missing wanderer from old Nestor in Pylos and from Menelaus in the hollow land of Lacedaemon with its many ravines. Even while he is absent, learning little, Odysseus is enduring the last of his adventures on an island where he is the comfortable prisoner of the nymph Calypso; whom he leaves, only to be wrecked on the shores of Phaeacia, where he re-

Chapter 3

The Aeneid

VIRGIL'S MELANCHOLY EPIC of one Trojan's escape from the burning city, of his long wanderings westward, and of his building Rome, might seem to be the purest poetry if purity in that art means a close view of things. It does, but Virgil may not see as much as he appears to see. He appears to see every ivory ornament, every clasp and buckle, and to hear every sigh, every modulation in each sad voice that speaks. He appears, even, to enter the hero's mind—concerning which he has a great deal to say—and thus to disappear out of position altogether.

But his poem is not visible, not tangible, as Homer's poems are, and it is not Aeneas' mind we are in. We are in Virgil's. We are among his ideas of how a man doomed to procreate an empire would think, feel, and move if he could move at all under so staggering a burden. In his hero we discover not so much a man as a kind of man: a nation, rather, inching up to its place in history. We discover history. Aeneas, ever aware as he is of his doom, though he calls it his destiny, is unable to exist in any present moment. His image dissipates into perspective, the perspective of Roman and human history. We have all that in view all of the time. The closer we get to the hero's thought the clearer becomes our view of this other thing. The poem is increasingly conscious of being prophecy, the hero of being a symbol, and the poet of being physician to mankind. Homer's secret, whereby he kept a right relation between near and far, between the part and the whole, between free will and fore-knowledge, is utterly lost. It has not been found again. Virgil is the more modern poet, for history in him—history as emotion—is pure and perfect.

The *Aeneid* is lacking in the sort of life that inspires higher criticism. We do not pay it the compliment of refusing to believe that one man wrote it. It exists in literary time. Its

Chapter 4

Paradise Lost

MILTON'S MAGNIFICENT HOPE of adding an English epic to the short list of great ones in the world, of right and successful ones, must be met by those who use his language with more than the pious hope that exactly this is what he did. It must be met with the resolution to review his poem in the ample perspective which he himself invited the world to take: the perspective supplied by Homer and Virgil. To look at *Paradise Lost* down such a vista may mean that an English reader must try to see it shorn of its famous style—famous, that is, with English readers, for its glory is not worldwide. It will be difficult to do this, but unless the attempt is made a reader can scarcely expect to acquire a view of the poem permitting him to compare it with any other epic at all; for there happens to be no English epic that is worthy to be compared with it, and so its rank, if it is to have one, must be found among the foreign poems it so consciously competes against.

So examined, it reveals that in at least one respect it is more Virgilian than Homeric. There are plenty of differences between Milton and the author of the *Aeneid,* but it is true of both that their success is in the arts, rather than the art, of poetry. The art of poetry is an art concerning which little will ever be known except that when it is truly practiced the result is a poem whose force is simple and full. The force of *Paradise Lost* is not simple and not full, however splendid its writer's aim and however impressive the gifts he brings. Its power is not of that compact sort which exhibits itself with equal certitude in the little and the big parts of a work. The sign of a master is that each move he makes is explicit of his entire meaning; that is how he can be at once so generous and so economical, so broad and yet in any part so brief. Such mastery of the poetic art is not possessed by Milton, though he possesses many arts. Like Virgil he makes

Chapter 5

Concerning the Nature of Things

De Rerum Natura. Not the tears of things, as with Virgil, but their nature is the subject that sends Lucretius in search of aid from Calliope, who for him is the "ingenious" Muse. He has no story to tell, no tale within whose folds his subject will more or less lie hidden. He begs us to look upon his subject bare, for itself is the story of all that happens; it explains away other stories, and exposes the illusions which made them seem important; it is all we need to know about whatever can and does occur in a world containing nature and ourselves. It is a story to end story. It is a demonstration, if we will accept it, that tragedy cannot be. It has no hero unless the author is one—a tragic hero, too, considering the intensity of his belief that he at last, and he alone, has hold of the world's secret. But that is still another story, and Lucretius gives no sign of knowing that he tells it.

No poem is more deeply, more madly, penetrated by paradox. No sooner are two of its contradictions suggested than two others suggest themselves. The *De Rerum Natura* is a passionate attack upon passion. And it is a poem whose purpose is to kill poetry.

Feverish with the power of his own feeling, Lucretius hunts through the world he knows for an added power, the power of the poet whom no mortal may resist. For the poetry he must kill is a gigantic thing, and it will take a gigantic force to remove it. So Lucretius invokes every sort of aid from goddesses and muses, and studies the sorcery of every predecessor in his art, with a view to gathering maximum strength for his assault on song, on story, and on the soul. Milton reënforced *Paradise Lost* with all the poetry he could import from the past, but his motive was less strange; he only wanted to beautify a truth which he could not trust without such help to seem substantial. Lucretius has no doubt about his truth, which for him is most substantial when

Chapter 6

The Divine Comedy

THE FULL WEIGHT of Homer's wisdom was delivered in stories of particular persons who did what they did in particular times and places. For Virgil a story was not enough; there had to be an idea, too, and a view of human history. But all of that together did not add up to the one thing, or the two things, Homer sang. Neither was Milton content with the brief, tremendous myth he started with; he loaded it with inventions, and in these inventions it lost some of its original force. Lucretius, superior to story, addressed himself to things; he tried to say what they were made of, and to fix truth so that it would never move again. He was a noble poet, but the truth still moves, still seeks its natural pace, which is that of narrative.

The vast and delicate poem of Dante does not readily answer a question put to it by the context of its peers. Which comes first in its author's being, the philosopher or the poet? The answer in fact is never given, for Dante is that unique thing, a successful philosophical poet: his story, for he tells one, cannot be separated from the thing it means. In this respect he is the peer of Homer and of Hamlet's historian, though his procedure is different from either of theirs. The journey his narrative takes is through the entire universe, and that universe is stationary; its parts wait for him to pass, learning their nature as he goes. But he does go; a journey is taken. Our belief in his story is simultaneous with our interest in what it signifies.

The *Divine Comedy* has to be sure absorbed a philosophy, and it is the most complex, not to say the most intimidating one, that poetry anywhere contains. Furthermore it is Dante's most serious conscious concern. The "sacred poem to which both heaven and earth so have set hand that it hath made me lean through many a year" is sacred to him because of the faith it explores. And the exploration is through regions

Chapter 7

The Faerie Queene

TO CALL *The Faerie Queene* a philosophical poem is to compliment it, not to praise it. Whatever else it may be ordered by, it is not ordered by intensity. There is so little concentration in it upon a single visionary goal that many, indeed, have found it monotonous in its variety, and therefore, since it is endless, dull. The mistake of finding it so is most easily made by those who suppose that Spenser's queer masterpiece is to be compared with Dante or even with Lucretius; or by those who, refusing to credit its author with an intellectual design, look idly among its pages for the "mere" delight which legend says is there. Read slowly, and with a care which nothing at first glance seems to call for, it works its reward. The adventurer among its stanzas who listens to each word, each line, letting each unit of whatever length canter at its own pace through his understanding, will discover that a knight of poetry, on broad horseback, moves gracefully—if rather primly, with a certain old-fashioned and charming stiffness—through unbounded meadows of discourse.

Spenser insisted that they were moral meadows, and they are; and they are agreeable, even if unfenced. Spenser deserves the epithets that have so long been standard for him. He is sage and serious. He is nothing more. He is a virtuoso in verse, and the master of a certain style which nobody else can use; but at his center he is an intellectual amateur, a gentleman moralist, a high-Renaissance Englishman who writes better than he thinks and feels. He loves poetry more than he loves truth. And he is drunk with allegory. But he does not know how to make it his inspiration. The heroes whom he sends riding among the pitfalls set to test their virtue are priggish in their triumph, nor is the meaning of their triumph certain save in the book of manners which Spenser consults. Spenser is interested in virtue or he

Chapter 8

Troilus and Criseyde

CHAUCER TAKES HIS TIME with the simple story he has to tell of two Trojan lovers and their go-between. He is leisurely by nature as Spenser was leisurely by contrivance; he is long —for such a story; and he is light. *Troilus and Criseyde* has everything in it, yet it weighs nothing. Its wise author pretends to be the most ignorant of men. He is the finest instance in narrative poetry of the comic genius at work, and hence belongs in any list of Calliope's great sons—or nephews, if Calliope cannot bend. In that case he is the son of Thalia, her sister. But no matter, he cannot be missing from any account of poetry when it is important. It is never more important than when it laughs.

Comedy does not limit laughter, nor insist that it be loud. Chaucer's laughter is seldom audible at all. But it is steadily there, in the view he keeps of Troilus, Criseyde, and Pandar, and of the human life in which for a moment of old time they touchingly participate. Comedy as Chaucer makes us understand it is half of human life; or the whole of it, seen in a certain way, with a certain eye. How Chaucer sees it *Troilus and Criseyde* makes clear. And the man who looks is quite as interesting as the spectacle that engages him; though he never forgets the spectacle, nor will it be forgotten by us whose view of it is shaped by the arch of his brows.

Comedy has no beginning and no end. Its field is the middle distance where riddles are not resolved. Consequently its works are long, since anything that is endless must be long. Wit and tragedy may be short, and indeed they had better be, or we shall not accept them. But humor, the soul of comedy, will not be dictated to. The soul of tragedy, as Aristotle observed, is plot, is action, and there comes a time when we know what the action meant. Humor means itself. It distributes itself everywhere through the work it graces;

Chapter 9

Don Juan

"I WANT A HERO." Thus Byron begins, and we cannot set it down as an accident that his first word is what it is. He never finds a hero, and in a sense he never finds a subject—Byron, that is to say, is a modern poet. Subject matter has been hard of late to find, which means among other things that comedy has been hard to write. The enormous natural genius of Byron is handicapped as even comedy must be by a want of stuff to work on. Even comedy needs a mountain that can be assaulted and reduced. Byron must be his own mountain.

He is his own hero and subject, and so is free to talk forever. But his freedom bores him. He would rather have something distant, something dry, something really high to talk about. He cannot be as perfect in comedy as Chaucer was because he has no single story to tell. Chaucer could assert himself against an object—the legend of a certain love—but Bryon has no object. He inhabits a desert, the world after Waterloo, and no amount of rage brings back sufficient echo. This may or may not be Byron's fault, but in any case he pays with failure. All is conversation, and the intellectual force displayed in this is astonishing; but Byron has to stretch and strain himself too far, he has to become fantastic, he has to range between the titanic and the cute. Improvisation is his curse. He flounders brilliantly, now up, now down, and he is nowhere more amusing than in his many admissions that this is true. But he would rather have more to be amusing about.

He calls his comedy an "epic satire," suggesting by the phrase a world about him that is foolish—or vicious—without limit. The absence of limit takes some salt out of the satire; it is overseasoned, and still it cannot prove its point if it has one. Perhaps *Don Juan* is better than a satire. Its several stories—of Juan's education, of his shipwreck and short

Chapter 10

The Prelude

"I WANT a subject." Thus Wordsworth would, or could, or should have begun his poem in fourteen books about himself. He did not so begin because he thought he had a subject—the only one in sight. Wordsworth created modern poetry when he decided that the man who writes is more important than the men and the things he writes about. Wordsworth had special reasons for deciding this: he did not know men, and the fountain of things had dried up. The world was a barren place, producing no further mythologies. The poet stood alone, and without a lyre. If poetry was to live again, he must make it live from nothing. He must make the dry bones sound.

Milton, searching for a subject, had found one that needed loads of ornament before it could seem substantial. Wordsworth, searching in the same fashion, found none at all; and ornament for him was not in order. He was honest, and furthermore there was no art of poetry extant, no set of pleasures with which he could play. The least sportive of poets—this certainly he was—could not be expected to go forth with a fowling-piece like Lord Byron's and litter the waste land with carcasses of crows. If he was anything he was a philosophical poet. Indeed he would have to be one, for only such a man could build poetry again. Intuition had departed; the rules for it must be rediscovered. If the world was to bloom once more with living truth, poetry must work the ground. Truth in the fortunate ages had been something for poetry to express. Now it was something for poetry to find.

But what is poetry? Wordsworth had first to answer that simple question. At least it is simple before it is asked. The greatest poets never asked it; they simply went to work. Wordsworth, having no work to do until he had produced a definition, devoted his life to the discovery that poetry is the art of finding truth—general truth, as distinguished from the

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