

# SOUL FOOD

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Soul Food sounds tempting. The very words may make your mouth water, dreaming of catfish and hush puppies or shrimp and grits. But what exactly is it? The best definition I have found is in *The Urban Dictionary*, which puts the meaning plainly: “Soul food is a variety of cuisine originating in the Southeastern United States from African American culture. It originated in the 1960s, during the Civil Rights era, when ‘soul’ was a common word for that culture.” If you want recipes for soul food, you will find plenty of them in a cookbook simply called *Soul*. You will not find them in a standard cookbook. If they mention it at all, they will tell you that soul food has as many definitions as dishes. One thing it clearly isn’t; is food for the soul. Soul food is strictly for the body. It’s the kind of food you crave when you are really hungry and want to sit down to a hearty meal.

Soul food is definitely not for the mind, which is neither body nor soul. Mind comes from the brain, but where does Soul come from? Some would say it doesn’t come from anything, that it doesn’t exist at all, except as a thought in the mind. Thought is infinitely elastic; it can comprehend the whole universe. Astrophysicists can map the universe by observing and measuring objects in space, but they cannot measure a single soul. If the soul exists at all, it does not come from the mind any more than it comes from the body. “Soul Food” is only a recent phrase, arising from an identifiable human culture. Soul itself is quite different. It is of ancient origin, as old as the human race.

You will not find that definition of the soul in the *Urban Dictionary*. For that, you need a standard English dictionary, abridged or unabridged. It will define the soul in its traditional sense, as the immaterial essence of a human being. Soul is not flesh and blood. It does not need ordinary food. The human body, we have learned, is the miraculous product of millennia of evolution from the physical universe. The mind is part of that evolution, though the thoughts it produces are not physical. They are philosophical. They come from thinking about ourselves and the universe, and from synthesizing the knowledge we derive from such thinking. The soul, if we read about it in the works of a philosopher like Aristotle, has never been physical. He called it metaphysical, meaning beyond the physical, and taught that it comes not just from thinking but from believing. To speak seriously about the soul as Aristotle did, we have to conceive of it as existing inside the body as the invisible essence of who we are. Every soul in his view is the unique, immaterial, and immortal identity of every person created by God. Such a belief implies that the soul has a life of its own which outlives the body and the mind, and that the end of a life is not the end of the soul. To define the soul in the traditional historical and philosophical sense has nothing to do with “soul food.” You cannot feed the soul on Southern cooking.

You *can* feed the body on Southern cooking, and if you do, you will make it feel happy. Souls are inside the body, and the body has appetites that have to be satisfied. Soul food in the *Urban Dictionary* sense can be very satisfying. But living well means eating well, following a balanced diet. Too much soul food can be fattening. It is for *gourmands* not *gourmets*. Hunger is an instinct; eating what’s best for us is not. We have to learn how to eat wisely, to provide the body with the right kind of nourishment. We learn it from our parents as we grow up, and from our doctors as we grow older. What we learn is that a balanced diet consists of a proper mixture of fruits and vegetables, meat and bread, cold and hot drinks, sweets and desserts, all taken in

moderation. Because soul food is mouthwatering, it can lead to the cardinal sin of gluttony. We have to be careful how much of that kind of soul food we eat. If we want to maintain a healthy body as a home for the soul, we know that means to eat what is pleasing to the taste and beneficial to the body, not whatever tempting snack tastes good but has little nutritional value.

Soul food in the *Urban Dictionary* sense is physical, strictly for the body. There is also food for the mind, which is not physical. What our minds hunger for is knowledge. The mind craves to be educated, and education comes from reading books and from listening to those who have read more of them than we have. Good books are as essential to a healthy mind as good food is for a healthy body. As soon as we learn how to read, we begin to hunger for books. They provide intellectual pleasure equal to the physical pleasure of eating food. We must eat and sleep to stay alive, but we read because we choose to. Reading enlarges the world; it liberates us from the shell of self; it expands all that we inherit from past generations. We want to know as much as we can about the world so that we can find our own place in it. If we hope to get the most from what we read, we need good teachers to tell us how to do it, how to read selectively, how to acquire whatever skills are necessary for earning a living, and even more importantly, how to understand what life itself is all about.

Good teachers are the guides to a life worth living. They help us balance our reading as we balance our diet, seeking both practical and theoretical knowledge. Textbooks and manuals can give us useful advice for doing things right, but no one wants to spend his life reading manuals and textbooks. The books we most need to read are the books that challenge us to think. Such books open our mind to subjects beyond our ken. They add to our fund of experience and enable us to reflect on what we know. Reflection develops critical judgment, making it possible to distinguish bad books from good books, good books from the best. We have to learn how to

spend our reading time wisely, in search of the best books, the ones we call Classics. Classics are books that endure, that contain wisdom as well as delight. *Mens sana in corpore sano*, a sane mind in a healthy body, was the Roman ideal. If we learn how to feed our mind with the best books as we feed our body with the best food, we are on our way to a liberal education.

Liberal education *is* the balanced diet of the mind. Such an education can't be acquired quickly; it comes from years of studying genuine classics, ancient as well as modern, guided by teachers who know more about them than we do. They urge us to include in our reading the arts as well as the sciences, geography as well as philosophy, economics as well as religion, physics and chemistry as well as history and literature, the whole range of subjects a good university catalogue ought to offer its students. It takes a lifetime of reading to acquire a liberal education in the fullest sense--indeed more than a lifetime, if we want to read all the Classics, since knowledge is boundless and new classics arise in every age, including the one we live in. To seek a balanced diet for the mind means to go on reading as long as we live, pursuing the fullest education possible, balancing practical knowledge with theoretical knowledge, keeping in mind the humbling thought that however long we live, we can never know all there is to know. .

If a healthy and balanced diet is the best food for the body, and a liberal education is the best food for the mind, what might be the best food for the soul? It will not be soul food as the *Urban Dictionary* defines it, but in a more enlightened sense, drawn from faith as much as from intellect. And since religious faith, in our increasingly secular society, is less and less common, the very existence of the soul is threatened. Yet true soul food does remain a possibility. Such at least was the argument of the Kentucky poet and critic Robert Penn Warren. He believed in the existence of the soul in its historical and philosophical sense, though he called himself a "yearner" more than a true believer. Late in his life, Warren wrote an extended essay called

*Democracy and Poetry*, in which he argued that the soul has not only a religious, but a political, dimension. He began his argument by identifying the soul with the self, a definition that even a skeptic would find it hard to doubt. Warren was comfortable with the definition of the soul as the essential identity of every human being, given each of us at birth, to be cultivated as rigorously as we cultivate the body and the mind. Poetry, to Warren, was the real soul food. He called it “even a nourishment of the soul.”

It was a bold and original claim to make, that poetry is food for the soul, but Warren could point to the fact that poetry is the oldest and longest-lasting form of literature, at least as old as civilization, indeed a civilizing force in itself. We know for a fact that a language rich in poetry can survive when the language itself is no longer being spoken or written. Classical Greek has survived for two millennia because Homer was inspired to write two epic poems, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, in a language that is no longer a living tongue. The poems are alive, however, and are taught and read in every civilized country. Classical Latin survives because Virgil followed Homer’s example, and wrote an epic poem called *The Aeneid* in Latin, another dead language that still lives in his work. Anglo-Saxon, the original English language, survives mainly through the epic poem *Beowulf*, written by an unknown poet in Old English, a language as foreign to us today as German. Literary history supports Warren’s argument. It tells us that great poetry can outlive the language in which it is written.

Warren knew that great poetry was not limited to democracy. It can come from any civilized form of government that is based on a system of laws, but he was original in linking democracy with poetry..It was his view that of the many forms of government under which great poetry may be written, from monarchy to dictatorship to socialism or communism, democracy is the most congenial. It was his principle that democracy encourages maximum individual

freedom, and since poetry is the highest, and most lasting form of literature, it is fertile territory for the soul. Individual freedom validates selfhood; poetry validates individual freedom; thus if democracy thrives on individual freedom, poetry can justly be called “a nourishment of the soul.”

Warren’s argument of course depends on the existence, not only of individual selves and souls, but of poets and audiences for poetry. For poetry to nourish the soul, it must be widely read and appreciated in the democracy where it flourishes. Here, we must admit, American civilization has some catching up to do. I sometimes wonder how many Americans actually read and enjoy the poetry their own fellow citizens have created. I wonder if they even know what they are missing. Fortunately, Warren’s argument does not rest on the number of people who choose to read poetry. It rests on the special enjoyment of poetry by those who do read it, however few they might be. Warren knew perfectly well that great poetry has been written and appreciated under many other forms of government, but he believed American democracy was the most conducive to its creation and appreciation, offering a special kind of soul food freely to all readers who delight in it. The literary history of the United States supports Warren’s argument, for in the four centuries of its existence, the United States has produced an abundance of gifted poets who have created a body of poetry remarkable both for its variety and its excellence. American poetry cannot boast of colossal epics like those that distinguish Classical Greek and Latin poetry, but it has produced an abundance of fine poems that are valued not only by serious American readers, but by serious readers in countries that are not democracies.

Warren knew that American democracy is a relative latecomer among civilized nations, but he argued in *Democracy and Poetry* that our country has already produced more than its share of minor and major poetic masterpieces, which means more than its share of his kind of

soul food. America as a nation has flourished militarily and economically beyond other nations; and our literature is as rich in quality and quantity as that of any modern nation, many of them with longer history than ours. Warren was himself a patriotic American poet, but he was no chauvinist; he did not limit his argument to American poetry; he applied it to poetry in the broadest sense, created throughout centuries in many nations and languages. His argument was that fine poetry is highly compatible with democracy, even though the audience for the best poetry continues to be small.

Indeed, the audience for the best poetry has always been small, in every country and in every age. It has proved the most durable, but never the most popular, form of literature. Why? Maybe because the best poetry is never easy reading, and more than other forms of literature it requires educated readers. The more highly educated the reader, the more likely he is to find poetry to his taste, and highly educated readers are never a majority in any country. Joseph Brodsky was a modern Russian poet who won a Nobel Prize for Literature, but he was evicted from Russia for failing to write good Communist poetry. Forced to leave his native country under protest, it was no accident that he chose to become an American citizen. He was fluent in English and knew how much good poetry had been written by Americans. He had memorized all of his own poetry before he left Russia and he continued to write in Russian, but he became an American citizen out of admiration for American poets. He wanted to be one of them, and in time he was appointed Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress, our equivalent of Poet Laureate, an honor he shared with Robert Penn Warren.. Brodsky was a lover of American poetry, but he was a realist. He estimated that the audience for poetry in any age or in any country has never been above one percent of the population. It may be food for the soul, but few have an appetite for it. Warren would not have disagreed with Brodsky's view of the limited

audience for poetry, though an earlier American poet, Walt Whitman, liked to insist that “To have great poets we must have great audiences too.” His *Song of Myself* was a heroic attempt to write the Great American Epic, and it is read today in every course of American Literature, but it has never been as popular as he hoped it would be. Even for a patriotic poet like Whitman, the audience has probably never exceeded one percent of the population, Brodsky’s estimate of the audience for poetry in any age or any language.

Fortunately, Warren’s argument that poetry is most compatible with democracy does not depend on its relative popularity. The audience for poetry has always depended on individual readers who eagerly seek it because of the peculiar pleasure it gives them, the pleasure which Warren called a nourishment of the soul. Poetry is an abstract word covering a multitude of poems, bad as well as good. I have in my library a book entitled *The Stuffed Owl, An Anthology of Bad Verse*. It is not what Warren meant by “a nourishment of the soul,” but I keep it on my shelf for a good laugh, as well as a reminder that there is much more bad poetry than good poetry to be read in the world.

Warren’s argument applies to the best poems, not to the worst. If we are to relish them as soul food, we need to look and listen to a variety of classic poems. Warren did not propose a balanced diet for the soul, but we are free to do so if we want to. So why not try? There are many good poems to choose from in the rich bounty of Western literature, some of it as old as the Greeks who invented it more than two thousand years ago.. I think there are enough good poems to suit every kind of reader, and have long believed that those who say they don’t like poetry just haven’t read enough of it. Somewhere, if you are a dedicated reader, there is the right poem for you, and if you find it, you might agree with Warren’s argument that poetry is food for the soul. Let us create here and now our own balanced diet for the soul, trying to make it as

nourishing as soul food is for the body and literary classics are for the mind.. Let's make it a three-course meal, consisting of two great poems for each course: two for breakfast, two for lunch and two for dinner. To guarantee that our diet is balanced, let's choose some poems from the distant past, some from modern times, some from American poets, some from British poets, even some from poets who did not write in English but who have been masterfully translated into it. We want our poetry diet to be inclusive, with all the delicious flavors good poetry has to offer in our own language. Let's start our meal with a poem that could serve as proof of Warren's argument that poetry is the real soul food.

## As Kingfishers Catch Fire

GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS

As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame;  
As tumbled over rim in roundy wells  
Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell's  
Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name;  
Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:  
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;  
Selves — goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells,  
Crying *Whát I dó is me: for that I came.*

I say móre: the just man justices;  
Keeps grace: thát keeps all his goings graces;  
Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is —  
Chríst — for Christ plays in ten thousand places,  
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his  
To the Father through the features of men's faces.

Gerard Manley Hopkins was an English poet and a Roman Catholic priest. To him, Christian belief was truth, and he found evidence of it in everything and every person. His poems are

rhythmically stunning. They have to be read aloud and read slowly. He wants you to listen as well as to look. In this poem he takes an old Italian sonnet form and makes what he called a “sprung rhythm” poem out of it. Within this fixed fourteen-line sonnet he pictures, and at the same time sounds, the particularity of all things, whether natural or human. He would have agreed with Warren that poetry eloquently affirms selfhood, the unique identity of each person and thing. If self is identical with soul, Hopkins expressed it in lyric form. He took seriously the Christian doctrine of Incarnation: God becoming man, the divine becoming human, Christ as the son of God. Hopkins undoubtedly had in his mind the opening verses of the Gospel According to St. John: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God, and the Word became Flesh and dwelt among us.” He opens with “Kingfishers” a noun which becomes a verb with “catch fire” and follows with “Dragonflies,” a noun which becomes the verb “draw flame.” What a thing is is what it does, the nouns and verbs echoing each other. He identifies the sound of a stone falling in a well with the stone itself and says “Each mortal thing does one thing and the same,” illustrating with the clapper of a bell, which rings out the identity of the bell.. When he says “the just man justices,” another noun becomes a verb, insisting that a just man must *do* justice every time he acts, because “What I do is me for that I came.” At the end he reaches even higher, imagining God becoming Christ in everything He creates, sanctifying the world by the divine will of its Creator.

For a second appetizer, let us partake of

## **A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning**

JOHN DONNE

As virtuous men pass mildly away,

And whisper to their souls to go,  
Whilst some of their sad friends do say  
The breath goes now, and some say, No:

So let us melt, and make no noise,  
No tear-floods, nor sigh-tempests move;  
'Twere profanation of our joys  
To tell the laity our love.

Moving of th' earth brings harms and fears,  
Men reckon what it did, and meant;  
But trepidation of the spheres,  
Though greater far, is innocent.

Dull sublunary lovers' love  
(Whose soul is sense) cannot admit  
Absence, because it doth remove  
Those things which elemented it.

But we by a love so much refined,  
That our selves know not what it is,  
Inter-assured of the mind,  
Care less, eyes, lips, and hands to miss.

Our two souls therefore, which are one,  
Though I must go, endure not yet  
A breach, but an expansion,  
Like gold to airy thinness beat.

If they be two, they are two so  
As stiff twin compasses are two;  
Thy soul, the fixed foot, makes no show  
To move, but doth, if th' other do.

And though it in the center sit,  
Yet when the other far doth roam,

It leans and hearkens after it,  
And grows erect, as that comes home.

Such wilt thou be to me, who must,  
Like th' other foot, obliquely run;  
Thy firmness makes my circle just,  
And makes me end where I begun.

The first two of the nine quatrains which make up “A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning” are a single sentence, comparing the death of a virtuous man to the love between the poet and his beloved. John Donne wrote the poem to his wife, when he was leaving their home for a long journey which would separate them for a while. He wishes to console her in his absence by assuring her he will never really leave her, and he does so with two metaphors: one of beaten gold and one of the legs of a drawing compass. He wants her to believe that his love is like the thinly beaten gold that never fractures, or like the two legs of a drawing compass that revolve in a circle but never part from each other, coming “home” when the circle is complete. Samuel Johnson called John Donne a Metaphysical Poet, whose poetry was intellectually complex, depending on extravagant metaphors the reader has to decipher. The poem has long been recognized as one of the most sophisticated love poems ever written, because it sees human love as more spiritual than physical, not “sublunary” and sensual but ethereal and infinitely refined. John Donne like Gerard Manley Hopkins was a priest, but of the Anglican faith, who was renowned for his sermons as Dean of St. Paul’s Cathedral in the heart of London. Most of his poems are love poems, expressing his belief that human love issues from the love of God who created them. Many are religious in their imagery like this one, but, some are frankly erotic, and his imagery is always ingenious, whether the love is sacred or profane. Now, for our first entrée, let’s savor

# There's a certain Slant of light

EMILY DICKINSON

There's a certain Slant of light,  
Winter Afternoons –  
That oppresses, like the Heft  
Of Cathedral Tunes –

Heavenly Hurt, it gives us –  
We can find no scar,  
But internal difference –  
Where the Meanings, are –

None may teach it – Any –  
'Tis the seal Despair –  
An imperial affliction  
Sent us of the Air –

When it comes, the Landscape listens –  
Shadows – hold their breath –  
When it goes, 'tis like the Distance  
On the look of Death –

Emily Dickinson deserves to be called the finest woman poet in any language since Sappho wrote in ancient Greek, yet her poetry was mostly left unpublished in her lifetime. She was totally unknown as a poet when she died; now her poems appear in every anthology of American poetry and her verses are quoted more and more often. Her poetry is personal, since she wrote it for herself alone, and during her life she ventured to publish only a few poems in obscure magazines. Most of her nearly two thousand lyric poems were stored in a drawer of her desk in Amherst, Massachusetts, to be discovered by her sister after her death. It was Emily Dickinson's fate to become a classic author posthumously. Her singular

achievement testifies to the durability of genuine poetry, which could not be kept secret forever. As readers we can be grateful that thousands of her highly original lyric poems have been saved for us to enjoy, when they might have disappeared forever if her sister had not found them and published them. Her poems are spontaneous, whimsical, sensitive to the change of seasons in her family garden, yet as profound and puzzling as those of published poets whose work was famous in their lifetime. She wrote them out of a pure lyric impulse that lived in her as in no one else, with a sincerity that is unmistakable. Her poems are deceptively short but loaded with observations and insights that are not easy to understand. Her wording is meticulous, though some of her early readers faulted her for carelessness about rhythm and rhyme, failing to see that she was writing her own kind of free verse before free verse became fashionable. Editors to whom she sent a few of her poems tried to correct what they saw as errors, but she was certain of what she was doing, and later editors have accepted them as she wrote them, recognizing that there was nothing trivial about them. Her whole world was her house and garden in Amherst, Massachusetts, all she needed to write her lyric masterpieces. She wrote poems about birds and butterflies and flowers, not about public events, even though the Civil War happened in her brief span of 56 years and one of her brothers fought in it. That she was a keen observer of nature is abundantly clear in her best poems, such as “There’s a certain slant of light.” It is about a phenomenon of weather so fleeting that only she could have captured it in words. Her subject is the winter light refracted by the atmosphere into a haunting foretaste of death, which she compares to the heavy sound—the “heft”—of a church organ. The slant of light passes quickly, but affects the landscape as it passes through, making “shadows hold their breath” when it comes, creating in its wake a shivery feeling that is “like the distance on the look of death.” The eeriness in

the premonition of death carries an ominous sense of fatality to the observer, who has only a brief moment to experience it.

For a second entrée, let's enjoy:

## The Journey Of The Magi

T.S. Eliot

A cold coming we had of it,  
Just the worst time of the year  
For a journey, and such a long journey:  
The ways deep and the weather sharp,  
The very dead of winter.  
And the camels galled, sorefooted, refractory,  
Lying down in the melting snow.  
There were times we regretted  
The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces,  
And the silken girls bringing sherbet.  
Then the camel men cursing and grumbling  
and running away, and wanting their liquor and women,  
And the night-fires going out, and the lack of shelters,  
And the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly  
And the villages dirty and charging high prices:  
A hard time we had of it.  
At the end we preferred to travel all night,  
Sleeping in snatches,  
With the voices singing in our ears, saying  
That this was all folly.

Then at dawn we came down to a temperate valley,  
Wet, below the snow line, smelling of vegetation;  
With a running stream and a water-mill beating the darkness,  
And three trees on the low sky,  
And an old white horse galloped away in the meadow.  
Then we came to a tavern with vine-leaves over the lintel,  
Six hands at an open door dicing for pieces of silver,  
And feet kicking the empty wine-skins.  
But there was no information, and so we continued  
And arriving at evening, not a moment too soon  
Finding the place; it was (you might say) satisfactory.

All this was a long time ago, I remember,  
And I would do it again, but set down

This set down  
This: were we led all that way for  
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly  
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,  
But had thought they were different; this Birth was  
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.  
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,  
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,  
With an alien people clutching their gods.  
I should be glad of another death.

T.S. Eliot wrote both secular and religious poetry in a style he insisted was distinctly American, though he lived more than half his life in England. He was born in St. Louis to a New England family that had moved west. His grandfather became the rector of the Unitarian Church in St. Louis while his father became the owner of a brick factory. Eliot was sent to Milton School in Boston to prepare for Harvard, where he edited the *Harvard Crimson*, published a few poems in the college magazine, and earned a traveling fellowship in graduate school to study philosophy at Oxford University. His poetic career began when he met Ezra Pound in London and was told in no uncertain terms that his poetry was so good he must become a poet, not a philosopher as he was setting out to be. Wisely, he followed Pound's advice, and in 1922 he published a groundbreaking poem called *The Waste Land* that changed the literary landscape and became the most celebrated poem of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was a condensed epic that seemed to portray the collapse of Western civilization after the end of the First World War, though its range of references went back to Homer and Vergil and many great poets in other languages than English, especially Dante and Baudelaire, forcing readers to look them up, and giving them helpful footnotes.. The poem is a secular masterpiece with religious overtones, which set Eliot on the path to becoming a convert to the Anglican Church. As a result, his later poems, like "Journey of the Magi," are definitely Christian. "The Journey of the Magi" takes as its subject the visit of the Three Wise Men to the birthplace of Christ in Bethlehem. This familiar post-Christmas event became known

as the Epiphany, marking the time when the miracle of Christ's birth was witnessed by Gentiles, who became worshippers of Christ, even when he was rejected and crucified by the Romans who governed his own people. The Magi were from the East, probably from Persia, and they were, as Eliot's poem depicts, of an earlier faith, but were so overwhelmed by the sight of the Christ child that they knelt before his cradle, and offered him their famous presents of gold and frankincense and myrrh. Their journey was to see him, but once they had done so, they made a journey home to their kingdoms, to report what they had seen "no longer at ease here in the old dispensation, with an alien people clutching their gods." Eliot depicts them as bewildered by what they had witnessed, a Birth that seemed more like a Death, foreshadowing the crucifixion of Christ. They anticipate their own personal deaths, which seem a welcome relief from the disturbing memory they brought back with them. Eliot's poem is the confessional of one of the Magi, who thinks looking back that he had discovered a new religion in his journey to the manger in Bethlehem. Strangely, it has changed his life for the worse, since in retrospect it is beyond his understanding. For Eliot, the poem was a post-Waste Land revelation, a turning point in his life that caused him to think "I should have been glad of another death" meaning that he would die as a Christian, not as the doubter he once had been.

Now for our dessert course, let's start with:

## The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter

Ezra Pound

While my hair was still cut straight across my forehead  
I played about the front gate, pulling flowers.  
You came by on bamboo stilts, playing horse,

You walked about my seat, playing with blue plums.

And we went on living in the village of Chokan:

Two small people, without dislike or suspicion.

At fourteen I married My Lord you.

I never laughed, being bashful.

Lowering my head, I looked at the wall.

Called to, a thousand times, I never looked back.

At fifteen I stopped scowling,

I desired my dust to be mingled with yours

Forever and forever and forever.

Why should I climb the look out?

At sixteen you departed,

You went into far Ku-to-yen, by the river of swirling eddies,

And you have been gone five months.

The monkeys make sorrowful noise overhead.

You dragged your feet when you went out.

By the gate now, the moss is grown, the different mosses,

Too deep to clear them away!

The leaves fall early this autumn, in wind.

The paired butterflies are already yellow with August  
Over the grass in the West garden;  
They hurt me. I grow older.  
If you are coming down through the narrows of the river Kiang,  
Please let me know beforehand,  
And I will come out to meet you  
As far as Cho-fu-Sa.

This poem has a complex history. It was written by Li Po in China in the 8<sup>th</sup> century AD and translated into English in 1915 by Ezra Pound, as one of a collection of ancient Chinese Poems he called *Cathay*. Pound was an American expatriate from Philadelphia who taught himself Chinese in London, when he was given the papers of an American scholar of Chinese poetry named Ernest Fenollosa. The poem stands on its own in English, because Pound was a master translator who worked miracles in many languages during his career. It gives an endearing picture of a Chinese girl who was only 14 years old when she married, and just 16 when her husband, a merchant who traded along the river in ancient China, was far from home. She misses him and longs for his return, writing him a letter to say she would gladly go out to meet him on his way back. She expresses herself in images that convey how much she misses him. “The monkeys make sorrowful noise overhead, “ she says, as if wild animals missed him, too, and “ the moss has grown” on the path to their house “too deep to clear it away,” because no one has walked on it since his departure, and the “paired butterflies” in their garden remind her that she is alone, without her husband. She is shy and unresponsive to other men, “called to a thousand times I never looked back,” and though she is lonely she is not complaining, just hoping for the two of them to be reunited “forever and forever and forever.” Pound’s poem is a

tribute to an appealing young girl, set to verbal music by a Chinese poet in the distant past, to be transformed by Pound into a modern American poem that is a memorial of life in a very different China than that of today. For our final course let us savor:

## **When You Are Old**

WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS

When you are old and grey and full of sleep,  
And nodding by the fire, take down this book,  
And slowly read, and dream of the soft look  
Your eyes had once, and of their shadows deep;

How many loved your moments of glad grace,  
And loved your beauty with love false or true,  
But one man loved the pilgrim soul in you,  
And loved the sorrows of your changing face;

And bending down beside the glowing bars,  
Murmur, a little sadly, how Love fled  
And paced upon the mountains overhead  
And hid his face amid a crowd of stars.

Yeats wrote this love poem in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century in Ireland, thinking of Maud Gonne, the defiant woman he loved but never married, since she refused his proposals though she cherished the many poems he wrote for her. She was an outspoken Irish patriot in the period when Ireland was striving to free itself from English rule, and the man she married was one of the leaders of the Irish rebellion, Major John McBride. She remained a close friend of Yeats and appreciated the poems he dedicated to her, among the best he ever wrote. This love poem is highly personal in its subject, but it was a loose translation of a well-known French love poem by Pierre de Ronsard, written in the 16<sup>th</sup> century A.D. in French. Ronsard's love sonnet began "Quand vous

serez bien vieille au soir à la chandelle” (literally, “When you are very old, in the evening candle light”). It anticipates a later time in their lives when he imagines she will take down his book and read the poems he wrote for her, seeing how much he loved her and regretting too late that she did not fully embrace the man “who loved the pilgrim soul in you” causing him to flee in imagination, as he “paced upon the mountains overhead and hid his face amid a crowd of stars.” Yeats never stopped loving Maud Gonne, though after she turned down his last proposal and married another man, he married another woman and lived a happy family life with Georgie Yeats, who bore him a son and a daughter. Maud Gonne, a militant and beautiful Irish woman, was immortalized by Yeats in his poems, which are masterpieces of forsaken love written by one of the greatest modern poets.

Such is the power of poetry. It can reach the hearts and souls of anyone who reads it seriously, no matter when it was created nor who created it. The words may come from any language which inspires poets to write, and they may be translated into authentic poems in other languages, if the translator is a poet himself like Pound or Yeats. To claim, as Robert Penn Warren did, that democracy favors poetry is certainly plausible. Athens and Rome had republics long before America did, and our republic has produced its share of great poetry and may well produce more. To claim as Warren did that “poetry is a nourishment of the soul” depends on more than a single nation or language. One critic has defined poetry by its effect on the reader: he said it produces a thrill. If there is no thrill in the reader, he argued, there is no poem. Though it is a subjective definition of poetry, it answers to what Warren meant when he said poetry was “a nourishment of the soul.” Poetry gives meanings that go beyond the words. It can even be what Samuel Johnson called *metaphysical*. That is one definition of poetry. A more

modern, almost scientific, definition was given by Ezra Pound, the highly gifted and also highly controversial American poet of the twentieth century:

Poetry is a sort of inspired mathematics, which gives us equations, not for abstract figures, triangles, spheres, and the like, but equations for the human emotions.

Robert Penn Warren, like Ezra Pound and Emily Dickinson and T.S. Eliot, was an American poet of the modern age, and what they wrote gives credence to Warren's theory that democracy is favorable for poetry. But any definition of poetry, however ingenious, is bound to fall short of defining something truly indefinable. Poetry is too mysterious to be fully accounted for. You can't define it; you have to *feel* it. The same is true of the soul; if you believe in it, you feel it. If you don't feel it, it doesn't exist. If any of the poems I have quoted gives you a thrill, that means you liked it. What you felt might even have been metaphysical. If it differed from what you thought poetry was, it is possible your soul has been nourished. That was my hope in writing this paper.