

**On the Ancient and Modern
Influence of Poetry**
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ON THE ANCIENT AND MODERN INFLUENCE OF
POETRY.

It is curious to observe how little one period resembles another. Centuries are the children of one mighty family, but there is no family-likeness between them. We ourselves are standing on the threshold of a new era, and we are already hastening to make as wide a space, mark as vast a difference as possible, between our own age and its predecessor. Whatever follies we may go back upon, whatever opinions we may re-adopt, they are never those which have gone *immediately* before us. Already there is a wide gulph between the last century and the present. In religion, in philosophy, in politics, in manners, there has passed a great change; but in none has been worked a greater change than in poetry, whether as it regards the art itself, or the general feeling towards it. The decline and fall of that Roman empire of the mind seems now advanced as an historical fact; while we are equally ready to admit that some twenty years since the republic was in its plenitude of power. In the meantime a new set of aspirants have arisen, and a new set of opinions are to be won. But it is from the past that we best judge of the present; and perhaps we shall more accurately say what poetry is by referring to what it has been.

Poetry in every country has had its origin in three sources, connected with the strongest feelings belonging to the human mind—Religion, War, and Love. The mysteries of the present; the still greater mysteries of the future; the confession of some superior power so deeply felt; higher impulses speaking so strongly of some spiritual influence of a purer order than those of our common wants and wishes;—these all found words and existence in poetry. The vainest fictions of mythology were the strongest possible evidence how necessary to the ignorance of humanity was the belief of a superior power; so entire was the interior conviction, that sooner than believe in nothing no belief was too absurd for adoption. The imagination, which is the source of poetry, has in every country been the beginning as well as the ornament of civilization. It civilizes because it refines. A general view of its influence in the various quarters of the globe will place this in the most striking point of view.

Africa is the least civilized quarter of the globe, not so much from its savage as from its apathetic state; one could almost believe that it had been formed from the dregs of the other parts. Now, the distinguishing mark of its deficiency in that soil of mind wherewith the intellect works, is its total want of imagination. It is the only great portion of the world which is not emphatically made known to us by its own peculiar religion. Her mythology was the earthly immortality of Greece. Greece is indelibly linked with the idea of civilization; but all those fine and graceful beliefs which made its springs holy places, and haunted the fragrant life of every flower and leaf, were the creations of its earliest time. Look from thence to the fierce regions of the North,—how full is the Scandinavian faith of the wild and wonderful! or to the East, how gorgeous their tales of enchantment, with their delicate Peris, and the fallen and fearful spirits in their subterranean caverns!—again, the faith of Brahma, with its thousand deities. Or, to cross the wide Atlantic, there are the vestiges of a terrible creed yet

touched with something of spiritual loveliness, in their singing-birds bringing tidings of the departed, and in the green hunting-grounds which made their future hope. Each and all these creeds are the work and wonder of the imagination—but in these Africa has no part. No august belief fills with beauty or terror the depths of her forests, and no fallen temple makes its site sacred though in ruins. Her creeds have neither beauty nor grandeur. The Devil is their principal Deity, and their devotion is born of physical fear. Other nations have had their various faiths, created and coloured by the scenes which gave them birth. The religion of Greece was beautiful as her own myrtle and olive groves. The Scandinavian was like its own wild mountains and snowy wastes, with just gleams of beauty from its starry nights and meteors. The Arabian was glowing and magnificent as the summer earth and radiant sky of its believers; while that of the American Indian was terrible as the huge serpents and the interminable forests which gave shelter to its mysteries. But in Africa the sunny sky, the noble rivers, the woods, splendid in size and foliage, have been without their wonted effect. Slaves from the earliest period, the very superstitions of her sable sons are mean fears caught from their masters; all about them is earthly, utterly unredeemed by those spiritual awakenings which are as lights from another world. We might believe that some great original curse has been said over them, and that they are given over into the hand of man and not of God. And in simple truth that curse has been slavery. The Helots even of Greece were uninspired. "A slave cannot be eloquent," said Longinus; nor poetical either—the wells of his enthusiasm are dried up. What some ancient writer says of iron may be applied to Poetry—its use is the first step to civilization, and civilization is freedom.

Next to Religion War was the great source of poetry; and the deeds of the brave were sung in that spirit of encouragement which one man will ever receive from the praise bestowed on the deeds of another, when he meditates similar achievements of his own. And here we may be permitted a few words on what we cannot but consider an unjust and erroneous opinion, now much insisted upon,—that poets and conquerors have been equal enemies of the human race—the one but acting what the other praised; and that the sin of encouragement was equal, if not greater, than that of commission. In answer to this we must observe that it is not fair to judge of former actions by our present standard. Our first view of society is always the same: we see the human race dwelling in small dispersed sets, with rude habits, the results of hardships and of dangers. A more favourable situation, or, more commonly, the influence of some superior mind, which from the wonderful effects produced by a single man is often a nation's history: these or similar causes first placed some of the tribes in positions of comparative comfort and advancement. This position would of course be envied by their savage and starving neighbours, who would consider brute force the only means of sharing their advantages. Single motives never last: ambition, aggrandisement, conquest with a view to security, soon gave a thousand motives to warfare that had originally begun in want and self-defence. It has required centuries so to consolidate kingdoms that now a breathing space is allowed for reflection on the sin of sacrificing man's most valuable possession—life. But what part has the poet taken in these scenes of bloodshed? One certainly of amelioration. If he has sung of con-

querors, the qualities held up to admiration were those of magnanimity and generosity. He has spoken of the love of liberty as holding light the love of life; and the highest eulogium of a warrior was that he died in defence of his native country. But to give our assertion the support of an example.—Perhaps the spirit which animates, the desire which excites, the power which supports, a conqueror, were never more entirely personified than in Xerxes. He possessed to the utmost that grasping ambition, that carelessness of human blood, which characterize the mere conqueror; yet with all the purple pomp of his power, we are not aware of his having been held up otherwise than in reprobation, while the whole world has been filled with the fame of his brave opposers; and the names of those who fell at Marathon are still the watchwords of freedom. Again, in the days of chivalry, what were the qualities the minstrel lauded in the knight?—his valour, certainly, but still more his courtesy, his protection of the weak against the strong, his devotion, his truth;—till the “ungentle knight” was almost as much a phrase of disgrace as that of the “recreant.”

Love was the third great fountain of poetry's inspiration; and who that has ever loved will deny the necessity of a language, beyond the working-day tongue of our ordinary run of hopes and fears, to express feelings which have so little in common with them. What has been the most popular love-poetry in all countries?—that which gave expression to its spiritual and better part—constancy kept like a holy thing—blessings on the beloved one, though in that blessing we have ourselves no share; or sad and affectionate regrets in whose communion our own nature grows more kindly from its sympathy. We are always the better for entering into other's sorrow or other's joy.

The whole origin and use of poetry may be expressed in a few brief words: it originates in that idea of superior beauty and excellence inherent in every nature—and it is employed to keep that idea alive; and the very belief in excellence is one cause of its existence. When we speak of poetry as the fountain whence youth draws enthusiasm for its hopes,—where the warrior strengthens his courage, and the lover his faith,—the treasury where the noblest thoughts are garnered,—the archives where the noblest deeds are recorded,—we but express an old belief. One of our great reviews—the “Westminster”—in speaking of the fine arts, &c. says, “The aristocracy do well to encourage poetry: it is by fiction themselves exist—and what is poetry but fiction?” We deny that poetry is fiction; its merit and its power lie alike in its truth: to one heart the aspiring and elevated will come home; to another the simple and natural: the keynote to one will be the voice of memory, which brings back young affections—early confidence,—hill and valley yet glad with the buoyant step which once past over them,—flowers thrice lovely from thoughts indelibly associated with their leaf or breath: such as these are touched by all that restores, while it recalls, days whose enjoyment would have been happiness, could they but have had the knowledge of experience without its weariness. To another, poetry will be a vision and a delight, because the virtue of which he dreams is there realized—and because the “love which his spirit has painted” is to be found in its pages. But in each and all cases the deep well of sympathy is only to be found when the hazel rod is poised by the hand of truth. And, till some moral steam is discovered as potent as that now so active in the physical

world, vain will be the effort to regulate mankind like machinery: there will ever be spiritual awakenings, and deep and tender thoughts, to turn away from the hurry and highways of life, and whose place of refuge will still be the green paths and pleasant waters of poesy. That tribes of worse than idle followers have crowded the temple, and cast the dust they brought around the soiled altar,—that many have profaned their high gift to base use—that poetry has often turned aside from its divine origin and diviner end,—is what must be equally admitted and lamented; but who will deny that our best and most popular (indeed in this case best and popular are equivalent terms) poetry makes its appeal to the higher and better feelings of our nature, and not a poet but owes his fame to that which best deserves it? What a code of pure and beautiful morality, applicable to almost every circumstance, might be drawn from Shakspeare!

The influence of poetry has two eras,—first as it tends to civilize; secondly as it tends to prevent that very civilization from growing too cold and too selfish. Its first is its period of action; its second is that of feeling and reflection: it is that second period which at present exists. On the mere principle of utility, in our wide and weary world, with its many sorrows and more cares, how anxiously we ought to keep open every source of happiness! and who among us does not recollect some hour when a favourite poet spread before us a page like that of a magician's; when some expression has seemed like the very echo of our feelings; how often and with what a sensation of pleasure have long-remembered passages sprang to our lips; how every natural beauty has caught a fresh charm from being linked with some associate verse! Who that has these or similar recollections but would keep the ear open, and the heart alive, to the "song that lightens the languid way!"

Why one age should be more productive in poetry than another is one of those questions—a calculation of the mental longitude—likely to remain unanswered. That peculiar circumstances do not create the poet is proved by the fact, that only one individual is so affected: if it were mere circumstance, it would affect alike all who are brought within its contact. What confirmation of this theory (if theory it be) is to be found in the history of all poets!—where are we to seek the cause which made them such, if not in their own minds? We daily see men living amid beautiful scenery; and scenery is much dwelt upon by the advocates of circumstance. Switzerland is a most beautiful country, yet what great poet has it ever produced? The spirit which in ancient days peopled grove and mountain with Dryad and Oread, or, in modern times, with associations, must be in him who sees, not in the object seen. How many there are, leading a life of literary leisure, living in a romantic country, and writing poetry all their days, who yet go down to their unremembered graves no more poets than if they had never turned a stanza! While, on the other hand, we see men with every obstacle before them, with little leisure and less encouragement, yet force their upward way, make their voice heard, and leave their memory in imperishable song. Take Burns for an example: much stress has been laid on the legendary ballads he was accustomed to hear from infancy; but if these were so potent, why did they not inspire his brother as well as himself? Mr. Gilbert Burns is recorded, by every biographer, to have been a sensible, and even a superior man; he dwelt in the same country—he heard the same songs—why was he not a poet too? There can be but one

answer,—there was not that inherent quality in his mind which there was in his brother's. Many young men are born to a higher name than fortune—many spend their youth amid the most exciting scenes—yet why do none of these turn out a Byron, but for some innate first cause? What made Milton in old age,—in sickness, in poverty—depressed by all that would have weighed to the very dust an ordinary man—without one of man's ordinary encouragements,—what could have made him turn to the future as to a home, collect his glorious energies, and finish a work, the noblest aid ever given to the immortality of a language? What, but that indefinable spirit, whose enthusiasm is nature's own gift to the poet. *Poeta nascitur non fit* is, like many other old truths, the very truth after all.

We cannot but consider that, though some be still among us, our own great poets belong to another age. Their fame is established, and their horde of imitators have dispersed; those wearying followers who, to use the happy expression of a contemporary writer, "think that breaking the string is bending the bow of Ulysses." We hear daily complaints of the want of present taste and talent for poetry: we are more prepared to admit the latter than the former. In the most sterile times of the imagination, love of poetry has never been lacking; the taste may have been bad, but still the taste existed. Wordsworth truly says, "that, with the young, poetry is a passion;" and there will always be youth in the world to indulge the hopes, and feel the warm and fresh emotions, which their fathers have found to be vain, or have utterly exhausted. To these, poetry will ever be a natural language; and it is the young who make the reputation of a poet. We soon lose that keen delight, which marvels if others share not in it: the faculty of appreciation is the first which leaves us. It is tact rather than feeling which enables experience to foresee the popularity of a new poet. As to the alleged want of taste, we only refer to the editions of established authors which still find purchasers: one has just appeared of Scott, another of Byron. With what enthusiasm do some set up Wordsworth for an idol, and others Shelley! But this taste is quite another feeling to that which creates; and the little now written possesses beauty not originality. The writers do not set their own mark on their property: one might have put forth the work of the other, or it might be that of their predecessors. This was not the case some few years ago. Who could have mistaken the picturesque and chivalric page of Scott for the impassioned one of Byron? or who could for a moment have hesitated as to whether a poem was marked with the actual and benevolent philosophy of Wordsworth, or the beautiful but ideal theory of Shelley? We are now producing no great or original (the words are synonymous) poet. We have graceful singing in the bower, but no voice that startles us into wonder, and hurries us forth to see whose trumpet is awakening the land. We know that when the snow has long lain, warming and fertilizing the ground, and when the late summer comes, hot and clear, the rich harvest will be abundant under such genial influences. Perhaps poetry too may have its atmosphere; and a long cold winter may be needed for its glad and glorious summer. The soil of song, like that of earth, may need rest for renewal. Again we repeat, that though the taste be not, the spirit of the day is, adverse to the production of poetry. Selfishness is its principle, indifference its affectation, and ridicule its commonplace. We allow no appeals save to our reason, or to our fear

of laughter. We must either be convinced or sneered into things. Neither calculation nor sarcasm are the elements for poetry. A remark made by Scott to one of his great compeers shows how he knew the age in which he was fated to end his glorious career:—"Ah—it is well that we have made our reputation!" The personal is the destroyer of the spiritual; and to the former everything is now referred. We talk of the author's self more than his works, and we know his name rather than his writings. There is a base macadamizing spirit in literature; we seek to level all the high places of old. But till we can deny that fine "farther looking hope" which gives such a charm to Shakspeare's confessional sonnets; till we can deny that "The Paradise Lost" was the work of old age, poverty, and neglect, roused into delightful exertion by a bright futurity; till we can deny the existence of those redeemers of humanity—we must admit, also, the existence of a higher, more prophetic, more devoted and self-relying spirit than is to be accounted for on the principles either of vanity or of lucre: we shall be compelled to admit that its inspiration is, indeed,

"A heavenly breath
Along an earthly lyre."

Methinks there are some mysteries in the soul on whose precincts it were well to "tread with unsandalled foot." Poetry like religion requires faith, and we are the better and happier for yielding it. The imagination is to the mind what life is to the body—its vivifying and active part. In antiquity, poetry had to create, it now has to preserve. Its first effort was against barbarism, its last is against selfishness. A world of generous emotions, of kindly awakenings, those

"Which bid the perished pleasures move
In mournful mockery o'er the soul of love;"

a world of thought and feeling, now lies in the guardianship of the poet. These are they who sit in the gate called the beautiful, which leads to the temple. Its meanest priests should feel that their office is sacred. Enthusiasm is no passion of the drawing-room, or of the pence-table: its home is the heart, and its hope is afar. This is too little the creed of our generation; yet, without such creed, poetry has neither present life nor future immortality. As Whitehead finely says in his poem of "The Solitary,"—

"Not for herself, not for the wealth she brings,
Is the muse wooed and won, but for the deep,
Occult, profound, unfathomable things,—
The engine of our tears whene'er we weep,
The impulse of our dreams whene'er we sleep,
The mysteries that our sad hearts possess,
Which, and the keys whereof, the Muse doth keep,—
Oh! to kindle soft humanity, to raise,
With gentle strength infused, the spirit bowed;
To pour a second sunlight on our days,
And draw the restless lightning from our cloud;
To cheer the humble and to dash the proud.
Besought in peace to live, in peace to die,—
The poet's task is done—Oh, Immortality!"

He is only a true poet, who can say, in the words of Coleridge, "My task has been my delight; I have not looked either to guerdon or praise, and to me Poetry is its own exceeding great reward."