(1919–26) was a set of 10 murals, designed to be a "people's history," celebrating the deeds of ordinary men conquering nature.

Critics championed Benton's first efforts, comparing him to Mexican Marxist muralists Diego Rivera and José Clemente Orozco. But Benton was no Marxist, as his next series of murals, *America Today* (1930), showed. These murals, Broun says, "appealed directly to the populace they portray rather than to those who sought to be the people's saviors." While Rivera's murals from this period show heroic, larger-than-life laborers toiling over machinery, Benton's murals portray a "patchwork of private interests"; burlesque queens, faith healers, and boxers jostle machines and stockbrokers.

In New York, where he taught painting, Benton's radical friends (such as e. e. cummings and Lewis Mumford) accused him of being a vulgar fascist. Benton contended that Marxism was "a feudal hangover in the realm of thought which has no place" in the modern world. Disgusted by the bickering of New York intellectuals, he moved to Kansas City in 1935.

"I feel I belong all over my state," Benton wrote in 1937. "There is about the Missouri landscape something intimate and known to me." Perhaps that is why Benton's later paintings are more personal and lyrical than his earlier works. Such works as *Persephone* (1938–39) and *Silver Stump* (1943) show an intimacy and faith in the fertility of the land lacking in his epic murals.

In his last years, Benton was "content to deal with history more often than politics." Yet in his final paintings, such as *Wheat* (1967), Broun notes, Benton "at last merged his lifelong concern for social progress and his enduring faith in natural regeneration."

G. K. C. and The Stage

"Please, Sir, May I Go Mad? G. K. Chesterton, Self-Revelation, and the Stage" by P. J. Kavanagh, in *Grand Street* (Summer 1987), 50 Riverside Dr., New York, N.Y. 10024.

G. K. Chesterton (1874–1936) used his wit to master the arts of journalism, literary and social criticism, fiction, and poetry. His works, written from the perspective of an Anglican who became a Catholic convert when he was 48, range from the Father Brown series of mysteries to such collections of essays as *All Things Considered* (1908). But Chesterton's talents never translated well to the theater.

Although Chesterton's three plays are forgotten today, says Kavanagh, a columnist for *The Spectator*, they yield dividends to the careful reader. "These dramatic works," he says, throw "an unusually personal light on Chesterton, and on his thought."

Chesterton began his intermittent efforts as a playwright at the urging of George Bernard Shaw. "I shall repeat my public challenge to you," Shaw wrote in a 1908 letter, "vaunt my superiority, insult your corpulence . . . steal your wife's affections with intellectual and athletic displays, until you contribute something to the British drama."

Five years later, Chesterton completed *Magic*, which embodied his war against "modernity"—a kind of atheistic pessimism which drained life

of exuberance and adventure. Set in the estate of an endearingly comic duke, the play pits an agnostic and a socialist clergyman against a conjurer who wishes to restore Christian mystery and wonder to the world. According to Kavanagh, the play has "an intriguing vein of darkness" lacking in Chesterton's cheerful essays.

Although *Magic* was a London success, Chesterton abandoned play writing for almost two decades. His next play, *The Judgement of Doctor Johnson* (1930), shows Chesterton's disillusionment with Western society. In the play, Chesterton's mouthpiece is the 18th-century essayist Samuel Johnson, who rails against unrestrained sex, atheism, and moralizing liberalism. The play concludes with a speech, which, Kavanagh argues, expresses "a loss of belief" in any practical means of reforming society. *Doctor Johnson* closed after six performances. Chesterton's last play, *The Surprise* (1932), was a piece in which actors portrayed puppets in a toy theater. The play was never finished.

Kavanagh concludes that Chesterton's three plays deserve reviving because they reveal a dark side missing from his other writings. "For the sake of those 'moderns' who cannot trust a light unless they see it streaked with darkness," he says, "Chesterton should have written more plays."

The Poet's Task

"Responsibilities of the Poet" by Robert Pinsky, in *Critical Inquiry* (Spring 1987), 5801 Ellis Ave., Chicago, Ill. 60637.

Many contemporary poets, says Pinsky, an English professor at the University of California, Berkeley, suffer from a particularly modern disease—"Poetry Gloom." Faced with sparse and diminishing audiences for their work, poets have "mysterious disaffections" and "querulous doubts" about the validity of their art. To whom, Pinsky asks, should poets be responsible? The state? Posterity? The audience?

Prior to the 20th century, such questions would not have been asked. Poetry was clearly accepted as a part of civilized life, as a mirror for society to view itself. But as contemporary poetry became more abstract and austere, the traditional poet's role—as sage or tribune—faded.

But poets should not try to regain lost audiences by cheapening their art. The first task of a poet, Pinsky argues, is to "mediate between the dead and the unborn," preserving poetry as a living art between one generation and the next. That does not mean that poets should only work in forms sanctioned by the dead; their task is to ring changes on their heritage, not mimic the lifeless past. By keeping poetry energetic for the next generation, "others who come after us can have it if they want it, as free to choose it and change it as we have been."

Like journalism, poetry can be a form of social history, for both genres are observations about the way we live. But poetry is a more reflective art than journalism; poets judge as well as record. By reading William Blake's poem *London*, for example, we learn not just how poor people lived two centuries ago, but also the way civilized men viewed those unfortunate enough to have "mind-forg'd manacles."

Poetry must describe the world; pure inward abstraction, Pinsky says,