

Poetry in the Modern Age: An Editorial Statement

One central aspiration of the modern political ideologies was to efface the traditional vocabularies human beings had used to understand their nature and the nature of the world as a whole, and to replace it with a new one. They hoped thereby that a change in language would result also in a change in human nature. As human nature has proven intractable stuff in the face of such a radical program, persons in the modern age find themselves grappling with the same realities as their ancestors, even as they stand bereft of the well-seasoned language needed to understand, express, and confront fruitfully the human condition.

Poetry should play a central role in equipping us with language adequate to our experience, but its modern practitioners have more often seemed typical victims of this great forgetting than a bulwark against it. Modernist poetry sought to call everything about the art into question in the ambitious hope of testing the limits of the aesthetic as a place of intellectual depth and spiritual authority but without actually surrendering the place itself. Unhappily, such radical experimenta-

tion often had just this unintended effect. If modernists contemplated in awe the fact of art as a mystery, their heirs, the citizens of “postmodernity,” tend to look with indifference and incredulity that anyone should ever have taken art for a distinguished mode of expression at all.

It is part of *Modern Age’s* mission to see with clarity our present civilization in both its achievements and its insufficiencies and to help in what way it can the overcom-

ing of the latter. As it has always done, this magazine proposes to publish the best contemporary poetry, which gives expression to present experience while drawing on the venerable resources of mankind's most ancient and universal art form.

Since antiquity, poetry has been understood above all as the paradigmatic art form, as a kind of *making* where talent and inspiration converge such that the divine and eternal finds expression through human ingenuity. The central marker of this distinguished kind of making has always been *meter*, that practice of human speech where language is measured, brought to order, by a pattern that at once refines and deepens it, sets it apart from the everyday while also suggesting a connection with the order of reality as a whole. Meter has aided poetry's *memory* or mnemonic function, its memorability that has allowed it to serve as a just repository for mankind's most enduring stories and as a fitting medium for the interior exploration and contemplation of the self and the soul. In the service of these ends of narrative and interior reflection, poetry has also always had a fourth and final function, best described as *metaphor*. Through the use of figurative

language, scheme, and trope, poetry is able to represent the previously unrepresentable, whether by this we mean the ambivalences of sacred and profane love, the dramatic tensions intrinsic to human action, or the mystery of being. It is above all through the presence of metaphor that poetry as a kind of inspired making shows itself, for in this aspect we see existence, being, and truth find a mysterious fullness of expression, as if something very ancient yet also very new had suddenly been allowed to come into the world.

In the years ahead, *Modern Age* hopes to publish poems that manifest these historical, distinguished features of the paradigmatic art (*making*); poems that draw together *meter*, *memory*, and *metaphor*, in the interest of helping the art form to recover its rightful distinction and traditional value. In short, poems that serve the purpose—finally—of helping us understand our natures and the world with a condign language expressive of the wisdom of our enduring intellectual traditions and refreshed by the immediacy of our contemporary experience.

—James Matthew Wilson