Poetry

I, too, dislike it: there are things that are important beyond all this fiddle.
Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, one discovers that there is in it after all, a place for the genuine.
Hands that can grasp, eyes that can dilate, hair that can rise if it must, these things are important not because
high sounding interpretation can be put upon them but because they are useful; when they become so derivative as to become unintelligible, the same thing may be said for all of us – that we do not admire what we cannot understand. The bat, holding on upside down or in quest of something to eat, elephants pushing, a wild horse taking a roll, a tireless wolf under a tree, the immovable critic twitching his skin like a horse that feels a flea, the base-ball fan, the statistician – case after case could be cited did one wish it; nor is it valid to discriminate against "business documents and school-books"; all these phenomena are important.

One must make a distinction however: when dragged into prominence by half poets, the result is not poetry, nor till the autocrats among us can be "literalists of the imagination" – above insolence and triviality and can present for inspection, imaginary gardens with real toads in them, shall we have it. In the meantime, if you demand on one hand, in defiance of their opinion – the raw material of poetry in all its rawness, and that which is on the other hand, genuine, then you are interested in poetry.

Footnote:
1 First published in 1919 in Others: A Magazine of the New Verse
I, too, dislike it.

Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, one discovers in it, after all, a place for the genuine.

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A Graveyard

Man, looking into the sea—
taking the view from those who have as much right to it as you have it to yourself—
it is human nature to stand in the middle of a thing
but you cannot stand in the middle of this:
the sea has nothing to give but a well excavated grave.
The firs stand in a procession—each with an emerald turkey-foot at the top—
reserved as their contours, saying nothing;
repression, however, is not the most obvious characteristic of the sea;
the sea is a collector, quick to return a rapacious look.
There are others besides you who have worn that look—
whose expression is no longer a protest; the fish no longer investigate them
for their bones have not lasted;
men lower nets, unconscious of the fact that they are desecrating a grave,
and row quickly away—the blades of the oars
moving together like the feet of water-spiders as if there were no such thing as death.
The wrinkles progress upon themselves in a phalanx—beautiful under networks of foam,
and fade breathlessly while the sea rustles in and out of the seaweed;
the birds swim through the air at top speed, emitting cat-calls as heretofore—
the tortoise-shell scourges about the feet of the cliffs, in motion beneath them
and the ocean, under the pulsation of light-houses and noise of bell-buoys,
advances as usual, looking as if it were not that ocean in which dropped things are bound to sink—
in which if they turn and twist, it is neither with volition nor consciousness.

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2 First appearing in The Dial, 1921. Published in her collection, Observations, in 1924.
A GRAVE

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"In America," began the lecturer, "everyone must have a degree. The French do not think that all can have it, they don't say everyone must go to college." We incline to feel that although it may be unnecessary to know fifteen languages, one degree is not too much. With us, a school—like the singing tree of which the leaves were mouths singing in concertis both a tree of knowledge and of liberty—seen in the unanimity of college mottoes, Lux et veritas, Christo et ecclesiae, Sapient felici. It may be that we have not knowledge, just opinions, that we are undergraduates, not students; we know we have been told with smiles, by expatriates of whom we had asked "When will your experiment be finished?" "Science is never finished." Secluded from domestic strife, Jack Bookworm led a college life, says Goldsmith;

and here also as in France or Oxford, study is beset with dangers, —with bookworms, mildews, and complaisancies. But someone in New England has known enough to say the student is patience personified, is a variety of hero, "patient of neglect and of reproach"—who can "hold by himself. " You can't beat hens to make them lay. Wolf's wool is the best of wool, but it cannot be sheared because the wolf will not comply. With knowledge as with the wolf's surliness, the student studies voluntarily, refusing to be less than individual. He "gives his opinion and then rests on it"; he renders service when there is no reward, and is too reclusive for some things to seem to touch him, not because he has no feeling but because he has so much.

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3 First published in 1941 in What Are Years?