



POETIC JUSTICE

John Van Doren

This lecture was delivered as part of the Law and Literature Lecture Series at the Loyola University of Chicago School of Law, April 5, 1995.

The topic on which I have been asked to speak to you today—that is, law and literature—is in one sense a narrow one, encompassing only a few works of distinction; in another sense it takes in all of poetry (as I shall hereafter call “literature,” whether it be prose or verse), at least until our own day, when for the first time in our tradition we find poetry lacking, or thinking that it lacks—I believe to its disadvantage—any law to consider.

The narrow sense I have in mind is, if you will forgive me, the law you mostly study here at this law school—the law of rights and remedies, of legal penalties and civil regulation. Some wonderful books do, to be sure, deal with such material. One thinks of Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, of Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, of Wilkie Collins’s *Moonstone*, to begin with; and then there are at least four or five works by Dickens in which the law in

this narrow sense appears. I have in mind *Bamaby Rudge*, with its evocation of the eighteenth-century Gordon riots in London; *The Pickwick Papers*, where the episode of *Bardell vs. Pickwick* offers us the well-known expostulation of the bedeviled Mr. Pickwick, sued for breach of a promise he never made, that “the law is an ass”; *Great Expectations*, with its specter of draconian punishment in the English criminal law courts; *Bleak House*, where the old Court of Chancery with its endless procedures sucks dry the wealth and strength of those who resort to it; and finally, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, which would have been a murder mystery if Dickens had lived to finish it. One could add Theodore Dreiser’s *American Tragedy*, in this century, as well as Richard Wright’s *Black Boy*, and doubtless other works to this list. But it is at best a relatively small group of writings.

The larger, all-encompassing sense in which law and literature—law and poetry, again—combine is that in which poetry, like any art, confronts what seem to be the laws of human existence, or perhaps a certain desire for such laws that human beings have—did have, at least. This takes in a much larger group of writings, includes nearly every work of consequence since the art became established, though some examples are more explicit than the rest, of course. How old poetry’s concern with such things is, I do not know, but I really think it is original. I find it hard to imagine poetry without an interest in law of the sort I mean now. True, there was law in the Garden of Eden and not poetry; indeed, poetry could not exist there, as Milton discovered (in an otherwise apt work) when he tried to depict the lives of Adam and Eve, as if these were imaginable. There was law, that is, but it was infinite, being God’s, and had no definition. Only when it was disobeyed did its meaning appear, and then poetry could be born, as having something to measure, to talk about.

What poetry finds to talk about is just the limits—the laws, if you please—within which human life is lived, and without which it cannot escape without ceasing to be itself. I do not mean social limits, although the novel, at least, has been much concerned with those. I mean limits of a more fundamental kind. I can distinguish three of them. The first is moral, the second is natural, the third civil. Often they are mixed, so that it is difficult to tell where one stops and the next begins. Sometimes they contradict each other, as with *Antigone*. I suspect that one or another of these laws, perhaps all of them, must be somehow evident if poetry, in its classic sense as story, is to function and if life in human terms is to be lived.

I hope that does not sound reactionary. I have no political agenda. I mean, or wish to mean, only what I think we all recognize. Life without moral law is meaningless, if not malignant; without natural law it is abhorrent; without civil law it is anarchic. None of these is a fully human existence, and poetry has never attempted to deal with such a state of affairs, at least until recently. At the risk of calling into question much of which *passes* nowadays for poetry, as for art in general, I do not think it can, successfully. It thinks it can, and of course it must explore the possibility, which is not without interest, but I do not think it can succeed.

The Greeks did not give the name of laws to the limits under which they thought all human beings lived—if, I suppose we should add, they had leisure to live any sort of life at all beyond that of slavery or incessant labor. The Greeks saw two such modes of existence, principally, but called them tragedy and comedy. Again and again they saw human lives as playing out the rules of one of these modes or the other, neither of which was a human creation, strictly speaking, though neither was it a divine one, being rather a consequence of the fact that men after all are not gods—cannot live forever and do not know their own fate.

Homer, who is the inexhaustible spring from which all subsequent poetry in our tradition comes—right up at least to Whitman, who said so—is the great artist in both of the ways I refer to. *The Iliad* (GBWW 1: 4, 3-179; 11: 3, 307-541) is the tragedy by which all others of the sort are measured, as *The Odyssey* (GBWW 1: 4, 183-322; 11: 3, 307-541) is the comedy that all subsequent poets—Dante and Cervantes, notably, even Melville, if, as I think, *Moby Dick* (GBWW 1: 48; 11: 48, 1-260) is ultimately a comic work, being about survival—have imitated. *The Iliad* is a poem of death in its most terrible human form, which is war; *The Odyssey* is a poem of life, which requires both peace and a home, the two things Odysseus is in search of, both being hard to find. The first poem is painfully swift in its course, the second, deliciously drawn out. Tragedy is simple and disastrous, Aristotle tells us, while comedy is complicated and moral. Or, as we might say, tragedy is action and comedy is talk, for no two endeavors better characterize Achilles and Odysseus, the protagonists of these two poems. Yet in a sense both poems have the same subject, though it is nearly impossible to see it as the same, and though if we could really do that we would have a kind of superhuman insight such as Socrates speaks of at the end of the *Symposium*, when he says that the true artist in tragedy is an artist in comedy also; unfortunately, by this time everybody is too drunk and sleepy to grasp what it is he means.

The idea that Homer's poems share, I think, is Justice, and here I find myself rather suddenly coming upon the subject of my own remarks, which their title indicates. For the concern of poetry with law seems to me ultimately to be a concern with justice, or the lack of it, in human life and human affairs, justice being the end that law may be supposed to seek—that validates it, or not, as the case may be. By justice I do not mean anything more elaborate than the sense human beings seem to have that, in the general order of things, the good they do to others and the harm they suffer from them require recognition, if not an appropriate response. This may not come, but if that happens, it is not a matter of indifference, and in fact poetry is never more likely to involve itself, or rather to be called upon, as witness, than when such failures occur.

The importance we attach to this matter of justice is indicated, I think, precisely by the great interest we have traditionally taken in poetry, where justice is so often the focus of attention, as is injustice. There is nothing we care more about in poetry—in story, if you like—than injustice—nor is there anything we wish more intensely to be righted if it can be. Often it can't, or someone thinks it can't; that is what tragedy is about. But sometimes it can, in very different form from that in which it was first conceived, and that is comedy's business. In either case we pay close attention, are forced to pity or are given a kind of satisfaction that itself is likely to be wrenching. Indeed, we weep at both results—at Lear understanding that his strangled daughter, now speechless for certain, will come no more; at Charlie Chaplin's flower girl, in *City Lights*, recognizing with her fingers the face to which the mocking eyes his money has restored have blinded her—as if each result has brought its own purgation (*GIT* 1995: 178-228). And so it has. The recognition scenes of tragedy and comedy are different in that one is bitter, the other sweet, but both lift the burden from us of knowing what we would have told the persons in the story if we could, which is that the wrong that they have suffered has been realized, whether or not it can be cured.

Both of Homer's poems have to do with justice and the law that dictates it, or changes it into something we would rather do without. Like Achilles, who asked for justice and got it, and then didn't want it because it seemed to be something else, having cost the unanticipated death of his dearest friend. Or like Odysseus, who discovered it was hidden behind many disguises, which he met by disguises of his own, and then found he could have it only if he really transformed himself, which so far as possible, given the man he was, he did. Is either kind of justice the kind we like to call poetic—the kind that means everyone has got what they deserve?

Perhaps. But what have they deserved? Poetry has not been sure it knows the answer to that question. We remember Hamlet's outburst to Polonius:

Use every man after his desert, and who should 'scape whipping?
Use them after your own honor and dignity; the less they deserve, the
more merit is in your bounty. (*GBWW* 1: 27, 46; 11: 25, 46)

The Greeks were fascinated by the ways in which justice could disguise itself—could seem to be exactly the thing which it was not, or carry within itself some other contradiction they had better look out for, lest it surprise them and bring ruin upon their heads. Their name for this was irony, and they never tired of exploring the cunning turns it took. Perhaps the greatest example of its power is the story of Oedipus, who, having become ruler of Thebes by the power of his wits, undertook to employ them in the cure of a plague which had overtaken his city, only to discover that he was himself its unwitting cause (*GBWW* 1: 5, 99-142; 11: 4, 111-174). Aristotle thought Sophocles's treatment of this subject the perfect tragedy, and the many brilliant ironies of his play have never been surpassed. On the other hand, Socrates, told by the Delphic Oracle that he was the wisest man in Greece, determined to avoid Oedipus's fate and took the message to mean he knew that he knew nothing. Scott Buchanan suggests that *The Dialogues of Plato* (*GBWW* 1: 7; 11: 6), in which Socrates plays the central part, are the long record of Plato's attempt to discern by careful inquiry the things Oedipus thought he already knew, among them the nature of justice, and thereby to save the soul of his own city, which was Athens, and which in his time had been ruined, like Oedipus' Thebes, through overconfidence. *The Dialogues* may be read as the comic counterpart to the Oedipus tragedy—that is, if you are willing to take them as poetry, which I think they are, being essentially dramatic, and though I do not for a moment mean that they are not philosophy as well.

But Plato could not prevent the effect of his city's fall on both poetry and justice, as Buchanan points out. The effect was to leave poetry (and philosophy as well, along with arts and universities) in a city without real power, which at passed at first to Macedon and then in time to Rome. A schism developed in the Western mind as a result, which not only lost the habit of combining poetry and power—and in Roman terms that meant poetry and law—as human enterprises but also decided they were incompatible. Poetry in time became a thing to be read only in schools, something for children, a means of escape (the Victorians liked poetry because they thought it wasn't true), while power was the province of those responsible for the city or the state, the true business of men. As for

their education, poetry was not included. I do not think it is much a part of your curriculum at this law school except as quixotic figures like Mr. George Anastaplo and Mr. William Braithwaite introduce it. You begin to see, I am sure, what I think got left out along with it.

It is true, Rome had its poet, Virgil, whose greatest poem, *The Aeneid*, is the very pursuit of justice you would suppose I would find apt (*GBWW* 1: 13, 103-379; 11: 12, 81-321). As I do, in part, for the poem's understanding of justice and poetry—and it labors to understand them both—is explicit and political in a way that Homer never was or could be, there being no states yet, truly speaking, in the world he contemplated. And yet *The Aeneid* in its undoubtedly grand manner is proof of the schism I have mentioned, since the wanderings of Aeneas on his way to found Rome, as Virgil, following certain legends, chose to believe that he had done, accepts that poetry and justice must finally part. The latter is to be Rome's business, Aeneas is told prophetically—founded to establish and maintain it—while the arts are to be left along with speculative thought to the Greeks, whose world has become a political backwater. It is not surprising, perhaps, that a famous melancholy sounds in Virgil's poem, as if he thought he himself had no place in Rome, for all that he was the favorite of Augustus, whom he celebrates. We remember that Plato would have banished poets from the Republic, the just city. Do we see in Virgil what that would really mean—or has he, in taking Plato literally and turning poetry into history, even into propaganda, somehow missed the point? The poets are told in *The Republic* that they must “go to another city.” Is not this city Athens, and is not Plato saying that there is work for poetry to do still in the not yet just world that exists?

The schism I refer to widened after that until Rome itself became divided into two parts, with profound consequences for the Western psyche, which passed through a kind of despair that gave birth to Christianity. This did not attempt to repair the schism so much as to transcend it, and the means by which it did so was neither poetry nor justice but love, by which both the soul and all creation were seen as unified. Such was the vision, at least, of Dante, whose *Divine Comedy* in the Middle Ages proclaims it. And yet, is not his poem a true descendant of the others—for Virgil he certainly knew—and is it not in some important sense a continuation of their quest?

The love that Dante celebrates is just, that much we are told, and it is poetry that discovers it for us in a way that we can see. Dante

selects a poet, indeed he selects Virgil himself, to be his guide through the regions of eternity—not a priest and certainly not a politician. Dante is a poet, too, who is writing a poem about his journey, which is one of discovery and at the same time that of a soul on the path of its salvation. It is quite a trick to pull off, as we say nowadays, for no poet has ever undertaken so many roles. We are not surprised that the sight of God that Dante has in one last, blinding moment is of a book in which the parts of the universe are bound as pages. What else would a poet see (*GBWW* 1: 2 1; 11: 19, 1-170)?

The power that binds these pages is law, but ruling as love does, without any apparent force at all. So much we learn from Piccarda, whose soul Dante meets in Paradise, where, however, she stands upon an outer circle in adoration of the Godhead at the center of things. Do not spirits such as hers envy others who stand closer, Dante asks? No, she says, “His Will is our peace.” We ask ourselves if, as Dante clearly thought, this is what justice would seem like if it were perfect, such as we had never had or could have? An uncomfortable recollection arises of fanatical modern sects whose members speak of their demented leaders much as Piccarda does. But we recall that they exclude everyone except themselves from their consideration, while she is comprehensive, or rather Dante is. No one is excluded from the law that has her entire devotion, and none denies it, not even the damned in Hell, though they may hate it forever. Whatever perfect justice may be thought to be, it is justice for all, not some.

It is worth noting that Dante does not think he can deserve the love that he pursues—the law, as we must remember here to say—without a transformation of himself, which in the dispensation by which he lived meant recognition of his sins. In a famous early canto of the *Inferno* he meets two lovers, Paolo and Francesca, who are there as adulterers, and faints with pain when he hears their story, which is of how they were come upon one day while reading a book together and killed by the husband they had betrayed. It is not until later in the poem that we realize we have been treated to this scene in part because it reveals sympathies that both Dante the poet and Dante the man think are proper but that are inconsistent with the higher love they seek. When at the gate of Paradise Dante does meet Beatrice, the woman he loved himself until she died, she chides him gently for the many things he has not understood on his way there—does not understand yet—and we are left to think about the fact that perfect love, like perfect law, is never obvious, cannot be seen without effort. We remember Odys-

seus tempted by the many disguises of peace and home that he encountered, all of which were false.

The transcendent vision that enabled Dante to see as high as heaven did not survive much longer than himself. Some thirty years after he died, Petrarch wrote the poems that by traditional reckoning began the Renaissance. Thereafter poetry and Justice, or the rule of states, developed independently, and in unprecedented ways. Yet the quest to which I have referred, whereby the one appeared to seek the other, was not entirely abandoned. On the contrary, one of its greatest examples was of that age, when a certain Spanish gentleman with too much time on his hands became addicted to the many books of chivalry his library contained and undertook the mission of bringing them to life (*GBWW* 1: 29; 11: 27). His real name is forgotten, though you can look it up, but it hardly matters, because he will be forever known by the name he took for himself, which was Don Quixote de la Mancha, this being the town in which he lived. Calling himself that, wearing an ancient suit of armor on his thin frame, and riding a bony horse, he commenced to go about—eventually in the company of a short, stout peasant named Sancho Panza, who rode a donkey and whom he designated as his squire—endeavoring to convince the world that it should adopt the order of knight errantry, which he maintained had really once existed in a kind of golden age and which he believed to require of him that he break enchantments, right miscellaneous wrongs, and rescue damsels in distress.

That he failed utterly in this undertaking is well known. Although he urged his vision upon it with an eloquence that everyone acknowledged, the world was not persuaded and declared that the man was cracked to think it could be, or should. It noted also that he did a certain amount of harm in his attempt to be the knight he thought to play. Yet the marvelous arguments he made in support of his resolve and the inspired example he set on its behalf constitute one of the funniest as well as one of the saddest lessons we possess of what it might be like if we tried to do as he did and offer justice to the world. Cervantes, the gentleman's creator, does not draw any such lesson from his own tale, we must acknowledge—does not draw any lesson at all, so far as we can gather—but it is hard not to think that poetry has here wonderfully and consciously outreached itself, and taught us something in the process. The world will resist becoming just, the implication is, supposing that it should be, and supposing we know how to make it so—not because it prefers injustice, but because it would rather continue as what it is, rather than be made an ideal thing. Perhaps it is wise in this, or perhaps it is just stubborn.

Might we nevertheless succeed in Don Quixote's high determination if we ourselves were kings, say, and not mere paper knights, and if the example we were offered came out well, not badly? Shakespeare, contemporary to Cervantes, whose knowledge of statecraft was encyclopedic, and who is the poet for all time, seems to have thought so—for awhile. His two plays devoted to the reign of Henry IV (*GBWW* 1: 26, 434-502; 11: 24, 434-502), together with the one on that of his successor, may be read as having such an aim.

In the first of these plays, the kingdom is shown to be in great disorder, derived, as was the case in ancient Thebes, from a defect in the right of the ruler to his throne. The plague by which it is bedeviled is rebellion, led by Henry Percy, known as Hotspur. The threat is all the greater because of the cynic immorality of the king's subjects, symbolized by Falstaff, and because the king's own son, Prince Hal, the heir apparent, is Falstaff's close companion, sharing in his revels and, indifferent as it seems, to his responsibilities.

You know, I am sure, how Shakespeare, with some support from history, makes this all come out. Hotspur, betrayed himself by weakness and dissension among his supporters, is nevertheless likely to succeed when Hal, pulling himself together, rides off to battle and slays him; and having saved the kingdom in this fashion, Hal then returns to disown Falstaff and his crowd of miscreants, whom he punishes for their various crimes and misdemeanors. Then, in the play that follows, he reappears as Henry V, and he leads an expedition against the French, whom he conquers and whose princess he makes his queen. He stands forth at the end as the very model of a soldier-king—of power and virtue—that Shakespeare appears to have thought he was. Justice has been established in the world, and has found a poet to say so.

But there is a caution in the tale which may not be simply literary—or poetic, if you prefer. What seemed to deserve poetry's high celebration was a dramatic dead end. We may like Laurence Olivier and Kenneth Branagh, who have both played the part, but the truth is, Henry V is a limited character—rather vain, given to bombast, not above sophistry. And even if he had been the paragon we are asked to think he was, there would have been no more to say about him. Poetry shrivels when asked to put life into perfection. Remember Milton. *Henry V* could have no successor among Shakespeare's history plays, as they are called, being the climax to which they led, and wisely Shakespeare never tried to write another. The kings of the tragedies and romances that follow—if ro-

mances is the right term for *The Winter's Tale*, say, or *The Tempest*—are all mythic or imaginary. I might call them pure poetry. Yet what Hamlet and Lear and Othello and Prospero know or learn of justice is profound by comparison with anything we find in *Henry V*. Is this because, as poetry, they say what could have been the case, not what was? Is poetry hobbled by the limits of history? I am reminded of the definition of a myth I once heard which said it was something so true it couldn't possibly have happened. Perhaps that is the point at which we have arrived. Perhaps that is what justice is. You must decide if you are free then to ignore it.

I said at the beginning of these remarks that not until our own day had poetry tried to function without limits of a certain sort, by which I meant that it has been interested in an order that may lie only in ourselves, but to which we are subject and by which as human beings we are defined. I do not mean that poetry has always found such an order—quite the contrary, as *The Iliad* shows, and so, more exactly to the point, does the *Book of Job* and *Antigone* and any number of other works you doubtless could remind me of. But even in such works the quest I have spoken of—the question, if you like—is real, and the failure to find an answer to it is momentous, suggests some defect in the nature of things, or some grand illusion in ourselves, which reflects at least a human dignity.

I would like to conclude by speaking briefly of two works that seem to mark the end of the time when it was thought possible to have this kind of dignity, to think the question is worth asking, and which suggest that it is not, if that means an answer can be expected to reveal itself. I have in mind *The Trial* and *The Castle*, by Franz Kafka, with which our century begins, approximately, and whose vision seems to have been so terribly realized since then. The first of these works is regarded as a kind of political fable, the second as a social commentary. I think they are both theological.

Perhaps you know them. In the first, a certain Joseph K., by profession a bank clerk, finds his apartment invaded one morning by enigmatic bailiffs from a mysterious and unnamed court who tell him that he is under arrest and must prepare himself for trial. Just what his offense is, or what judge he must answer to, or when the matter will come up, they do not say; indeed they say they do not know. But it is clear that they are serious, and he believes them—believes they will be back, or that he will be summoned, in due course. The rest of the book, which has the quality of a nightmare, describes his attempts to learn, over weeks or months, who his accusers are and how he can defend himself against them, perhaps with the help of lawyers he is told to consult, though they prove

useless. His job, his personal relationships, disintegrate. At one point, seeking rest in a cathedral, he is told by a priest that his protestations of innocence are themselves an indication of his guilt, and that the justice he seeks—his vindication, in other words—will forever elude him. The trial he has been warned to expect never occurs, nor do the authorities, whoever they are, take any further initiative. But in the end K. is visited once more by the bailiffs, who take him out and execute him in a manner that implies a sacrifice, though his last thought is that his death is meaningless, no better than a dog's.

The Castle does not offer even this sort of engagement. Again, the protagonist, if one can call him that, is known by his initial, K., though this time he is not a bank clerk but a surveyor, and though the action takes place not in a city but in a remote mountain village where he arrives, at the beginning of the story, because he has been engaged by the authorities there to do some surveying—at least, that is what he says. It is not clear that this is so. The townspeople are skeptical of K.'s claim, and the authorities, if that is who they are, who are taken to live in a high and unapproachable castle above the town, where they are never seen, do not concede it. In fact, they are impossible to reach for verification or, indeed, for any explanation at all of why K. has been summoned, if he has, despite his attempts over a period of months, if not years, to find out what his position is.

The book is not finished—neither is *The Trial*; Kafka found them both beyond his strength to complete—but we gather from notes that remain that K. was never to get an answer to his question, unless the bureaucratic runaround, punctuated by a sort of hysterical giggle, which he hears once over the telephone, has amounted to that; nor was it to be acknowledged, when some indirect and enigmatic message finally does arrive, that he has any right to be in the village at all. He is merely to be allowed to live out his life there as a kind of favor, without further recognition—by which time, however, he is on his deathbed, his hour having arrived.

Such are the two great myths of our time in the West, as I think, fulfilled by social and psychological developments, a pervasive alienation, of which we are by now painfully aware. The summary I have given is hardly adequate, does not convey their quality, which, again, is that of two nightmares, where the most beautifully reasoned and closely argued consideration of the predicament—the moral environment, if you like—in which their protagonists, each of whom is evidently his creator's alter ego, are locked, falls to make sense of it, and where the most determined efforts cannot

make it explain itself, supposing there is anything to explain, or any “It” to address. But you can grasp, perhaps, the haunting character that the two books have.

I do not mean for a moment that Kafka is the first poet to have this perception of our moral universe, to conclude that whatever gods there be are utterly indifferent to the sense of justice I have said that human beings possess, whether they have one of their own or not. I have mentioned *The Iliad*, *Job*, and *Antigone*. You could all add titles of the same kind to the list of Kafka’s predecessors, I am sure. No greater one can be found than the *Oedipus Rex* of Sophocles, to which I have also referred, whose hero denies to the end that he deserves his fate, though others say he must, simply because it is his. A more recent expression of what at least a certain voice holds to be the absence of any moral reason in the nature of things is in Dostoyevsky’s *Notes From Underground*, written fifty years before Kafka’s books appeared, which many of you probably know.

Still, the fact is that Kafka, like Dostoyevsky, has been taken, not only as the poet but as a prophet of what we like to call the human condition in the twentieth century—and by prophet, I mean someone who sees not so much how things will be but how they already are. We seem to recognize his vision everywhere, though it goes sometimes by other names. The French—I am thinking of Sartre and Camus—called it a sense of the absurd, by which they meant the illusion that any such thing as a moral universe exists, or that we can expect recognition from it; and there is in Kafka a kind of wit that justifies such a term. It is not what French existentialism had in mind, and yet, cannot something of the kind be heard in the plays of Samuel Beckett?


Of course this is not exactly laughter, nor does its presence mean that Kafka is not serious. On the contrary, he is almost insanely so, unlike ourselves at the end of his century, who have, as it were, got used to the idea of absurdity, if that is the right term, and, seeing it everywhere and supposing it to be amusing, believe it can be played with. I think it was Saul Bellow who insisted not long ago that the only style left for the novelist is parody, the form itself being in his estimation quite exhausted. Our humor is certainly parody. We entertain ourselves also with fear, as you note if you go to the movies nowadays, where any devil is dined—and laughed at.

There seems to me to have been a loss of magnitude in our sense of the absurd, even as there has been an extension of its range. Is this not so when, as is now the case, the rich can say that the poor are

taking all their money, while the powerful assert that the powerless have deprived them of their rights? What is poetry to make of such stuff except farce? Chaplin could have made comedy, perhaps, but we exiled him in a parody of Plato because he told lies, as we believed, about one of our gods—that is, Mammon. Now he is dead, and we must be careful that justice is not mocked.

If justice is at all, to be sure, and if it will take the trouble to reveal itself—then the question in which I have suggested that poetry has shown such interest is not, after all, absurd, as Kafka wished it was not, but could find no one to say so. I must bring these remarks to a close without being able to offer full assurance. That the *idea* of justice exists—is something more than this person’s opinion, or that one’s—the teachers in this school will doubtless have been able to indicate by showing you how to look for it in your own minds. But I know well how little the exigencies of your course, and, still worse, the requirements of legal practice, leave time to decide where it lies, if at all, in the cases you have to consider. If the poets are right, however, it reveals itself—or not, as the case may be—in the lives we live as human beings; and if that is so, then some portion of your time should be devoted to the study of such lives.

I recall hearing that, years ago, the meetings of the English Department at a great university were always held at three o’clock on Friday afternoons. The younger, idealistic faculty members once asked the chairman why he scheduled them at such an hour, when everybody wanted to leave, when there was time only for administrative matters and none left to discuss literature. Should we not be discussing literature, he was asked? Oh, he said, if we did anything like that, we’d never get home in time for dinner.

I do not know how it will be for you students in days to come, but I should like to think that, at least now and then, when you arrive home late to find that your meat has grown cold and your spouse asks you where on earth you have been, you will be able to present a straight face and say that you could not get away sooner, you were studying justice—that is, you were reading poetry. I wish you good luck. 

John Van Doren, who early in his career studied law and is now, among other things, president of The Poetry Center of Chicago, which sponsors readings by poets and writers in that city, was for many years an associate of Mortimer J. Adler at the Institute for Philosophical Research. From 1971 to 1994, Mr. Van Doren

served Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., as executive editor of The Great Ideas Today.

WELCOME NEW MEMBERS

Antonio Prado

Diane Rowley

We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

published weekly for its members by the

CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE GREAT IDEAS

Founded in 1990 by Mortimer J. Adler & Max Weismann

Max Weismann, Publisher and Editor

Ken Dzugan, Senior Fellow and Archivist

A not-for-profit (501)(c)(3) educational organization.
Donations are tax deductible as the law allows.