



The Poetry of Life



The Works of
BLISS CARMAN

✻
Essays

The Kinship of Nature	\$ 1.50
The Friendship of Art	1.50
The Poetry of Life	1.50

Poetry

Ode on the Coronation of King Edward	<i>net</i> 1.00
Sappho: One Hundred Lyrics	
Limited Edition (500 copies)	<i>net</i> 6.00
Large Paper Edition (200 copies)	<i>net</i> 10.00
Autograph Edition (50 copies)	<i>net</i> 15.00

✻ **PIPES OF PAN SERIES** as follows:

1. From the Book of Myths *net* 1.00
2. From the Green Book of the Bards *net* 1.00
3. Songs of the Sea Children *net* 1.00
4. Songs from a Northern Garden *net* 1.00
5. From the Book of Valentines *net* 1.00

Poems: A sumptuous collected edition of all of the author's verse *complete* with the exception of Sappho. Limited to 300 copies. Two volumes, small folio, printed throughout in red and black on hand-made paper . *net* *10.00

* On January 1st, 1906, this price will be advanced to \$15.00

✻
L. C. PAGE & COMPANY
New England Building, Boston, Mass.



Blissfarman

The Poetry of Life

By
Bliss Carman

*Author of "Pipes of Pan," "The Kinship
of Nature," "The Friendship of
Art," "Sappho," etc.*



L. C. PAGE & COMPANY

BOSTON

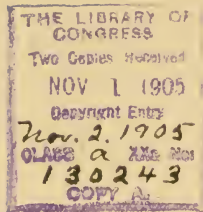
MCMV

PR 4441

P6

1905

copy 2



Copyright, 1905

BY L. C. PAGE & COMPANY
(INCORPORATED)

All rights reserved

Published October, 1905

COLONIAL PRESS
*Electrotyped and Printed by C. H. Simonds & Co.
Boston, U. S. A.*

To My Sponsors in California

J. O'B. Gunn, of San Francisco,

and

W. Irving Way, of Los Angeles

WILL you not accept this volume, my good friends, in ever grateful remembrance of our happy days under your Californian sky?

I recall now, with the continent between us, how gladly I met you on that morning of my arrival, as I strayed through the hall of the St. Francis, feeling like a mouse in a new loft, and how quickly I was made to feel at home. Of all the great-hearted hospitality of the Coast which had me in its generous keeping at San Francisco, at San José, at Monterey and Santa Barbara, at Pasadena and Los Angeles and Santa Monica, I can

To My Sponsors

never adequately speak. If this were a *magnum opus*, and there were enough of it to divide, I should have to put a score of names on my dedicatory page in order to indicate anything like my full indebtedness. As it is, perhaps those who do not find themselves spoken of by name, will be indulgent enough to receive this more tacit acknowledgment of their kindly favour and friendship, on the trail and in the town.

You were always, if I may say it, so constant and painstaking in all the finest offices of comradeship, so ready and solicitous, that I verily believe if I should find myself suddenly at the Great Portal, and my references required, I should instinctively answer, "I am a friend of Mr. Gunn's" — or Mr. Way's, whichever name happened to slip from my tongue at that embarrassing moment. If I were so unfortunate as to have outlived either of you, and to come after you to the shining Doubtful Entrance, I should have no anxiety at all about my reception;

To My Sponsors

for I would know that you had already secured me not only an admission, but probably an introduction to the Management, and an invitation to supper with a few of the choice Stars.

The book to be dedicated to you ought really to deal with the Art of Friendship; but since I am not likely ever to write such a work, let me have the genuine pleasure of offering you the first that comes to hand since we parted. Indeed, if ever the Art of Friendship should be written,—some golden book on that high theme worthy to stand beside Cicero and Emerson,—it would be a stalk without pith for me, unless its pages were redolent of your names and some memorable tribute to your fine instinct in the art.

Now that I have finished the writing and am beginning the final revision as it goes to press, I have, as one always must have in such cases, quarter-hours, half-hours, whole hours and days of misgiving (or illumina-

To My Sponsors

tion), when I sit aghast at the meagre result, in view of all that one knows might have been done. If I am to go through the ordeal of proof-reading with my sanity intact, and not qualify for the funny-house through fits of melancholy, I shall have to keep your kindly faith constantly in mind. I shall have to think to myself that while you are delicate and exacting critics, you are also the most indulgent of friends, and will be sure to find some value in the pages, even if you have to look for it between the lines. I shall be more than conscious of all the shortcomings which must be evident in such a collection of essays on poetry as this, when compared with other books on the same subject, by men whose names I hesitate even to recall. But you, I know, will make no such comparison. Your generosity will overcome your scholarship, and, with all your knowledge of good books, and your love of the best in letters, you will still be unable to find fault when you read herein. I can see you

To My Sponsors

turn from page to page and smile with only the kindest appreciation; or when some sentence or paragraph is farther from the truth than the rest, I can hear you offer your suggestions in the gentlest words.

You may not be critics of the sort that is best for one, very likely, but you are of the sort that one likes best. And if I could always feel as I shall feel while revising this undeniable offspring, I should never need any severer criticism than yours, for I should never again attempt to write.

I should never again be venturing forth from the safe old beaches of silence upon the splendid perilous alluring sea of English prose, where even to-day I can behold so many hardy young captains sailing without disaster their fairy shallops in the sun. They have all voyaged successfully to the Fortunate Islands, and are bringing their untold treasures safely into port, while we stand offering our timorous applause. Yet such is the infatuation of mortals, I dare say I

To My Sponsors

shall be launching a new skiff through the surf of criticism every year while life lasts, only to have it dashed in pieces about my feet, or to see it dance a few yards from land to sink beneath the waves. For, like the dauntless discoverers of old, I shall always be cheered by the unconquerable hope that one day perhaps I may construct a craft, all my own, yet not unseaworthy nor unshapely, which shall be fit to ride the breakers triumphantly, and skim the deep blue waters in a breeze of popularity at last.

However, the book is done now with all its blemishes, and must stand for awhile, — unless, indeed, as I give it this final reading, I could drop it sheet by sheet into the cañon (as you would call our Kaaterskill Clove), there to be blown away with vanishing mists. That is but a mad hope I shall have to relinquish. Let me quiet my agitation with the thought that, while I shall have no reader more difficult than myself, I shall have two, at least, more certain to be pleased.

To My Sponsors

Take the book, then, if you will, and read it not with the keenest glasses in the world. If it fails in temper or in grasp, and is swept into overstatement by some heat of conviction, or falls into banalities for lack of wisdom, read it only the more leniently and forgive it all its trespasses. With whatever failings, it shall not be superfluous. I will save it from that final annihilation, at least. For if it is of no account as criticism, very well, let it serve for something far better,—an excuse for this dedication. That will be a sufficient justification for its appearance,—that it should become a votive offering in the Temple of Friendship and a token of affection between men.

B. C.

TWILIGHT PARK, *September, 1905.*



Contents



	PAGE
The Poetry of Life	I
The Purpose of Poetry	15
How to Judge Poetry	52
The Poet in the Commonwealth	63
The Poet in Modern Life	78
The Defence of Poetry	105
Distaste for Poetry	111
Longfellow	127
Emerson	151
Mr. Riley's Poetry	159
Mr. Swinburne's Poetry	177
The Rewards of Poetry	191
Cheerful Pessimism	217
Masters of the World	224
The Poetry of To-morrow	237
The Permanence of Poetry	247



The Poetry of Life



“THE poetry of life,” says the book of St. Kavin, “is the poetry of beauty, sincerity, and elation.” And when you think of it, it seems reasonable enough that this should be so, since these are the archangelic trio to whose keeping the very sources of life are confided. They are the dispensers of happiness, the bringers of wisdom, the guardians of mystery.

That the poetry of life should of necessity be the poetry of beauty, first of all, seems nearly self-evident. The beauty of the world so outreaches and overcomes all its ugliness, is so much more prevalent and vital and persistent. One concludes at once and instinctively that life concerns itself with beauty

The Poetry of Life

almost, at first glance, to the exclusion of everything else. What more natural, therefore, since life cares so much for beauty, than that art, life's replica, should care greatly for it also?

As for its sincerity, the poetry of life need not always be solemn, any more than life itself need always be sober. It may be gay, witty, humourous, satirical, disbelieving, farcical, even broad and reckless, since life is all these, but it must never be insincere. Insincerity, which is not always one of the greatest sins in the moral universe, becomes in the world of art an offence of the first magnitude. Insincerity in life may be mean and despicable, and indicate a petty nature; but in art insincerity is death. A strong man may lie upon occasion, and make restitution and be forgiven, but for the artist who lies there is hardly any reparation possible, and his forgiveness is much more difficult. Art, being the embodiment of the artist's ideal, is truly the corporeal sub-

The Poetry of Life

stance of his spiritual self; and that there should be any falsehood in it, any deliberate failure to represent him faithfully, is as monstrous and unnatural as it would be for a man to disavow his own flesh and bones. Here we are every one of us going through life committed and attached to our bodies; for all that we do we are held responsible; if we misbehave, the world will take it out of our hide. But here is our friend the artist committing his spiritual energy to his art, to an embodiment outside himself, and escaping down a by-path from all the consequences. What shall be said of him? The insincere artist is as much beyond the pale of human sympathy as the murderer. Morally he is a felon.

There is no excuse for him, either. There was no call for him to make a liar of himself, other than the most sordid of reasons, — the little gain, the jingling reward of gold. For no man would ever be insincere in his art, except for pay, except to cater to some

The Poetry of Life

other taste than his own, and to win approval and favour by his sycophancy. If he were assured of his competency in the world, and placed beyond the reach of necessitous want, how would it ever occur to him to create an insincere art? Art is so simple and spontaneous, so dependent on the disingenuous emotion, that it can never be insincere, unless violence is done to all law of nature and of spirit. Since art arises from the sacramental blending of the inward spirit with the outward form, any touch of insincerity in it assumes the nature of a horrible crime, a pitiable revolt against the order and eternity of the universe. That the conditions of modern commercialism are to blame for this unhappy possibility, may be true; but that only makes it the more sad, and gives the final selfish touch that robs it of all sympathy:

The environs of the city of art are always full of charlatans. The clever artisan or inventor who often does not even pretend to

The Poetry of Life

make the real article you seek, but offers you something "just as good and much cheaper," is never far from the honest market-place. Often he has the very appearance and pose of the true artist, and his resentment of an imputation of his honesty would deceive many. He is a cheat, for all that, and in his heart he knows it.

For the books that are written, the plays that are produced, the pictures that are painted by fatuous, misdirected, incompetent, yet sincere energy, one can have nothing but compassionate respect. The sight of some poor spirit, in guileless devoted zeal, spending years and health and hope and resources in the pursuit of some quite hopeless ambition in art, is a thing to make one weep. So pure, so kindly, so praiseworthy in its intentions, and yet so futile! For such as these there must be a special reward hereafter. They do not cumber the ground, they keep it sweet; often they shame even the

The Poetry of Life

great ones by their singleness of purpose and sincerity of soul.

It is not necessary, as I say, for art to be solemn and wholly serious-minded in order to be sincere. Comedy is quite sincere. She is one of the most honest of the muses. Yet it is easy to usurp her name and play the fool for pennies, with never a ray of appreciation of her true character. I know a comic poet (you may not believe me, but I believe myself), a young man who has recently arisen, who seems to me to be a true artist and no pretender. Whenever I see his name I read his jingles with delight. Such amazing productivity with such un-failing irresistible mirth I have seldom heard of elsewhere. If he is not another Hood, I am mistaken. He is, so far at least, a proof of the fact that one can live in the world yet not be destroyed by the world; for though so eminently popular, he is still genuine in his wit. I always think of his work as an example of art which may

The Poetry of Life

be perfectly frivolous and perfectly sincere at the same time. And every day, side by side with his, I see other work masking as comedy, which is nothing but false, uninspired, and wooden, the pitiable product of cleverness without spirit, the worthless contrivance of journeymen. There seem to be plenty of fabricators of this latter sort of rhyme. They are, I suppose,—they and their works,—the inevitable but odious accompaniments of our times. They write to please their editors, and their reward is sure, but the comic muse disowns them for all that.

Sincerity, then, is not in the least averse to fun, it only requires that the fun shall be genuine and come from the heart, as it requires that every note of whatever sort shall be genuine and spring from the real personality of the writer.

More than this, I find in the phrase, “the poetry of sincerity,” a suggestion as to the function of poetry in relation to science, to

The Poetry of Life

truth, for our thirst for knowing what is to be known. And the aspiration, *Da mihi, Domine, scire quod sciendum est*, seems preëminently the daily prayer for a poet to make, the voice of his longing to be brought into communication with things as they are. It points to the necessity poetry is always under of supplying food for our curiosity, answers for our deepest questions, and a reasonable explanation of life. It emphasizes the fact which I have reiterated so often, that it is never enough for poetry to be stirring and entrancing, unless it is illuminating as well. The poetry of sincerity is the poetry of truth.

In the matter of elation as a requirement in the poetry of life, perhaps a little more explanation is needed. As I understand it, "the poetry of life is the poetry of beauty, sincerity, and elation," because the poetry of ugliness, falsehood, and depression would be a poetry of death. And that is something the world does not want. It has enough of

The Poetry of Life

death in reality, without any artificial copy or reminder of it. When poetry, poetry that is highly esteemed and widely valued, refers to death, it seeks and celebrates some trace of survival, some hint of immortality. It strives to minimize the depressing aspect of death, and bring gladness out of sorrow. There has recently been issued a selection from Whitman's poetry, entitled "The Book of Heavenly Death." It is anything but depressing, of course. It has its place assured with the poetry of elation. And so of all great sincere poetry which has proved itself of value in men's eyes, it retains its vogue and influence because of its enheartening power, its power to strengthen our hearts in courage, faith, love, gladness, serenity, wisdom, resignation, or peace. Poetry which emphasizes depression, discouragement, and defeat, and harps upon the horrors or ills or dark enigmas of life, is of no earthly use whatever to men whose whole business

The Poetry of Life

in life is to avoid and mitigate and overcome those sorry evils.

I have heard a writer who insisted, in season and out of season, perhaps, on the necessity of the joyous note in art, taken to task as a pagan, and accused of being indifferent to the sorrows of man, or even ignorant of them. I am sure that by the word "joy" he could not have meant any mere momentary and shallow gladness, whether of the senses or the spirit. To rejoice, is the injunction repeated again and again by an apostle of Christianity, the religion of the sorrowful. The man who has not tasted sorrow,—natural, inevitable, purifying sorrow,—does not know what joy means in this larger sense. There is a higher joy which includes all sorrow, just as there is a higher good which forgives all evil, though it may scarcely be within the reach of mortals. And one who should advocate the cultivation of a small, thoughtless, selfish joy, to the exclusion of all ex-

The Poetry of Life

perience of sorrow and all sympathy with pain, would be foolish indeed. For such joy is less than the joy of children, being heartless and insecure.

If one asks for the note of joy in art, and demands that the quality of gladness be emphasized, this does not imply that sorrow is to be ignored. A joy without sympathy would be unnatural, if, indeed, it were possible in such a life as this. And if we are urged to rejoice and be exceeding glad, let us understand that it is to be in spite of sorrow and evil, even somehow by their means, and not regardless of their presence in life.

That is always good in poetry, as in life, which stimulates the spirit and renews its zest, its strength, its fortitude. Sorrow and the representation of sorrow may do this at times as well as happiness. There is an influence in tragedy, a nobleness of grief, which is tonic to the soul, and leaves us sobered but not dejected. It is the squalid

The Poetry of Life

and unrelieved depression in them, which makes so many modern tragedies hopeless failures. They emphasize the ugly evil, yet afford the soul no escape, offer it no compensation, such as there always is in life. No wonder the public will have none of them. But in classic tragedy there is always some exit for the distraught, indomitable spirit, some incentive to endurance, some consciousness of greatness or nobility. We weep at the sorrows of Lear, yet our pride is touched by the grandeur of that old kingly man, and our just indignation at the impious daughters relieves the tension of suffering. Both sentiments are kindling to the spirit, and we come away from the play bettered, if not cheered. It belongs to the poetry of elation, tragedy though it is.

Such poetry is in accord with the trend of life,—life which is full of evil and horror and confusion and mischance, and which yet goes on its long, slow, persistent course, ever putting aside these monstrous

The Poetry of Life

drawbacks, and gathering to itself all loveliness and truth and charity. Anything which can help the spirit of man on his difficult trail, that will he gladly make use of, that only to him is good. In poetry, in the arts, whatever gives us a touch of elation, of glad encouragement, of hope, of aspiration, of solace, that do we eagerly seize and hold. It seems to us good, as well as fair and true. If you say that the poetry of sincerity is the poetry of truth, you may add, the poetry of elation is the poetry of goodness.

To incorporate truth, to arrest and make evident those facts about nature which delight and satisfy the mind; to incorporate at the same time the feelings which delight and satisfy the heart; and to give this manifestation a guise which shall allure and delight and satisfy the senses; this is the great and only business of all art, just as it appears to be the supreme concern of all life.

Life which is constantly realizing itself

The Poetry of Life

in nature, does so in these three ways, and offers us these three phases of itself. An art which attempts to realize itself, while still neglecting to make itself felt in any one of these three directions, must, therefore, be faulty just to that extent. And since art is a mimic creation, made in imitation of life, we see how this saying was come by, "The poetry of life is the poetry of beauty, sincerity, and elation."

The Purpose of Poetry



BEFORE considering any of the aims and purposes of poetry, or any of its essential characteristics, we had better first consider it in its place as one of the fine arts. If we then ask ourselves what the fine arts are to do for us, what place they are to hold in a civilized nation, we shall perhaps be able to look at poetry in a broader way than we otherwise could; we shall be able to think of it not merely as a pleasant and amusing diversion, but as one of the potent factors of history.

If we try to find a place for the fine arts among our various human activities, we might begin by making a rough classification of our subject. The most primitive and

The Poetry of Life

necessary occupations we engage in, such as fishing and agriculture, trading, navigating, and hunting, we call industries. These mark the earliest stage of man's career in civilization. Then he comes to other occupations, requiring more skill and ingenuity; he weaves fabrics, he makes himself houses, he fashions all sorts of implements for the household and the chase. He becomes a builder, a potter, a metal-worker, an inventor. He has added thought to work and made the work easier. And these new occupations which he has discovered for himself differ from his earlier ones chiefly in this, that they result in numerous objects of more or less permanence, cunningly contrived and aptly fitted to use. They are objects of useful or industrial art.

Now we must note two things about this step forward which man has taken toward civilization; in the first place he had to have some leisure to do these things, and in the second place the objects he has made reveal

The Purpose of Poetry

his ingenuity and forethought. They are records of his life; and it will happen that as his leisure increases, his implements will become more and more elaborate and ornate. Every workman will have his own way of fashioning them, using his own device and designs, so that they will become something more than rude relics of one historic age or another; they will tell us something of the artificer himself; they will embody some intentional expression of human life and come to have an art value. In so far as they can do this, they contain the essential quality of the fine arts. And the more freely the workman can deal with his craft, the more perfectly he can make it characteristic of himself, the finer will its artistic quality become.

The only purpose of the primitive industries was a utilitarian one. The prime object of the industrial arts is also a utilitarian one; but they have a secondary object as well, they aim at beauty, too. They not only

The Poetry of Life

serve the practical end for which they were intended, they serve also as a means of expression for the workman. Now just as we passed from the industries to the industrial arts, by the addition of this secondary interest, this human artistic expressional quality, so by making this quality paramount we may pass from the industrial arts to the fine arts themselves, where expression is all-important, and utility becomes less prominent. It is the distinguishing mark of the fine arts that they give us a means of expressing ourselves in terms of intelligible beauty.

I have made this distinction between the fine and the industrial arts merely for the sake of clarifying our ideas, and getting a notion of what is the essence of all art. But really the difference is not important, and, having served its turn, may be forgotten. There is an element of art, of course, in everything that we do; the manner of the doing constitutes the art. The quality of art which we should appreciate and respect may

The Purpose of Poetry

quite as truly be present in a Japanese tobacco-box as in a Greek tragedy. The Japanese, indeed, offer an instance of a people who have raised the handicrafts quite to the level of the fine arts. All those fascinating objects of beauty, which they contrive with so much skill, are often, one may guess, only as many excuses for the workman to exhibit his deftness and his taste. This black oak cabinet inlaid with pearl, or that lacquer bowl, may, perhaps, be counted useful objects; but I fancy that before all else they were just so many opportunities for the artist; and when he fashioned them he had in mind chiefly the creation of something beautiful, and dwelt very little upon the use to which they might be put. He was bent on giving play to his imagination, and you may be very sure that he was glad in the work of his hands, and wrought all those intricate effects with loving care. Surely the result is much more deserving of respect than a mediocre epic or a second-rate painting.

The Poetry of Life

It is not what we do that counts, but how well we do it. There is no saying one kind of work is art, and another kind is not art. Anything that is well done is art; anything that is badly done is rotten.

I do not wish either to confine the word "useful," in its application, to our material needs. Everything we do ought to be useful, and so it is, if it is done well. Tables and chairs are useful; but so are pictures and cathedrals and lyrics and the theatre. If we allow ourselves only what are called the necessities of life, we are only keeping alive one-third of being; the other two-thirds of our manhood may be starving to death. The mind and the soul have their necessities as well as the body. And we are to seek these things, not only for our future salvation, but for our salvation here and now, that our lives may be helpful and sound and happy.

It is often easy to see how a fine art may grow from some more necessary and com-

The Purpose of Poetry

monplace undertaking. The fine art of painting, for instance, arose, of course, from the use of ornamental lines and figures, drawn on pottery, or on the walls of a skin tent, where it served only to enhance the value of the craftsman's work and please his fancy. Gradually, through stages of mural decoration, perhaps, where ever increasing freedom of execution was given the artist, its first ornamental purpose was forgotten, and it came to serve only as a means of expressing the artist's imaginative ideals. So, too, of sculpture and architecture, of dancing and acting. It is an easy transition from the light-hearted, superfluous skip of a child as it runs, to the more formal dance-step, as the child keeps time to music and gives vent to its gaiety of spirit. It is an easy transition from gesture and sign language, employed as a necessary means of communication, to their more elaborate use in the art of acting, where they serve merely to emphasize subtle expression and to create

The Poetry of Life

an illusion. Similarly, too, whenever a piece of information is conveyed by word of mouth, and the teller of the tale elaborates it with zest and interest and grace, making it more memorable and vivid and beautiful, the fine art of letters is born.

Now we may notice that the quality of art begins to appear in all our occupations, as the direst stress of existence is relieved, and man's spirit begins to have free play. Art is an indication of health and happy exuberance of life; it is as instinctive and spontaneous in its origin as child's play. To produce it naturally the artist must be free, for the time being, at least, — free from all doubt or hesitation about the truth, free from all material tortures, free from dejection and fear. The primitive industries mark the first grade in the human story, when we were barely escaping from the necessity for unremitting hand-to-hand physical struggle for life; and the second grade in our progress is marked by the appearance of the

The Purpose of Poetry

industrial arts; while we may look on the fine arts as an index of the highest development, as we pass from savagery and barbarism to civilization. And perhaps we shall not go very far astray, in our comparative estimate of nations, and their greatness on the earth, if we rank them in the order of their proficiency in the arts.

Now the fine arts, having thus had their rise in the free play of the human spirit as it went about its work in the world, and busied itself with the concerns of life, became a natural vehicle for giving expression to all men's aspirations and thoughts about life. Indeed, it was this very simple elemental need for self-expression, as a trait in human character, which helped to determine what the fine arts should be. To communicate our feelings, to transmit knowledge, to amuse ourselves by creating a mimic world with imaginative shapes of beauty, these were fundamental cravings, lurking deep in the spirit of man, and demanding satisfaction

The Poetry of Life

almost as imperiously as the desires of the body. If hunger and cold made us industrious, no less certainly did love of companionship and need for self-expression mould our breath into articulate speech. Since, therefore, the fine arts are so truly a creation of man, we may expect to find in them a trustworthy image of himself. Whatever is human must be there,—all our thoughts, all our emotions, all our sensations, hopes, and fears. They will reveal and embody in themselves all the traits of our complex nature. Art is that lovely corporeal body with which man endows the spirit of goodness and the thought of truth. For there are in man these three great principles: a capacity for finding out the truth and distinguishing it from error, a capacity for perceiving goodness and knowing it from evil, and a capacity for discriminating between what is ugly and what is fair. By virtue of the first of these powers, man seeking knowledge has become the philosopher

The Purpose of Poetry

and scientist; by virtue of the second, he has evolved religions and laws, and social order and advancement; while by virtue of the third he has become an artist. Yet we must be careful not to suppose that either one of these powers ever comes alone into full play or fruition; for man has not three separate natures, but one nature with three different phases. When, therefore, man finds expression for his complete personality in the fine arts, you may always expect to find there, not only creations of beauty, but monuments of wisdom and religion as well. Art can no more exist without having a moral bearing, than a body can exist without a soul. Its influence may be for good or for bad, but it is inevitable and it is unmistakable. In the same way no art can exist without an underlying philosophy, any more than man can exist without a mind. The philosophy may be trivial or profound, but it is always present and appreciable.

Art, you see, is enlisted beyond escape, both

The Poetry of Life

in the service of science and in the service of religion. Great art appears wherever the heart of man has been able to manifest itself in a perfectly beautiful guise, informed by thoughts of radiant truth, and inspired by emotions of limitless goodness. Any piece of art which does not fulfil its obligations to truth and goodness, as well as to beauty, is necessarily faulty and incomplete.

At first thought perhaps you might not be quite ready to admit such a canon of criticism as this; for truth is the object of all science, and goodness is the object of all morality, and some persons have been accustomed to say that art has nothing whatever to do either with morality or science, but exists for its own sake alone, for the increase and perpetuation of pleasure. But art cannot give us complete pleasure if it only appeals to our senses, and leaves unsatisfied our natural curiosity and wonder, — our need for understanding and our need for loving. That is to say, our reason and our emotion

The Purpose of Poetry

must always be appealed to, as well as our sense of beauty.

For instance, I may be entranced by the beautiful diction and cadence of a poem, whose conception of life and the universe may be patently false and puerile; from which point of view it could not please me at all, but must disgust me. Or, showing a just estimate of life, it might be true to philosophy and science, and yet celebrate some mean or base or ignoble or cruel incident in a way that would be revolting to my spirit. While it satisfied my sense of lyric beauty, it might fail utterly to satisfy my sense of right or my desire for truth. To be worth while, the fine arts must satisfy the mind with its insatiable curiosity, and the soul with its love of justice, quite as thoroughly as they slake the needs of the senses.

To my mind the great preëminence of Browning as a poet does not rest on any profound philosophy to be found in his work, nor in his superior craftsmanship, nor yet

The Poetry of Life

in his generous uplifting impulse and the way with which he arouses our feelings, but rather on the fact that he possessed all these three requirements of a poet in an equally marked degree. The work of Poe or of William Morris, on the other hand, does not exhibit this fine balance of strength, intellectuality, and passion. On its sensuous side, it is wonderfully beautiful; and yet it is not wholly satisfying, since it fails to give us enough to think about. Its mentality is too slight. Neither of these poets, to judge from their poetry alone, had any large and firm grasp of the thought of the world, such as Browning possessed, and that is why the wizardry of Poe and the luring charm of Morris are not more effective. An artist must be also a thinker and a prophet, if his creations are to have the breath of life. And again poetry may easily fail by being overladen with this same requisite of mentality. It may have more thought than it can carry. Browning himself, in several of his later

The Purpose of Poetry

books, like the "Inn Album," quite loses the poetic poise of his powers, and almost ceases to be a poet in his desire to be a philosopher.

All this is so fundamentally important that we cannot have it too clearly in mind. It is the one great central truth, which must illumine all criticism, and help our understanding of life, as well as of art.

When we say, however, that it is the business of art to give pleasure in all three of these possible ways, of course we must not suppose that the arts do not differ one from another in their ability to meet such demand. The art of music cannot satisfy my reason as completely as the art of poetry, for example, because it cannot transmit a logical statement of fact. It may please my senses more readily than poetry can; it may arouse my emotions profoundly; but it cannot appeal to my mind in the way that poetry does. On the other hand, poetry itself is less strictly rational than prose literature; it

The Poetry of Life

does not attempt to satisfy our curiosity as completely as prose does, though it pleases the æsthetic sense more. There need be no question of one art being greater or less than another; a sense of art equality is born of recognizing the interesting ways in which they vary, and of realizing that each has only a different proportion and arrangement of the three requirements which are necessary to them all.

To speak quite simply, then, art is concerned first of all in the creation of beauty. At the same time it is closely related to science on one side and religion on the other. But how? I suppose we may say (to speak again quite roughly) that science is all we know about things, and religion is all we feel about them. Naturally, therefore, every artistic conception to which we give expression will betray something both of our philosophy and of our morality. It cannot be otherwise. In the case of literature the human spirit is finding expression for

The Purpose of Poetry

itself through the medium of human speech; and speech is the most exact means we have for conveying definite thought and narrating facts. So that every literature contains a great body of work which is almost pure science. In De Quincey's useful phrase, "There is a literature of knowledge and a literature of power." Euclid's *Geometry*, Newton's "*Principia*," Darwin's "*Origin of Species*," are works of science rather than of letters. They appeal solely to our reason, and do not attempt to please our sense of the beautiful by their literary structure and the arrangement of verbal sounds, nor to work upon our emotions in any way. Euclid does not care whether you like his forty-eighth proposition or not, so long as he can convince you that it is true. Neither does Darwin care whether his theory pleases you or not. He is only interested in getting at the truth. How that truth may affect our feelings is quite another matter. It is so, too, of theological and philosophic writers,

The Poetry of Life

like Spinoza and Kant; they are primarily scientists and not artists. But when you pass from these austere reasoners to a work like Plato's Dialogues, you perceive that two new elements have entered into the making of a book. Plato is not only interested in finding out the truth, and convincing you of its reasonableness; he wishes at the same time to make the truth seem pleasant and good; he tries to enlist your feelings on his side, and also to satisfy your sense of beauty with his form of words. He has added a religious value and an art value to the theme of pure philosophy. He has made his book a piece of literature.

And as literature is related to science on one hand, it is related to religion on the other. A book of meditation or of hymns may be extremely devout in sentiment, without possessing any value as literature. Because, very often it takes a certain set of ideas for granted, without caring very much whether they are the largest and truest ideas

The Purpose of Poetry

or not; and also because it makes no effort to be fine and distinguished in its diction. It may be entirely worthy in the fervour of its sentiment, and yet be quite unworthy in an artistic way. With great religious books this is not so. Works like the Psalms, or passages of Isaiah, or the poetry of Job, or Tennyson's "Crossing the Bar," are, first of all, religious in their intention; they are meant to play upon our emotional nature; but they do not stop there; they are cast in a form of words so perfect and fresh that it arrests us at once, and satisfies our love of beauty. At the same time they accord with the most profound and fundamental ideas about life and nature that humanity has been capable of. They satisfy our mind and our æsthetic sense, as well as our spiritual need. It is because of this threefold completeness, that we class them as pieces of literature, and not merely as records of religious enthusiasm. Depth of religious feeling alone would not have been sufficient to make them literature,

The Poetry of Life

any more than clear thinking and accurate reason alone could have made Plato's book a piece of literature.

We must remember, too, how vapid the artistic quality is, when it exists by itself without adequate intelligence and underlying purpose. Think how much of modern art is characterized by nothing but form, how devoid it is of ideas, how lacking in anything like passionate enthusiasm. I believe this is due to some extent to our failure to realize that the three components of which I have been speaking are absolutely requisite in all art. We forget that there is laid upon art any obligation except to be beautiful; we forget that it must embody the truest thought man has been able to reach, and enshrine the noblest impulses he has entertained. This is not so much a duty for art to undertake as an inescapable destiny and natural function.

It is a sad day for a people when their art becomes divorced from the current of their

The Purpose of Poetry

life, when it comes to be looked on as something precious but unimportant, having nothing at all to do with their social structure, their education, their political ideals, their faith, or their daily vocations. But I fear that we ourselves are living in just such a time. Fine arts may be patronized even liberally, but you could not say that they have any hold on us as a people; we have no wide feeling for them, no profound conviction of their importance.

There may be many reasons for this, and it is a question with which we are not directly concerned here. One reason there is, however, it seems to me, which is too important not to be referred to. The fine arts are an outgrowth and finer development of the industrial arts. One would expect them to flourish only in a nation where the industrial arts flourish; only in such a nation would the great body of the people be infused with the popular love of beauty, and the feeling for art, which could create a stimulating,

The Poetry of Life

artistic atmosphere in which great artists could be born and nourished. So much will be readily admitted. Now, under modern industrial and commercial conditions, the industrial arts are dead; they have been killed by the exigencies of our business processes. The industrial artist has become the factory hand. To produce anything worth while, either in the fine or the industrial arts, it is necessary that the worker should not be hurried, and should have some freedom to do his work in his own way, according to his own fancy and enjoyment. The modern workman, on the contrary, is a slave to his conditions; he can only earn his bread by working with a maximum of speed and a minimum of conscientiousness. He can have neither pleasure nor pride in his work; and consequently that work can have no artistic value whatever. The result is, that not only have we almost no industrial arts, properly speaking, but the modern workman is losing all natural taste and love

The Purpose of Poetry

of beauty through being denied all exercise of that faculty. If you allow me to learn the art of a book-binder, or a potter, or a rug-maker, and to follow it for myself as best I can, my perception and love of what is beautiful will grow with my growing skill. But if you put me to work in a modern factory, where such things, or rather where hideous imitations of those things, are produced, I should not be able to exercise my creative talent at all, and whatever love of beauty I may have had will perish for lack of use. Thus it happens that the average man to-day has so little appreciation of beauty, so little instinctive taste, and art and letters occupy so small a place in our regard. Before we can reinstate them in that position of honour which they have always held, hitherto, among civilized nations, we shall have to find some solution for our industrial difficulties.

It may seem, at a superficial glance, that the arts are all very well as a pastime, for

The Poetry of Life

the enjoyment of the few, but can have no imperative call for busy men and women in active modern life. And if we should be told that, as a nation, we have no wide-spread love of beauty, no popular taste in artistic matters, we would not take the accusation very much to heart. We should probably admit it, and turn with pride to point to our wonderful material success, our achievements in the realm of trade and commerce, our unmatched prosperity and wealth. But that answer will not serve. You may lead me through the streets of our great cities, and fill my ears with stories of our uncounted millions of money, our unrivalled advance among the nations, but that will not divert my soul from horror at a state of society where municipal government is a venial farce, where there is little reverence for law, where mammon is a real God, and where every week there are instances of mob violence, as revolting as any that ever stained the history of the emperors of degenerate

The Purpose of Poetry

Rome. We may brag our loudest to each other and even to ourselves, but the soul is not deceived. She sits at the centre of being, judging honestly and severely our violences, our folly, and our crime. And when at last we come to our senses, and perceive to what a condition of shame we have fallen from our high estate as a freedom-loving people, we may be able to restore some of those ideals which we have sacrificed, — ideals of common honesty, of civic liberty, of simple unostentatious dignity, of social order, law, and security.

All this, of course, goes almost without saying. But the point I wish to make is, that this decay in moral standards goes hand in hand with our loss of taste. Our sense of beauty and our sense of goodness are so closely related that any injury to the one means an injury to the other. You cannot expect the nation which cares nothing at all for art to care very much for justice or righteousness. You cannot expect a man

The Poetry of Life

who does not care how hideous his surroundings are to care very fastidiously about his moral obligations. And we shall never reach that national position of true greatness, which many Americans have dreamed of; we shall lose entirely those personal traits of dignity, honour, and kindness, which many old-fashioned Americans still retain, unless we recognize the vital need of moral standards and æsthetic ideals working together hand in hand, and set ourselves to secure them.

And if you ask me why America is producing for the most part only that which is mediocre in art and literature, I am forced to reply, that it is because the average man among us has so little respect for moral ideals. In a restless age we may experiment with all kinds of reform, but no permanent scheme of social betterment can dispense with personal obligation and integrity. It all comes back to the man at last. We don't need socialism, or imperialism, or free trade, or public ownership of monopolies, or state

The Purpose of Poetry

control of trusts, so much as we need honest men, — men in public life and private enterprise who have some standard of conduct higher than insatiable self-interest.

Such ideals of conduct, in the widest sense, it is the aim of art to supply, and education to inculcate. And education, like art, has its three-fold object. It has to set itself not only to train our minds in a desire for the truth, but at the same time to train our spirit to love only what is good, and our bodies to take pleasure only in what is beautiful and wholesome; and the work of education, like that of art, must, while proceeding in any one of these directions, be intimately related with the workings of the other two. Emerson's wise phrase is profoundly applicable here:

“ All are needed by each one,
Nothing is fair or good alone.”

An education or an art which does not quicken the conscience, and stimulate and refine all our senses and instincts, along with

The Poetry of Life

the growing reason, must still remain a faulty process at best.

Let me ask all who are engaged in the great occupation of teaching, and in the delightful art of writing, to consider whether this is not so. I am sure we cannot lay too much stress on this philosophic conception of man in the three aspects of his nature. I believe it is a helpful solvent of many difficulties in education, in art, in life, in social and political aims. I believe that without it all of our endeavours for advancement in civilization will be sadly hampered and retarded, if not frustrated altogether, for the simple reason that art and civilization and social order exist for man; and they must, therefore, be adapted to the three differing phases of his requirement. While his intellectual needs and capacities must be trained and provided for; his great emotional and spiritual need and powers must be no less adequately recognized and exercised, and

The Purpose of Poetry

his sensitive physical instincts wisely guided and developed.

With this notion in mind, we may turn for a few minutes to consider what tasks literature must set itself, and what it may be expected to do for a people. In the first place, it is the business of literature, as of all the arts, to create an illusion, — to project upon the imagination a mimic world, true to life, as we say, and at the same time more goodly and fair than the actual one we know. For unless the world of art be in some way more delightful than the world of our every-day experience, why should we ever visit it? We turn for sympathy to art, for recreation and refreshment, for solace and inspiration. We ask to find in it, ready to hand, these helpful and pleasant qualities which are so hard to find in real life. And the art which does not give them to us is disappointing, however clever it may be. It is this necessity for being beautiful, this necessity for providing an immediate pleas-

The Poetry of Life

ure, that makes pure realism unsatisfying in art. Realism is necessary, but not sufficient.

For instance, if you bring me a photograph of a beautiful elm-shaded street in an old New England town, it fills my eye instantly with a delightful scene. But by and by something in it begins to offend me, and I see that the telegraph-pole is too obtrusive, and spoils the composition and balance of the picture. The photograph loses its value as a pleasure-giving piece of realism. Now a painter in reproducing the same scene would probably have left out the telegraph-pole. That is the difference. And that is why photography, as usually practised, is not one of the fine arts. It is said by those who contend for realism, for the photographic in literature, that art must be true to nature, and so it must, to a certain extent; but there are other things beside the physical fact to which it must be true. Your photograph was true to nature, but it was not true to my memory of the scene.

The Purpose of Poetry

The painter's reproduction was truer to that; he preserved for me the delightful impression that I carried away on that wonderful June morning, when I visited the spot. For me his picture is more accurate than the photograph. When I was there, I probably did not see the telegraph-pole at all. It is therefore right that literature and art should attempt something more than the exact reproduction of things as they are, and should give us the vision, not the view, of a city more charming and a country more delectable to dwell in than any our feet have ever trod, and should people its world with characters varied and fascinating as in real life, but even more satisfying than any we have ever known.

There is another reason why art must be more than photographic; as time goes by and the earth grows old, man himself develops, however slowly, in nobleness and understanding. His life becomes different from what it was. He gradually brings it

The Poetry of Life

into conformity with certain ideals and aspirations which have occurred to him. These new ideals and aspirations have always made their first appearance in art and literature before they were realized in actual life. Imagination is our lamp upon the difficult path of progress. So that even in its outward aspect, art must differ from nature. The world is by no means perfect, but it is always tending toward perfection, and it is our business to help that tendency. As long as we are satisfied with the photograph, we are content to have the telegraph-pole. And we shall continue to be satisfied with them both until the artist comes and shows us the blemish. As soon as we perceive the fault, we begin to want the telegraph-pole removed. This is what a clever writer meant when he said that art does not follow nature, but nature follows art. We must make our lives more and more beautiful, simply because, by so doing, we make ourselves more healthy and happy. To this

The Purpose of Poetry

end, art must supply us with standards, and keep us constantly reminded of what perfection is, so that living much in the influence of good art, ugliness may become less and less possible.

I lay so much stress on this point because we have somewhat lost the conviction that literature and art must be more beautiful than life. We readily admit that they must be sincere servants of truth, and exemplars of noble sentiment, but there is an idea abroad, that, in its form and substance, art need only copy nature. This, I believe, is what our grandfathers might have called a pestilent heresy.

If art and literature are devoted to the service of beauty, no less are they dedicated to the service of truth and goodness. In the phrase which Arnold used to quote, it is their business to make reason and the will of God prevail. So that while literature must fulfil the obligations laid upon it to be delightful, — to charm and entertain us with

The Poetry of Life

perennial pleasure, — quite as scrupulously must it meet our demands for knowledge, and satisfy our spiritual needs. To meet the first of these demands, of course it is not necessary for literature to treat of scientific subjects; it must, however, be enlightened by the soundest philosophy at its command, and informed with all the knowledge of its time. It may not deal directly with the thought of its age, but it must never be at variance with truth. There can be no quarrel between science and art, for art sooner or later makes use of all knowledge, all discoveries, all new ideas. It is the business of art to assimilate new knowledge, and make it a power; for knowledge is not power, so long as it remains mere knowledge, nor until it passes from the mind into the domain of the will.

In a scientific age like our own, when the limits of knowledge are being extended so rapidly, prose is a much more acceptable medium of expression than poetry, because

The Purpose of Poetry

it can keep nearer to science than poetry can; though poetry, in the long run, has quite as much need of accurate and wide information as prose has.

It is only that they make different use of the same material. Prose serves to bring us definite reports of science, it appeals to our reason, our curiosity. But poetry has another motive as well; it wishes to emphasize its subject so that we can not only know it more clearly, but feel about it more deeply. Of course prose has this aim in view also, though to a less extent, and it invades the dominion of poetry whenever this aim becomes paramount. So that in literature we must never attempt to separate prose from poetry, too dogmatically.

The attempt which literature makes to deepen our feeling about a subject is the spiritual purpose of art. And this spiritual or moral influence is always present in all literature, in some degree and condition, whether apparent or not. Art has its relig-

The Poetry of Life

ious value, not because it deals directly with religious themes, but because it plays upon our moral nature and influences our emotions. How intrinsically incumbent it is upon art, therefore, to stimulate our generous and kindly feelings, rather than our cruel or violent or selfish impulses.

It may often be necessary for art and literature to deal with human crime and depravity and moral obliquity, but it must never dwell upon them excessively nor unnecessarily, nor ever make them seem to prevail. For evil does not rule the world; however powerful it may seem at moments, in the long run it is overcome by good. There is a tendency in modern letters to deal with repulsive themes, and depict for us the frailty and sorry shortcomings of human nature, and to do this with an almost scientific emphasis. Some people praise this sort of thing, as being true to life; while others call it immoral, because it touches upon such subjects at all. A juster view of

The Purpose of Poetry

the matter may perhaps lead us to a different opinion. Since it is the prime duty of art to make us happy, to give us encouragement and joy, to urge and support our spirits, to ennoble and enrich our lives, surely the one way in which art can be most immoral is by leaving us depressed and sad, and uncertain of the final issue between sorrow and gladness.

I have not said much about the technic of poetry, because I wished first to indicate, if I could, a scope and destiny for poetic art more significant than we are accustomed to grant it. If we first assure ourselves of the vital importance of art to a nation, if we set ourselves resolutely to change the tenor of public sentiment in regard to it, if we turn from the absorbing and ridiculous worship of superfluous possessions, and devote ourselves generously to the cause of beauty and kindness, the specific development of poetry may safely be left to take care of itself.

How to Judge Poetry



SURELY one may say the first requisite for the appreciation of poetry is an open mind. To say this, indeed, is only to reiterate the primal prerequisite of all mental and spiritual growth. Once let your mind become set or fixed in any mould of thought, committed too irrevocably to any single idea, once allow yourself to be in the least a partisan or a zealot, and all growth is arrested immediately. To hold any notion or creed as irrevocably final, is to limit the power and reach of intelligence. Experience should teach us better.

I may be an enthusiastic follower of this or that cult for a time; but as I have outgrown many tenets of thought in reaching

How to Judge Poetry

my present attitude of mind, I must admit that my present philosophy is probably ephemeral and certainly transitional. Creeds are but inns for the pious wayfarer upon the road to perfection. We are all higher vagabonds, as it were, putting up now with one host, now with another. Surely, then, I should hold my creed with a light grasp, and insist upon it with becoming moderation. One may allow a generous warmth of heart; one must never permit any heat of mind. To perceive that everything is provisional, and that the end of our spiritual pilgrimage is far beyond our range of vision, — this is one of the first gifts of culture. The deadly frost of prejudice blights the flower of life.

It is not only as appreciators of art that we need openness of mind, but also in the common conduct of life. Modern science has brought us no greater good than this very temper of toleration, this tentative mental condition, this faith which is strong, yet flexible. Indeed the scientist offers us a

The Poetry of Life

splendid example of patient detachment. He allows himself to be interested, to be devoted, even to be ardent, but never to be biassed nor overconfident. He knows that truth has not all been compassed, and that the conclusions of to-day may become the axioms of to-morrow, or its fables and superstitions. When a man of science comes upon a new fact in nature, he does not say to himself, "Well, this may be all very pretty, but I don't believe in it because it does not fit my theory!" He proceeds to try to comprehend the significance of his new knowledge, and to readjust his theory to it.

This is precisely the habit of mind we must cultivate before we can appreciate any art. Between science and religion there can never be any quarrel. Between science and formalism there can be neither compromise nor peace. To bring new truths to the test of old standards is the indubitable mark of the Philistine. We must crucify the Philis-

How to Judge Poetry

tine in ourselves (Heaven forgive the barbarous metaphor!) before we can hope to enter even the outer courts of the temple of art. I say temple of art, for art at its best is essentially only religion in another guise. You will see then with what seriousness and willingness and sweetness we ought to approach art. As it is the business of the fine arts to reveal to us new beauties of thought and aspiration and sensibility, surely we must strive to make our mind, our spirit, our senses, as alert as possible—to be as unprejudiced as possible, as sensitive as possible. And we can never be sensitive nor unprejudiced while we permit ourselves a habit of dogmatizing. I dare say the temptation to dogmatize is one of the supreme snares of the Evil One, one of the sins that cannot be forgiven unto men.

Of all lamentable states of mind in which we may approach a work of art, the most awful is that of the meek and humble ignoramus who admits that “he doesn’t know

The Poetry of Life

anything about art, but he knows what he likes."

My foolish friend, it isn't your business to know anything about art; the artist doesn't know anything about art himself. It is your business and his to try to find out something about it. Perhaps you think you know why two and two make four, or why the sun is yellow, or the sea blue, or how birds fly, or water runs down-hill. You see it is absurd to say you "don't know anything about art"; you ought to say you don't know anything at all. And as for knowing what you like, that is even more ridiculous. You don't like the same thing to-day that you did yesterday. And, moreover, you have not the least right in the world to like the wrong thing.

It is just as wicked to admire what is ugly, as it is to say what is false or to commit a crime. It is just as pernicious a perversion of truth to like the wrong things, as

How to Judge Poetry

to believe the wrong things, or to do the wrong things.

It is quite as much our business to find out what is beautiful and try to admire that, as it is to find out what is true and try to believe that, or to find out what is good and try to accomplish that.

If I do not like Shakespeare and the Bible, you will admit I should have the decency to conceal my shameful barbarity and pray for enlightenment. But equally, if I do not like Walt Whitman or Monet, I ought to suppress my distaste. Why? Not because these men have been placed beyond doubt among the immortals, but because the prejudiced and carping mood is hurtful to myself. I must approach Meredith and Maeterlinck with the same reverence with which I approach St. Mark. True, they may not be equally inspired; but I do not know that; and I can never know it, if I come to them with a mind already half-made up.

The Poetry of Life

Some persons seem to have minds like mazes. It is next to impossible to get an idea into their heads; and, once lodged there, it never gets out. The avenues of their intelligence are all beset with barbs and thorns and prickles — a provision of nature for the self-preservation of identity, but an unfortunate endowment to bring to the appreciation of art.

I have insisted on this openness of mind in judging poetry, because without it we cannot begin to judge of anything. But suppose that we bring to the appreciation of poetry a mind thus eager, simple, modest, and unprejudiced, are there any hints that will help us in judging so delicate a work?

In the first place, it is to be borne in mind that poetry, like any other fine art, makes a threefold appeal to us. If we remember that art is, vaguely speaking, the manifestation of our human nature, we will at once perceive that it must partake of the threefold character of that nature. It must

How to Judge Poetry

express our mental, our moral, and our physical character. And equally it must appeal to each of these three phases of ourselves, as we bring ourselves under its influence. The best poetry will charm our ear, will convince our reason, will enlist our sympathy. It is the endeavour of art to move the whole man. And those persons err who lay particular stress on any one quality of art at the expense of the other two. One must avoid that; one must avoid didacticism and sentimentalism, quite as much as sensuality, in art.

In the work of Mr. Swinburne, for instance, we have poetry appealing to the senses in its most perfect form. Every one admits that no such incomparable achievement in verse has ever been given to us in English. Yet it fails of that great power over men of which poetry is capable, because it makes so little appeal to our hearts and minds. In Browning, on the other hand, you may often find the perfect beauty of

The Poetry of Life

poetry spoiled by an overstress of thought, or by an inattention to form. I do not mean this in any cheap and petty sense; for Browning usually is a wonderful master of versification. But at times that fertile questing brain could pursue a curious thought too strenuously and too far, not too far for philosophy, but too far for poetry. That is the difference. And again, the poetry of Pope is an instance of poetry which is too purely mental in its appeal. Consummate common sense is there, certainly; but one does not live by common sense alone. And while it is foolish to say that the "Essay on Man" is not poetry at all, as some extremists would, it is right enough to say that it is not the best poetry, for the simple reason that it is content to enlist our reason alone, leaving our senses and emotions almost unmoved. As Arnold said, that was the prose period of English literature; and prose is a lower form of art than poetry, it is a step nearer science.

How to Judge Poetry

So poetry may be perfectly obvious, perfectly clear in the first reading; it may contain much new knowledge and rare wisdom, and yet be very poor poetry after all.

“An honest man’s the noblest work of God,”

is a proper sentiment, but it leaves one cold. It is just as true, perhaps, as saying —

$$a + b = c,$$

and just as chilly. On the other hand, there is an old friend, the Jabberwock, a poem which does not pretend to approach us through the pure reason; yet what a fund of feeling it has! How we warm toward it! The kingdom of poetry is bordered on the north by mathematics, and on the south by music, partaking of the character of each.

To be a good judge of poetry one must be a completely normal man, with a clear brain, a happy disposition, and a good appetite. If you are one of those weedy, dyspeptic, ill-ventilated, academic creatures, living

The Poetry of Life

with your nose in a book, you will only emphasize the purely mental qualities of poetry; you will miss much of its wonderful power through your own incapacity for sheer innocent, sensuous elation. And yet, if you are beery and gross and self-indulgent, you will never understand the finer intimations of the muse. To judge poetry, one must be a man of affairs, yet without hurry; a religionist, yet without heat; a philosopher, yet without a system. One must be a generous lover, infatuated, but not insane; an unflinching logician, yet not inflexible; and one must be an athlete, also.

It is hard to judge poetry.

The Poet in the Com- monwealth



∟ A DISCUSSION was started not long ago by a college professor in Chicago who declared that a man who works with his hands cannot be a poet. It is one of those definite statements that sound conclusive and have enough truth in them to arouse discussion. In one way it is true, and in another way it is exactly the reverse of the truth.

∟ Under our present social system, or rather our antisocial system, a man who works with his hands cannot be a poet, simply because he can scarcely be a man. He cannot be his own master, and he cannot command that amount of freedom which every creator of the beautiful needs. The creation of beauty

The Poetry of Life

requires first of all that the artist shall have freedom to do his own work in his own way. But the modern man who works with his hands is a slave to our mercantile system. In that complex and highly organized machine called modern civilization, it is not possible for any working man to remain free.

On the other hand, abstractly speaking, it is much nearer the truth to say that a man who does not work with his hands cannot be a poet. //

What do you understand by a poet? What is his office and business in life? What part does he play in the world? First, and speaking most roughly, he is a person who has something important to say about life, and has the special gift of saying it supremely well. He must be one, I think we will all admit, who has thought profoundly about existence. And yet that is not enough to make him a poet, for that is the accomplishment of philosopher or scientist. He

The Poet in the Commonwealth

must also feel deeply and strongly about life. And yet that is not enough to make him a poet, either, for many of us feel much more deeply and sincerely than we can say. No, he must not only be able to speak from a great fund of thought and knowledge and from a great fund of sympathy and emotion; he must be able to speak with the wonderful power of charm as well.

The one quality which makes him a poet is his faculty of expression, of course; for we can all be poets of silence. This particular gift or talent, which determines whether a man shall express himself in words or in sound or in colours, who can say by what it is in its turn determined? To say that this man is a poet, and that one a painter, is no more than to say that one has gray eyes and the other black. But the difference in character, that is another matter; and to be a poet or a painter implies being a man. The man behind the faculty, that is the important thing.

The Poetry of Life

The poet must delight our senses with the inevitable beauty of his cadences, his diction, his rhythms — with what is often called technique; he must enlist our sympathy through his own strong and generous emotional nature; he must convince our minds by his own reasonableness. He appeals to our sense of beauty, but not to that sense alone; he appeals to our sense of goodness, but not to that sense alone; he appeals to our sense of truth, but not to that sense alone. His appeal is to all three, and to all three equally.

The gift of technique, with the poet as with all artists, is largely a matter of endowment. But what he has to say about life will depend on how profoundly he has thought about it, and how keenly he feels about it. And unless a man has shared in our common life in the world, I cannot see how his opinions can have any great value, or his emotional preferences any great significance. But our common life in the

The Poet in the Commonwealth

world implies a certain amount of work with the hands, so that the conclusion seems inevitable, "A man who does no work with his hands cannot be a poet."

The argument is so simple. How can I talk to you with any hope of a common understanding, when I only know the facts at second hand, while you have actually experienced them, and when I have no caring about them one way or the other, while to you they are matters of life and death? The idea that a poet can ever be a mere bystander, an onlooker at life, seems to me too palpably impossible to need refutation. And I cannot believe that any great prophet or poet ever trod the earth who did not know the pinch of life at first hand, its actual bleak necessity, its terrible pathos and tremendous joy, its wonderful yet elusive significance. Nor do I believe that one for whom all the necessities and comforts and luxuries of life have been gratuitously pro-

The Poetry of Life

vided, from the cradle to the grave, ever can know these things.

\In moments of insight, in hours of contemplation, doubtless the poet is a bystander, as we all may be at times. But he cannot be that exclusively. A man who never halts to look upon life in questioning wonder, is no worse fitted to be an artist than one who spends his whole time in speculation and dreaming. The one has no knowledge save experience, the other no experience save in theory.

If a man has never driven a nail in his life, nor built a fire, nor turned a furrow, nor picked a barrel of apples, nor fetched home the cows, nor pulled an oar, nor reefed a sail, nor saddled a horse, nor carried home a bundle of groceries from town, nor weeded the garden, nor been lost in the woods, nor nursed a friend, nor barked his shin, nor been thankful for a free lunch, do you think it is likely he will have anything to

The Poet in the Commonwealth

say to you and me that will be worth listening to? I don't.

I should as soon expect a child to set a broken bone, or tunnel a mountain, or navigate a ship. Yet this is not to disparage the heavenly wisdom of inspiration, nor the strange inexplicable authority of conviction. //

«The compelling necessity for exertion lies upon all created things. And we ourselves can only achieve life and realize our individual existence by meeting that necessity hand to hand and overcoming it. In overcoming it we become what we are, whether we be men or whether we be chipmunks. The moment we cease to overcome and rest inactively on what we have accomplished, that moment we begin to perish.

There is only one way to be a poet, by sweat and heartbreak and bitter weariness of brain. And even then you won't be a poet, you will only be a man, unless it has pleased the powers to bestow on you the grace of words. But when a man has some

The Poetry of Life

faculty of expression, begotten in him by some happy circumstance, and then learns the taste of life and the touch of it at first hand, he will have some feeling about it and some opinion on it worth heeding, and poetry will come out of him as naturally as milk comes out of a cocoanut.

The genius of the artist secretes beauty by some natural process, as inevitably as a bee secretes honey, and gives it forth in good time for the mystification and enjoyment of the world. The process itself is hidden even from the intelligence that carries it on, but the carrying on of the process is a continual satisfaction. The creative instinct of the artist, uneasy with the possession of his unvented ideal, is akin to the procreative instinct of the world, which cannot rest until it has attempted to realize itself in ever fresher, more lovely, and more adequate forms.

There is another reason why the poet cannot be exempt from the common lot. Afflu-

The Poet in the Commonwealth

ence is not good for artists for this reason; affluence is not good for anybody — perfect affluence, I mean, the amount of affluence which relieves one permanently from all need of endeavour. Great wealth, or even a little wealth, may make people sleek and self-satisfied and fat-minded, but it cannot of itself make them either beautiful or loving, nor give them openness of mind. And since artists are always people with a large and vivid capacity for sensuous enjoyment, wealth is more dangerous to them than to others. It does not hurt a miner, or a horse-thief, or a peddler to grow rich, for in nine cases out of ten he does not know how to enjoy his money when he has made it; he can only go on making more and more, and growing more desperate every day at his own incapacity, until finally he begins to give it away in millions in sheer weariness of spirit. ¶ But in nine cases out of ten, great prosperity will spoil a good artist; he begins to be so engrossed in enjoyment, and he has such a great appre-

The Poetry of Life

ciation of the easy beauty of life, that he ceases from the strenuous work of creation.✓

∥ But, after all, all this is only one side of the question, and the whole argument I have made only proves that the poet, and every other artist, in fact, ought to be and must be a normal man — not an average man, but a normal man, with all the best powers and capacities of manhood in him. He must be capable of thought, capable of passion, capable of manual labour. No one lacking in these three essentials, or lacking in any one of them, can be called a normal man; nor can he have anything valuable and great to say to us about life.✓

On the other hand, however, modern life is very complex (and, of course, the more complex it is the more beautiful it may be made), and we all have to specialize a good deal, and it is not possible for one man to do more than one thing superlatively well. If you would be a great financier, a great mechanic, a great statesman, or a great scien-

The Poet in the Commonwealth

tist, or a great engineer, or a great cook, you must devote your life to it, you must give your mind to it, and your love and your industry. You may learn to do many things so well that the doing of them serves to enlighten and enrich your specialty; but the main issue, the focusing-point and flower of all your effort and ability, must be some one thing that you love most, know most, and do best.

Now art (and poetry is one of the most difficult of the fine arts) is just such an occupation as these. You cannot always compose a sonnet over your evening cigar. Art is not an idle amusement, it is a natural phenomenon, as significant as war, as beautiful as the northern lights, and as useful as electricity. Of all forms of human activity it is the most exacting, as it is perhaps the most delightful. And the demand which creative output makes on all the energies is just as great and just as exhausting as that made by any other worthy occupation worthily fol-

The Poetry of Life

lowed. If poetry were a purely artificial pastime, fit only to engage the minds of college youths and schoolgirls, certainly it would not be worth our serious discussion. But if it is what history declares it to be, the voice of revelation, the finest utterance of human wisdom, the basis of religion, and the solace of sorrowing mortals, if it teaches us how to live, how to be happy, how to love the right and appreciate the beautiful and perceive the true, if it illumines the dark problems of existence, and heartens us upon the difficult path to perfection, then surely we may well consider how best to foster it and preserve it, and make its influence prevail in the commonwealth.

If poetry, therefore, is such a serious business, and worth the attention of strong men, it cannot be cultivated as a mere avocation. It will engage all the energies of any one who follows it. So that, while it seems to me untrue to say that a man who works with his hands cannot be a poet, and while I

The Poet in the Commonwealth

think it nearer the truth to say that a man who does no work with his hands cannot be a poet, I think it nearest the truth (at the beginning of the twentieth century) to say that a man who earns his living with his hands cannot be a poet. He will not have time. He will not have leisure for the requisite learning and culture; he will not be able to know even the rudiments of science and philosophy and social economics; he will not have leisure to know the pleasures of æsthetic enjoyment; he cannot be a lover of nature, nor a lover of books, nor a lover of many things lovely.

Why? Because under existing social and industrial conditions he cannot be the master of his own time. And while the normal man must have enough physical work to keep him in perfect health, the average man has enough to ruin his health and sicken his soul. The whole question of art rests on the social and industrial problems. The fine arts are closely related to the industrial

The Poetry of Life

arts. And at present we can have no widespread national interest in the fine arts, because we have no national industrial arts. The industrial arts of a people, like the fine arts, can only be carried on by men who are free and honest and intelligent, and therefore happy. For it is quite true, as William Morris said, that art is the expression of man's pleasure in his work. But the men who engage in our industries to-day cannot have any pleasure in their work. For our industrial arts — or, rather, our industries and manufactures which ought to be industrial arts — are carried on by two classes of people, the workmen and the capitalists. And all workmen, under modern industrial conditions, are the slaves of their employers; while capitalists, however generous their impulses, are of necessity slave-owners. Of course the workmen do not know that they are slaves, and the capitalists do not know they are slave-owners. But that does not make the matter any better — it only plunges

The Poet in the Commonwealth

both in a sea of confusion, as the blind might stumble in fighting with the blind. The workman thinks he is free, because if he does not like one owner he can sell himself to another. And the capitalist thinks he is honest because he plays fairly according to the rules of the game. But the principles of the game are fundamentally rotten, since shrewdness of mind does not make right any more than might of muscle does.

The first question, however, is not whether a poet should live by the work of his hands, but whether he should live at all. And, however much we may obscure and injure the splendid significance of poetry with our incessant and ineffectual sophistries of a day, I must believe that the world's need for great and fearless poetry is perpetual, and that without its illuminating aid we shall never come near to accomplishing our destiny.

The Poet in Modern

Life



THERE is such incongruity between our traditional idea of the poet and our daily experience of modern life that we can hardly reconcile the two; and our conception of the poet in modern life is pretty sure, for that reason, to be either comic or tragic. He will seem to us anything but commonplace, and we cannot take him as a matter of course. The typical poet is out of date; and the poet of the times is slow to arrive, since the time itself is scarcely ripe for his appearance. If we are to think justly of the poet in modern life, however, we must be careful not to overvalue his office on the one hand,

The Poet in Modern Life

nor on the other to depreciate the worth and significance of the age. And the greater our love of poetry, our sympathy with ideals, our feeling for beauty, the more shall we be in danger of undervaluing our own day when these things are not paramount in men's minds. Let us try to look at the question quite fairly, neither embittered by the facts nor led astray by impossible fancies.

The poet, if we attempt to form a composite photograph of him from impressions gathered here and there through the pages of history, is for the most part a serious figure, nearly always aloof from the affairs of earth, somewhat shy of life and its activities, and dealing more in dreams than in realities. But to be more precise, as we think of the long list of poets whose names still survive, whose words still are alive in our ears, we shall find them dividing themselves mainly into two groups, — the religious poets and the dramatic poets, — those who were inspired by the moral temper of

The Poetry of Life

their time, and those who devoted themselves to the entertainment of their fellows. The poet is both prophet and entertainer, both priest and artist. He stands for ever the interpreter of nature to men; that is his sacerdotal office. He is also the revealer of men to themselves; that is his business as a dramatic artist.

David, Isaiah, Job, Dante, Milton, Shelley, Wordsworth, Emerson, — these are types of the poet as prophet or priest of nature. They “saw life steadily and saw it whole,” but in their heart there burned for ever a passion for righteousness never to be satisfied by things as they are. They were for ever stirred by a divine unrest; the fever of God throbbed in their veins; they could never suffer fools gladly, nor look with equanimity upon the sorry spectacle of human weakness. They were lean men and laughed little. Possessed continually by a consuming love of the beautiful, the true, and the good, and beholding at the same

The Poet in Modern Life

time how life seems to be inseparable from ugliness and evil, they could never attain the ruddy and placid contentment of the born comedian. The pageant of human endeavour, the interplay of human character, so engrossing to many, was to them only the surface and appearance of the world. They were for ever haunted by a sense of the presence behind the mask, the spirit behind the semblance. To their endless unhappiness, one must believe, they were driven forward by an insuperable curiosity for the truth about life, an unassuageable love of the beauty of earth, and above all by a pure and impossible desire to make actual those ideal conditions of conduct and circumstance which never yet have been realized by man, nor will ever leave him at peace in mediocrity.

As long as the stars remain and the soul of man fleets with the breath of his body, so long must he suffer this bitter divergence between "I would" and "I can." To the

The Poetry of Life

great poets of nature this realization has come as an overwhelming influence, a burden of knowledge almost insupportable. They could hardly be other than grave, impressive, unostentatious, simple, single of purpose, strenuous in endeavour, and modest from the very abundance of their wisdom. So great must have been their ideality, so keen their inward vision, it is little wonder if at times they failed in joyousness and permitted a minor strain to sound through their messages of encouragement to men. Thus it is that not all poets have been prophets of gladness, but sorrow and uncertainty had their messengers, too. For the life of man, which is so large a part of the poetry of earth, must be given complete expression in beautiful words; and the dominant note of triumphant joy must have its undertone of grievous doubt. Through the glad supreme assurance of large faith and unconquerable achievement, the broken-hearted wistfulness of failure must be heard;

The Poet in Modern Life

else were our poetry imperfect, and half of humanity left without a voice. Moreover, those deep consolations and counsels which it is the business of art and poetry to furnish, can scarcely be rendered effectively without the profoundest sympathy with suffering. The royal psalmist, on whom so many thousands have leaned for spiritual support, must have tasted the bitter waters of affliction, to be able to reach the hearts of men so surely.

Now, such a conception of the poet in his capacity as interpreter of nature and the deeper moods of the mind, is evidently not the broadest one. When we think of Homer and Virgil and Chaucer and Shakespeare, and the writers of the Greek Anthology, we think of the poet in a very different character. He is no longer the seer labouring under the stress of an almost Orphic inspiration; he is the open-eyed, glad-hearted beholder and recorder of life as he sees it. The God has breathed upon him, indeed, giving him greater insight into the foibles of his

The Poetry of Life

fellows than most men enjoy, and yet has not wholly rapt him out of himself. He is human, comfortable, friendly, merry, and content, a lover of wine and leisure and laughter. He is a lover of beauty, indeed, but his keen satisfaction in the loveliness of nature is not marred by the ever present sense of incompleteness, which must always haunt the preëminent poet of nature. The one finds the answer to his questions in a shrewd analysis of human motives and purposes. To the questions of the other, hearkening perpetually for some hinted solution of the riddle of existence, there is no answer possible. Small wonder, then, that the type of the first should be the jovial Horace or the genial Chaucer, while the type of the second blends something of the austerity of Dante with the zeal of David.

Now human life, when all is said, is not so very different in ancient and modern days. Barbarism or civilization, city or wilderness, the conditions vary, but the prime

The Poet in Modern Life

facts of life remain, and it is with these that the poet deals.

In modern life, as in that of old time, there are the matters of love and war, friendship and hatred, joy in the senses, sorrow, bereavement, loneliness, faith, disquietude, and death; the elemental facts from which the fabric of the universe is built, and the elemental passions and cravings with which we confront them. The poetry of the Old Testament, of Homer, or of Virgil, does not seem antiquated, except in occasional detail of local colour. The lament of David for Absalom, the mighty verses of many chapters of Job and Isaiah, the pathetic parting of Hector and Andromache, Virgil's description of the bees or the shadows on the mountainside, are as fresh as if they had been written yesterday.

This perennial vigour, this power to survive the change of fashion and the flight of years, is a test of poetry which most of our modern verse would be pitifully unable to

The Poetry of Life

fulfil, and which the best of it will still have to face. All that is whimsical, fantastic, grotesque, of purely contemporary value, will gradually be forgotten and cut away, while a few splendid lyrics, a few noble passages, we may imagine, will be jealously preserved and handed on as part of our bequest to the future. Men will not care to perpetuate what is essentially modern in our work, but rather what is essentially human, essentially poetic, essentially beautiful. In the long run only the fair and noble survives, whether in art or life, for the reheartening and regenerating of the earth. So it happens that all great literature that has come down to us is infused with a simple dignity of spirit, a majestic and pure sincerity, which seem for the time quite beyond the reach of our own accomplishment. Yet we may be sure our ambitious attempts, with all their cleverness, all their novelty, all their exact faithfulness to nature, will be wanting in vitality, in permanent interest, if we do not succeed

The Poet in Modern Life

in giving them just these spiritual qualities.

The spirit of the world is eager but inexorable, always in need of new thought, new beauty, new funds of emotion, and yet ruthlessly discarding everything which does not help it forward on the long, arduous progress of the centuries. The ages to come will care no more for our popular airs and songs and paintings than we care for those of vanished civilizations. But whenever the human spirit, under a stress of intense feeling, and in the face of the inescapable difficulty or bitterness or joy of life, rises to impassioned utterance, that utterance, however slight, is likely to be worth saving. This rule is unalterable, and obtains for modern poetry as for the most ancient. No art can outlive its own time which does not rise above the commonplace; and any art which rises sufficiently far above the average of contemporary achievement is sure to be treasured.

This, however, is only one way of looking

The Poetry of Life

at the matter. There is much very excellent art and poetry produced by every people, which is not great, and which has fulfilled its function when it has been remembered for a year or two, or for a generation or two, to give pleasure and encouragement to thousands to whom any more perfect or profound work would not appeal at all. No work is to be condemned simply because it is not of the first rank. Even if we have no great artists, it is good to have an interest in art, to have a number of men giving their energy to keep alive a great tradition, until a more favourable season. And one demands of them only a modest sincerity.

It is not my aim in the present paper to attempt any inquiry into the purposes of poetry. But in considering the relation of the poet to modern life, one necessarily takes for granted certain requirements of the poetic art, consciously or not. The business of poetry among the fine arts of expression,

The Poet in Modern Life

as it appears to me, is threefold. It must offer us some delightful counterfeit likeness of life for our entertainment; it must satisfy our intellectual need for truth; and finally it must supply us with spiritual reinforcement and consolation. We look to the fine arts in general to give us a refined pleasure of the senses, to answer the questions of our restless curiosity, and to intensify and ennoble our emotional life. We demand all these things of poetry. We ask that it shall have captivating beauty of form, that it shall be consistent with the most advanced discoveries of modern thought and modern science, and that it shall supply us with adequate standards and tests of conduct.

We must ask modern poetry, therefore, what it has to say on every topic of prime importance which bears upon life. We must expect it to embody for us all the new and wonderful revelations of modern science, discarding those old conceptions of the universe, however time-honoured and pictur-

The Poetry of Life

esque, which recent knowledge has proved erroneous. It is not easy for poetry to do this all at once, yet do it it must, if the restless mind of man is to be satisfied. It is only a poet of exceptional power who can see the poetry in modern life, its inventions, its discoveries, its ceaseless and venturesome activities, and give that poetic aspect adequate expression in words. The poet, particularly the modern poet, must have the unprejudiced eye and the exuberant spirits of a child, or he will not see the world for himself, and love it as it should be loved. Unless he sees clearly, loves intensely, and reasons profoundly, his poems can take no lasting hold upon us, however ornate or daring they may be.

To produce the best results in poetry, or in any art, then, the artist must be endowed with the alert, observing eye, the questing, unswervable mind, and a temperament at once ardent, kindly, and above satiety or corruption. He must love his age and understand it, in order to represent it justly or

The Poet in Modern Life

convert it to his way. This he can hardly do, if he feels himself out of sympathy with its ideals and pursuits. On the other hand, the actual world of things as they are can never seem quite adequate to the idealist. There is no man so uninspired as to be contented all the time. There will come to him hours of divine dissatisfaction, when nothing short of perfection will seem sufficient. Out of the wistfulness and disquiet of such moments the creative impulse may arise with its passionate longing for beauty, and give vent to that longing in imperishable forms of art; and these creations in colours, in sounds, in magical words, remain to convict the actual world of its shortcomings, and stimulate it to fairer endeavour.

Having in mind the opportunity always presented to poetry, what shall we say of its condition and scope to-day? What of the poet in modern life? Is it a time likely to be favourable for the production of great poetry? And have we any need of the poet

The Poetry of Life

with his visions? Let us admit, what seems to be the truth, that there probably never was a time when poetry was held in less esteem than at present. Why is this? We have wealth, we have leisure, we have great prosperity, we have peace, we have widespread intelligence, we have freedom of thought and conscience. All these things, it has always been supposed, go to make up a state of society in which the fine arts can flourish. Why do they not flourish here and now? Why have we no poets whose ability and influence are of national concern?

Because, with all our comforts, all our delightful luxuries, all our intellectual alertness, we are steadily losing our moral ideas, steadily suffering a spiritual deterioration. Anglo-Saxon civilization, to speak of no other, has become a humiliating and unscrupulous game. Our fathers and grandfathers cared for many ideals, for honour, for honesty, for patriotism, for culture, for high breeding, for nobility of character and

The Poet in Modern Life

unselfishness of purpose. We care for none of these things. They have gone out of fashion. We care only for wealth, and respect only those relentless and barbarous traits of character by which it is attained. That the ideal state must be established on material prosperity is quite true. But that we should permit ourselves to rest satisfied with such prosperity, and even become engrossed by it, is fatal. All that Western civilization has done in the past thousand years to make life more secure and pleasant and comfortable, has been done under the impulse of worthy ideals and humane inspirations. Now, having attained so complete a control of all the machinery of living, we seem in danger of losing what is best in life itself. Modern life, with its ambitions and triumphs, may seem a very comfortable and delightful period to be alive in, with its immense labour-saving facilities and its many diversions. One does not wonder that people give themselves so unsparingly to the secur-

The Poetry of Life

ing of those diversions and luxuries. Yet, from another view-point, one cannot but be amazed at the short-sightedness of men which allows them to spend laborious lives in preparing to live. One cannot but recognize the shameless materialism of the age, its brutal selfishness, ignoble avarice, and utter disregard of all the generous ideals of the spirit. We have gained the whole world, but in doing it we have lost our own soul.

Here is the theme for the modern poet. He is to bring back inspiration to our un-illuminated days. He is to show us how to regain our spiritual manhood. He is to show us how to make use of our wealth, how to turn our immense resources to some reasonable account. He must not be a mere detractor of his time, peevish and sour. He must love his age, with all its immense folly and pitiable sordidness; and because of his love and sympathy he must desire to re-establish for it those moral ideals which it has lost.

The Poet in Modern Life

The latter half of the past century had, in William Morris, a poet in many ways typical of the modern artist; he loved beauty and hated iniquity with so hearty a goodwill that he could see nothing good in his own age. He found nothing in it to love, and much to detest. That was his great misfortune. It drove him too far away from us. It made him little better than a mediæval visitor among us. We may be keenly aware of the modern lack of ideals, but we must not forget the immeasurable service which modern science has rendered the world. In the sphere of knowledge, in the liberation of the human mind, no century has been more remarkable than the nineteenth. This is no small matter; it is a very great glory indeed. But it did not seem to be of any significance to William Morris. So far as his conception of the ideal life was concerned, we might as well have been living in the age of Pericles or Theocritus. A man who cares no more than that for the greatest

The Poetry of Life

achievement of his time, can hardly hope to address it with authority. His noblest ideals must always seem to it somewhat quixotic and ineffective.

Of the two great Victorians, Tennyson and Browning, the one brooded upon modern life, yet held himself aloof from participating in it; while the other loved it well and partook of its good things, without attempting to address himself directly to its needs. It was the figure of Tennyson which satisfied the popular notion of the poet in majestic calm, undistracted by temporal affairs. And to the mind of Tennyson all our spiritual difficulties and doubts appealed; all the movements of his time were reflected in his work. Browning, on the other hand, was beset by no such difficulties. His themes were uninfluenced by the tenor of his time. The problems of the human spirit which confronted him and engrossed his thought were elemental and eternal. Perhaps for that very reason he could throw himself into

The Poet in Modern Life

the enjoyment of life with such unquestioning zest.

Of the other two poets of the later Victorian period, Rossetti and Arnold, one was a recluse, and belonged to no age, while the other belonged so exclusively to his age that his time was never his own. Though Rossetti lived in our own day, there is no touch of modernity in his work. And Arnold, who comprehended his age so well, was denied the leisure which poetry demands.

The poet in modern life, if one may indulge the fancy for creating an almost impossible figure, would have some of the characteristics of all these men. He should have all of Matthew Arnold's insight into the trend of social events, all of the sympathy of William Morris, all of the large poise and self-possession of Tennyson. Most of all, perhaps, he would resemble Browning in philosophic power combined with a vigorous love of life.

Among poets more strictly contemporary

The Poetry of Life

than these, there are two of marked popularity and preëminent achievement, whose position entitles them to be considered more or less typical in modern life. Mr. Rudyard Kipling and Mr. James Whitcomb Riley are perhaps the only English-speaking poets of the day who can command a respectful hearing. Others may be listened to by a few hundred admirers, but these men, when they speak, address an attentive audience, commensurate with their brilliant powers. They are not only read, but beloved; and their influence is undoubted. And our ideal modern poet, when he makes his appearance, if he is to inherit some of the traits of the greater Victorians, should also possess some of the qualities of our distinguished friends who have written "The Seven Seas" and "Poems Here at Home." He should have Mr. Kipling's capacity for perceiving romance in the midst of the seemingly commonplace, and Mr. Riley's untarnished spirit of kindness toward this great, foolish,

The Poet in Modern Life

distracted world. He would be tolerant and intensely human as they are, he would love his age, as they do, but, at the same time, if such a thing were not impossible, he would be horrified at the consuming greed which is the ruling passion in modern life, and he would be unconquerably possessed by a love of justice and goodness nowhere paramount in the poetry of the day.

Meanwhile, our modern bard, of whom we expect so many impossible virtues, will not have a very encouraging progress toward recognition. If he have means at his disposal, he will have to face the many distractions which modern society can make so alluring; and if he have none, he will have to face the still less desirable fate of slow starvation. For no man can serve two mistresses, and the muse will not tolerate a rival near the throne. Her devotee must offer her a single-hearted service, and be content with a hod-carrier's wage. He will have a taste for good books, good pictures, good

The Poetry of Life

music, and all the charming refinements of the modern world, and yet he must be satisfied to enjoy them only in the homes of others. He will need all the fortitude and cheerfulness of the poor. Indeed, he will need more of those admirable qualities than the poor possess, since his appreciation of all that is beautiful and elegant in life is so much keener and more profound than theirs.

It may be contended that the finest achievements of art are born of discouragement and privation, but I must believe there is a limit to the beneficial influence of these severe conditions. A modicum of discouragement, a few years of privation, are probably wholesome and tonic to the artistic temper. A lifetime of them seems more than is necessary. And we are always in danger of having genius perish at our doors. However, perhaps it is better that one genius should perish than that a hundred mediocre

The Poet in Modern Life

sentimentalists should fill the world with babbling.

But we must not leave our subject with so discouraging and petulant a thought. In all that I have said I have had in mind only the more serious aspects of poetry; but it is for ever to be remembered that the fine arts were born from sheer exuberance of spirits, and can never flourish long in any dolorous mood. They are analogous to the play of animals and children; they indicate excess of happiness and effervescence of life; they mean always that some mortal had more joy than he could hold, and must find vent for it in expression. The fine arts are quite superfluous in any scheme of life which looks only to the maintenance of a bare subsistence; they could never spring from a condition of bleak, unmitigated slavery. There must be some elasticity of spirit, some freedom of mind and action, to support them. They must, in truth, echo the sorrows of the world; but far more must they embody its gladness,

The Poetry of Life

its strength, its loveliness, its confident and careless manhood.

If the modern artist cannot have a good time living, he had better go out of business; success in art is not for him. If the modern poet cannot find a way to take life gaily, resourcefully, unquerulously, he had better quench his songs. He must be poor-spirited, indeed, if, in a time like this, so full of generosity, of confidence, of elation, he cannot find something to be happy about. He may have some difficulty in meeting his obligations, but he should certainly be able to present a gentle and cheerful manliness to the world, and manage to participate in its gaiety. He must not be less a man than his struggling fellows, but more. He must not be abashed or envious at any overabundance of worldly splendour, but exhibit a keen enjoyment of beauty and elegance and leisure, such as very few of our magnificent moderns can attain. He may sometimes think life is difficult, and poetry the most

The Poet in Modern Life

thankless of all pursuits; but he must still be glad to be alive, or no one will care whether he lives or not. Above all, he must see to it that no drop of the poison of *ennui* finds its way into his work. He must be so loyal to his beautiful art, that he will gladly keep it unimpaired by any chance misfortune of his own. However like a failure his own career may seem to him; however utterly he may lose at times the wholesome appetite for life, the longing for wisdom and beauty, the zest for achievement; however his spirit and flesh may fail before the mighty and inexorable enigma, he will still bear himself with courage before others, and look forth upon the confused concourse of life with an uncraven mind. So doing, he will utter no word of personal plaint, but carefully guard his poetry from the note of dejection. For he will perceive that his art is greater than himself, and scrupulously embody in his work only his gladsome and encouraging experiences, letting his darker hours perish

The Poetry of Life

unrecorded. However bitter existence may taste to him personally, he surely cannot help seeing that in the long run, in the large account, life as a whole is desirable, and art as a whole is the reflection of its goodly joy.

The Defence of Poetry



THERE have been many volumes written in defence of poetry, and every little while some fresh champion springs to its rescue with a diligent apology. But that raises the previous question, Why should poetry need any defence?

Has it survived until now, only to perish in the latter days of the world of neglect and inattention? It has always had defenders; it has always seemed to need apologists; and yet it does subsist. The truth is, one may say that poetry is the voice of the better self, and always needs to be defended from the less fortunate toiling self, who must bear the brunt of life, and sometimes grows cynical under the strain. That part of us which

The Poetry of Life

has to go to the office or the field, which must drive an axe or a pen all day to wrest a living from the clutch of nature, is not apt to be overtolerant of leisure and contemplation and the delights of the fine arts.

To become engrossed in the necessary pursuits of average existence, is to lose patience and sympathy with the finer appreciation of the poetry of life; and yet the wise man will be able to give his strength to strenuous service in practical affairs, will be a constant benefactor to his fellows in eminently substantial ways, will efficiently put his shoulder to the muddy wheel, while he is at the same time accumulating a reserve-fund of refreshing enthusiasm for the poetry of life as he sees it. No wise man is a scoffer, nor a disbeliever in the beautiful. This is true among all kinds of men, whether they live in the west end of London or the east side of New York. The poor foreigner who lives at starvation wages in the tenements, and yet saves enough to educate his

The Defence of Poetry

boy for better things, does not need any defence of poetry. He is a faithful believer already. The rich American, whose orbit lies between Wall Street and the park, is not necessarily in need of any defence of poetry; his love of beauty, his devotion to art, may form a very wide angle of his pie.

Nevertheless, for the majority of us, the enchantment of material possessions is all-powerful, and we hold them at an inflated value. So that poetry is always in need of a defence; we are always in need of friends of the spirit, and of helps toward the finest enjoyments; we need to be delivered from our own worse elements. There is no surer escape from the prison of the worse self than through the door of beautiful expression. If we can follow any one of the arts or crafts, ever so humbly, we have, indeed, an exceptional lot, happy beyond the fortune of the majority. But even barring this advantage, we may still escape through the

The Poetry of Life

expression of others; we may be lovers and appreciators of the artistic and the beautiful; we may borrow for a moment some phrase of Wordsworth or Stevenson that exactly speaks our own thought; or some tint from Turner or Monet that exactly conveys our own vision; and so we become sharers with these masters of the universal joy of self-expression. They have thus helped us to realize our own emotion, to visualize our own vague fancy; they have brought us into relation with the outer ocean of truth; they have given us passage out into the deep water of emotional being; they have liberated us from the petty shallows of our smaller selves. The liberal arts are those which make us free; a liberal education is one which gives us the freedom of the commonwealth of the spirit.

I fancy that the joy of any great artist, a great author like Browning, or a great painter like Millet, must reside in this, that he feels himself closely a part of a greater

The Defence of Poetry

life than his own. He is an interpreter, using the common symbols of our own speech, and communicating to us messages from the ancient, uncorrupted language of universal aspiration. He talks to us in terms more apt and beautiful than we could ever invent; he brings us the zest of conviction, the stir of wonder. When we take his expressions for a moment and make them our own, we can no longer be mean, nor petty, nor sordid, nor engrossed in unworthy pursuits. We have touched what is more attractive and entrancing, and henceforth must live by that more alluring standard of enjoyment. To be sensitive to new impressions of beauty, to be able to fill each minute with some keen sense of ennobling joy, this is a great part of the secret of happiness; and it is this that art can help us to attain. Hardly anything else can help us so much or so well.

Therefore, poetry, be it said again, needs no defender, save against the vandal within us. There is no man walking this earth who

The Poetry of Life

is not himself a defender of poetry in his best moments, and a forwarder of that golden age which is ever fleeting like a shadow before us.

Distaste for Poetry



WHETHER or not there actually is a growing distaste for the higher kinds of poetry is more a matter of observation than of judgment; and the opinion of a statistician, if he could find the proper data anywhere, would be more valuable than that of the wisest critic. I have no means of coming to an adequate conclusion on the subject, but I dare say many thoughtful persons must regretfully share the recent apprehension that poetry has nothing like the hold it used to have on men's minds.

This, however, would not necessarily mean the final decay of poetry as a fine art. It might only indicate a temporary condition, a passing fluctuation of history. Periods

The Poetry of Life

of fine civilization, of intellectual freedom and spiritual activity, have before now given place to ages of grossness, barbarism, ignorance, and decay. They may again. If not a book of poetry were sold in a year, it would not prove the death of poetry; it would only prove the degeneration of the time. At least that is the faith which the story of man up to the present time justifies us in holding.

The division of poetry into descriptive, lyrical, reflective, and narrative (epic and dramatic) is useful academically; but it will hardly give us sufficient help in determining the relative value of poetical works, and is very likely to lead us astray. We should scarcely be justified in calling "The Lady of the Lake" or "The Lays of Ancient Rome" a higher kind of poetry than "Tears, Idle Tears," or "Lead, Kindly Light," simply because the former deal with action and the latter with emotion, — though this, perhaps, is citing a rather unfair compari-

Distaste for Poetry

son. I believe we shall derive more help in our consideration of the subject, if we reflect rather on the aims and natural function of poetry, than on the various forms in which it manifests itself.

There are essential qualities common to all poetry, and the excellence or eminence of poetry depends on the extent to which these qualities are present and the proportion in which they coexist in any particular instance. Poetry, like the other fine arts, has arisen in answer to definite permanent needs in our human constitution. It is a sublimated means of expression or communication, transcending our daily speech, and helping us to realize ourselves. It fixes the delight of our happiest moments in some recognizable shape to add to the delight of others. It may be called a criticism of life, because it contains the wisest and most mature thought of the race. It is more than a criticism of life, however, since it records not only the best that has been thought, but

The Poetry of Life

the best that has been felt, also, as Arnold himself says. It is not content to appeal to our minds, it must appeal to our emotions also; it must move as well as inform us; it must convince us by its reasonableness, and at the same time it must quicken us by its passionate sympathy and warmth. In addition to these two essential qualities which good poetry possesses, it must have another: it must appeal to our instinct for beauty, it must charm our æsthetic sensibility with its rhythms and cadences and lovely sounds and entrancing images. It must give us thought, indeed, but thought "touched with emotion," thought suffused with feeling and drenched with beauty. When a poem does these three things for us in an eminent degree, it matters very little whether it is lyrical or epic.

Poetry may, of course, show one quality without the others or in excess of the others. It may be extremely thoughtful at the expense of emotion and beauty, as in the case of

Distaste for Poetry

some of Browning's longer poems; or it may appeal chiefly to our feelings, as in the case of so many sentimental poets; while, again, its chief preëminence may be its wonderful mastery of sensuous beauty, as in the work of the pre-Raphaelites. But in whichever way poetry excels, it is just that particular excellence that gives it value. The comparative worth of a poem depends on the intensity with which it reaches us and the profoundness with which it influences our springs of action.

Poetry can never have its utmost effect except when it makes use of these three avenues of approach, and sways our personality in each of these three ways.

Again, great poetry, like any great art, is only produced in exceptional moments; it is not the product of average every-day life, but of every-day life raised to the pitch of normal perfection; it is the record of heightened, if not unusual, experience. It gives definite utterance and memorable form

The Poetry of Life

to our universal aspirations and reflections. Whenever a piece of human experience is embodied in words, with more clarity of thought, more intensity of feeling, more haunting charm of speech, than have ever before been bestowed upon it, then is a new poem created which outranks all others on the same theme. It is widely appreciated because it refers to a common experience, and it is highly prized because it makes us realize that experience with uncommon vividness and intensity. It attains value in our eyes, and will continue to be treasured until in its turn it is superseded by another even more true, more stirring, and more beautiful.

These fortunate occurrences, these happy realizations of the creative impulse, seem to be quite beyond the control even of the sanest poets. Homer nods, and Wordsworth is often far from his best. No poet, if all his poetry could be recovered, but would have some verse to show which would prove

Distaste for Poetry

him fallible. All the more wonderful, therefore, seem the instances of perfection; so that we have come to attribute them to inspiration and to invest them with reverence.

This exceptional quality which we prize in poetry is not, let us remember, one of technique alone. We do not value most highly poetry which is most beautiful in execution, unless it also satisfies our longing for the true and the sublime. It must record for us the noblest aspirations of the human spirit, the ultimate reach of the soul after goodness; and it must reveal to us the clearest, widest view of truth the human mind can attain. These spiritual and intellectual feats are only to be achieved in rare moments of ecstasy and insight, when the individual is lifted out of himself and brought into relation with the larger thought and volition of the universe,—of the overself. Naturally such rare and exceptional experiences cannot be appropriately expressed in common or average language. They demand heightened

The Poetry of Life

and transfigured forms of expression for their embodiment; and only when they succeed in finding such appropriate lodgment for themselves are their purpose and destiny fulfilled.

Such experiences manifest themselves in all the arts, and enrich the world with shapes of beauty. When they choose the medium of words, and succeed in moulding it to some happy presentiment of themselves, they produce poetry of the highest rank, of whatever variety it may happen to be. The Book of Job, the Psalms, the Iliad, the plays of Shakespeare, have never been superseded, because they have never been surpassed. They deal with permanent human interests and perplexities that will draw men's attention as long as the world lasts, and they deal with them in a supremely beautiful way. If ever they are supplanted in our affectionate esteem, it will be because these same themes will have found other poets to treat them even more appropriately, — more lov-

Distaste for Poetry

ingly and convincingly and with greater charm. The future appreciation and fame of the poets and artists of any age rest upon no other ground than this.

If we take this view of poetry, we shall see that it is the result not only of happy concurrences in the nature of the poet, but of exceptional conditions in his age also, since he, even more than other men, must be sensitive to his surroundings and coloured by the temper of his time. A dull or supine or depraved period does not foster what is heroic and ennobling and lovely. This is the law which holds in spite of the fact that such an age may offer to poetry and art a stimulating opportunity, through its very disregard of all they hold most dear, arousing them, by its opposition and contempt, to champion all the more valiantly those altruistic causes which it holds in derision. But in the main the art of an age is the measure of that age. The poetry of a people is an index to the character of that people. A

The Poetry of Life

pronounced and continued decline in the art and literature of a nation means a deterioration in one or more of those qualities of taste and aspiration and intellectual power from which art and literature spring.

If, therefore, there actually is a growing distaste for good poetry among us, only two conclusions are possible. The fault is either in ourselves or in poetry. Either we have become so supine, spiritually and æsthetically, that the lofty ideals of existing poetry are abhorrent to us, or else we have outgrown them, and the pabulum which nourished our fathers will not do for us.

There may be some argument in favour of the latter conclusion. With changing times and manners, many forms of art must be laid aside as no longer pertinent. Our wants and beliefs are not those of any other time or place; we must require the sustaining power of a literature quite different from that of the age of Augustus or Queen Anne or the Pilgrim Fathers. The past

Distaste for Poetry

century has been one of immense and amazing unfolding of knowledge, and a consequent rearrangement of all our ideas. We have not had time to assimilate all our new thought and to imbue it with feeling; and since science must be saturated with emotion and become part of the familiar furniture of the mind before it can be properly used in poetry, we have hardly had time to evolve any poetry or art commensurate with our increased spiritual needs and representative of our enlarged stores of knowledge.

Again, much of the old poetry may be inadequate. "Paradise Lost," for example, can hardly have the same hold on us that it had on our parents. For them it was an impressive rendering of what they believed to be supernatural facts. It must have retained for them something of the glamour and authority of religion. For us it is a twice-told tale, an ancient legend retold in our English tongue, less lovely than many of the Greek myths that have come down to

The Poetry of Life

us, conspicuous through the stateliness of its verse, but holding no unquestionable moral sanction, having no such spiritual significance as it may once have possessed. So, too, the vogue of Byron passed with the passing tastes and requirements of his day. Because he satisfied the sentimental need and intellectual hunger of a hundred years ago, it does not follow that he should satisfy ours. The same thing may be true of a great deal of poetry that was once highly thought of, — it may no longer be capable of affording the satisfaction which it is the business of poetry to give. I can well believe that many thoughtful people to-day cannot find in poetry what they need. Matthew Arnold in his poetry gave some expression to the soul-sickness of his time. But it may be that the poetry which is to cure that sickness has yet to be written. Is there not a very large class of modern men and women who are most eager for something great in poetry, — something that shall deal strongly with their

Distaste for Poetry

mental disquiet, something that shall help them to live, something that shall allay despair and reëstablish their courage? Any adequate poetry ought to do this. Why is it not being produced for us? Here is the garden; where is the voice of God?

Perhaps, however, the first conclusion is the right one, and the fault does not lie in poetry, but in ourselves. There are critics who accuse us of a too great devotion to affairs, — to the practical and material side of life, — who point out our ruthless greed, our immeasurable self-confidence, our flagrant corruption, our growing inhumanity. If such accusations are just, and if we are suffering a temporary lapse into the brutality of materialism, then certainly many of our finer instincts must be in eclipse, and a distaste for the beauties of poetry is only a natural consequence. Poetry appeals to the better self in man, and when that better self is obscured, poetry must languish. To care for poetry, one must first care for honour,

The Poetry of Life

for righteousness, for truth, for freedom, for fair play, for generosity, for unselfishness, — in short, for all those ideals of rectitude and loving-kindness which the long battle of civilization has been waged to establish. If it is true that our life as individuals and as nations is permeated with cheap facetiousness, with disregard for public honesty, with disparagement of personal nobleness, with forgetfulness of the high traditions which belong to our birth, then it would be very unreasonable to expect us to care for poetry. It is the pious office of poetry to bring solace and encouragement and lofty purpose to the heart. To those who are recreant to their ideals it can bring nothing but a sense of shame; it can be no delight, but only a rebuke.

But if we are become a gross and materialistic people, why does no great poet arise to reprove us and lead us back toward perfection? Here is the wilderness; where is the voice?

Distaste for Poetry

Lovers of poetry are not the only complainants of the present day, however. A gentleman in the University of Chicago has been calling attention to the unwillingness of educated men to enter the ministry. He declares that out of twelve hundred students in Harvard, Yale, Columbia, and Princeton graduating this year, only twenty-eight of all denominations are reported as intending to enter the ministry. Again, where does the fault lie, with religion or with us? Why should any educated man wish to enter the profession of divinity? As a calling, religion is almost as poverty-stricken as poetry itself, and its ministers as little esteemed. We don't want religion any more than we want poetry. Why not? Have we outgrown it, or are we so debased that it is altogether distasteful to us?

No sane and thoughtful man can believe for a moment that a great human trait like our need of religion has passed away, any more than he can stately believe the literal

The Poetry of Life

declarations of the old orthodoxy. And because we cannot find new forms to replace the old formulas, we seem to be losing our grip on the essential elements of faith and piety. But even if this be partly true, faith in ideals will return. The power of goodness may seem to be overcome for a time, but it must prevail anew as it prevailed of old. After a season of indifference, uncertainty, and worldliness, we shall take up the fight again against iniquity, and dishonour, and corruption, and oppression, as we have done so many times before in the long history of the world, and reestablish our broken ideals with the beautiful and the good.

Poetry will return with religion.

Congfellow



I HAVE just been holding in my hands a literary treasure lent to me by that delightful book-lover, Mr. Irving Way. It is a first edition of Arnold's volume of selections from Wordsworth in the Golden Treasury Series, and bears the inscription —

To Mima Quillinan —
from her affectionate friend
Matthew Arnold.
Septber. 7th 1879.

To sincere lovers of poetry it is a book that must have a very great quickening interest; to many of our generation who owe to Arnold so much of their training in the valuation of literature, it must certainly appeal in no ordinary degree. Not since I picked up Emer-

The Poetry of Life

son's copy of Arnold's own poems, as a visitor in that well-beloved Concord study nearly a score of years ago, have I turned the leaves of any book with a feeling so near to veneration. For Arnold must always evoke, from me at least, that emotion of loving gratitude which only one's parents and most intimate teachers can call forth.

Now as I read again this incomparable preface, so lucid, so sound, so graceful, so courteous, yet so just, so penetrating and inflexible in the search for truth, I am reminded once more, as I have been reminded how often, of our standing obligation to the best in literature and in life. As a friend of mine is always saying, "Only the best is good enough!" It is the glory of Arnold's criticism that he makes us realize this obligation, this opportunity, and helps us to a temper of quiet sanity, neither censorious nor exuberant, in which we can best enjoy what is true and ennobling in letters. If only we could keep that temper, that habit

Longfellow

of serenity and justness, unimpaired for a single day, how much we should gain in power and happiness!

It is hardly within the capacity of any living critic, certainly it is not within mine, to write of poetry as Arnold did. It would be folly to try. But when we do our best to look at the work of any poet candidly and judge it fairly, with sympathy yet without heat, we cannot but follow Arnold's example and precept. In this introduction of his to Wordsworth's poetry, so invaluable an aid to the appreciation of that great Englishman, and indeed so reliable an assistance to the study of all poetry, there are several remarks which I think ought to help us in estimating the poetry of Longfellow.

"Wordsworth," Arnold says, "composed verses during a space of some sixty years; and it is not much of an exaggeration to say that within one single decade of those years, between 1798 and 1808, almost all of his really first-rate work was produced.

The Poetry of Life

A mass of inferior work remains, work done before and after this golden prime, imbedding the first-rate work and clogging it, obstructing our approach to it, chilling, not unfrequently, the high-wrought mood with which we leave it. To be recognized far and wide as a great poet, to be possible and receivable as a classic, Wordsworth needs to be relieved of a great deal of the poetical baggage which now encumbers him."

This is true of other poets as well as of Wordsworth. It is not true of Longfellow, however. Few poets who have written so much have maintained a more even level of achievement. While comparatively few of his poems, perhaps, approach the highest reach of poetry, very few of them could be discarded from the whole body of his work without some loss to his fame. Partly by reason of his exquisite artistic sense, partly by his academic training and cultivated appreciation of literary values and proportions,

Longfellow

and partly, I dare say, by a certain strain of gracious humour in his character, he was saved from falling into such utter banalities as our beloved Wordsworth was capable of. He seems to have had one of those finely poised natures, not common among artists and poets, in which the inspirational and the rational faculties are pretty evenly balanced. If he never rose to sublime heights of enraptured expression, under the divine irresponsible possession of the muse, he never sank to absurdities below the approval of sober reason. He may not have been capable of lyrics like "I wandered lonely as a cloud," and "My heart leaps up when I behold," and "I heard a thousand blended notes," but neither, on the other hand, could he ever have been capable of many a dreary passage in many a forgotten poem of Wordsworth's.

It is easy to forgive a great poet his unhappy departure from the broad highways of sane and reasonable utterance into the

The Poetry of Life

wilderness of platitude. For we perceive, as in the case of Wordsworth, the intensity of purpose to which they are due. We behold him in fancy, a rapt prophetic figure, possessed by the glory of a theme, blinded by the splendour of his own vision, and so unregardful of the obvious dictates of common sense that he must often stumble on his solitary way into pitfalls of bathos and quagmires of the commonplace. Sorry as is his plight on these occasions, there must always be something to arouse our sympathy as well as our mirth at the situation.

Is it not this very unworldliness, this lack of the restraining influence of prudent judgment, this quixotic pursuit of the will-o'-the-wisp of the imagination, that enables him at other times to scale the lofty peaks of wisdom which environ life, and to bring us wondrous reports therefrom? It is not the cautious, but the daring, who fall — and attain. We overlook in many a great poet long and tedious passages of prosy vapidness

Longfellow

or superfluous philosophizing for the compensation of a few golden words of memorable significance, a few lines of haunting and inescapable poetry. We must do so in Wordsworth, we must do so in Whitman, we must even do so, I fear, in Browning. The poets, like Gray and Keats and Rossetti and Arnold and Emerson, who need no such excision, are few, indeed. They are the rare masters of song, endowed with a less facile but more exact and scrupulous genius of expression. As they are too fastidious to be lavish, so they are too sensitive and of too fine a taste to blunder.

To neither of these classes does Longfellow belong. He is neither a prolific but uneven poet like Wordsworth, nor a surer, more infallible, though less affluent, poet like Rossetti. He is rather like Scott and Tennyson in this respect, maintaining an even tenor of utterance with unfailing and sober taste, neither frenzied with inspiration, nor futile for the lack of it. Not that I mean to

The Poetry of Life

assert that Longfellow is a greater or less poet than any of those here named. In matters of criticism we may make comparisons to advantage sometimes, if they help us at all to classify our own ideas, and to come at a just appreciation of the subject under consideration. It is hardly ever profitable to seek to establish the superiority of one great artist over another. That is a decision which time will manage for us very well. The great thing for us is to be sure to get the best out of his work and take it home to ourselves.

To mention Longfellow in the same sentence with Tennyson, therefore, need not imply any superiority of one or the other. They are comparable in the exquisite artistry of their work and in the tenor of their lives. Both were gentle born; both were college bred; both were happy in their lives, their friends, their homes; both were permitted by fortune to be exempt from poverty and the distressful cares which have

Longfellow

harassed so many poets and dissipated their powers; both were serene and moderate gentlemen, greatly and widely beloved; and both had long unbroken careers of worldly and artistic prosperity, crowned at last with memorials in the great English Abbey. However they may have differed in temperament and mental equipment, the outward similarity of their surroundings may have had something to do with producing this common trait in their work, — its scrupulous artistic perfection. For it may be said of them both that their glory depends on the mass of their poetical achievement, — a large body of work of uniform excellence. I dare say I could be taken to task for emphasizing this similarity, and I dare say there are admirers of the great Laureate who would insist on his complete superiority to our American. If so, they must afford to be generous; for Longfellow certainly did much the same service for poetry in America that Tennyson did in England. He filled

The Poetry of Life

the public eye; he satisfied the popular conception of what a poet ought to do; he maintained the prestige of poetry unimpaired; he carried its traditions and exemplified its worth in the sentiment of his country. In the day of small beginnings he not only made a place and name for himself in his own land, but filled the world with his fame.

I must return to Arnold's introduction to Wordsworth for another suggestion that will serve as well in thinking of Longfellow and his poetry. It is this significant passage:

“It is important, therefore, to hold fast to this: that poetry is at bottom a criticism of life; that the greatness of a poet lies in his powerful and beautiful application of ideas to life, — to the question, How to live. Morals are often treated in a narrow and false fashion, they are bound up with systems of thought and belief which have had their day, they are fallen into the hands of

Longfellow

pedants and professional dealers, they grow tiresome to some of us. We find attraction at times even in a poetry of revolt against them,—or we find attractions in a poetry indifferent to them, in a poetry where the contents may be what they will, but where the form is studied and exquisite. We delude ourselves in either case; and the best cure for our delusion is to let our minds rest upon that great and inexhaustible word *life*, until we learn to enter into its meaning. A poetry of revolt against moral ideas is a poetry of revolt against *life*; a poetry of indifference to moral ideas is a poetry of indifference toward *life*.”

He then goes on to remark how English poetry has been chiefly notable for the success with which it has dealt with life, and how Wordsworth's particular glory is that he has dealt with it so powerfully. I fancy that is also true both of Tennyson and Longfellow. They were both thoroughly absorbed in moral ideas and in getting these

The Poetry of Life

ideas expressed in their poetry. Not that either one of them was specially devoted to any pronounced or definite system or code. But a profound sentiment for morality, for the ethical opportunity of life, possessed them. Not a poem in their pages but has some bearing on that difficult question, How to live. In this regard, of course, they are brothers of Wordsworth, yes, and of Whitman and Emerson and Browning also. It is impossible to imagine any of these great poets writing a poem that should be beautiful but without spiritual significance.

Longfellow, then, was not merely nor even primarily an artist in words. He was a man of deep and serious convictions and feelings, beholding the varied pageant of life, and desiring to give utterance to his thoughts about it. That he should have been able to give his thoughts a finished and beautiful verbal form, was a subsidiary gift. He was an artist to the tips of his fingers, as has been said of him, but he was first a poet

Longfellow

—since there is no other term to use. It is impossible to read a page of Longfellow without feeling this moral force. It is not only evident in his obviously spiritual poems, like "The Psalm of Life," but is present in all of his poems. It is the main theme everywhere. You perceive that the main business of his endeavours is not the creation of a mere illusion, however beautiful, but the revelation of goodness—the great active pervading goodness of the universe. He is too excellent an artist to be merely didactic, but he is too excellent a poet to be merely artistic. He is no trifler. The great subject of life engrosses him seriously and colours all his work. He may not have dealt with it as powerfully as Wordsworth and Emerson did, nor even as magically as Tennyson did; but he dealt with it constantly and successfully, and he dealt with little else.

The ideas he applied to life were not new; they were often trite, and his manner of applying them was often trite. But they

The Poetry of Life

were always sincere and always suffused with gentleness. More than that, they were the ideas common to the vast majority of people, — the mighty average of humanity, — and to that great audience Longfellow will always make a stirring appeal. The lucidity and obviousness of his craftsmanship, the quietude of his sentiment, the ever present human interest in his work, will always continue to find hosts of readers. He may not be acclaimed and cherished among persons of a possibly overfastidious culture, but he will always be dear to the hearts of thousands.

I cannot feel at the present time that Longfellow restores me to myself as Arnold and Wordsworth do when I read them, or that he enheartens and stimulates me as Browning and Emerson do; but neither can I forget that he once did so. I cannot forget that he was the first poet to stir that living enthusiasm for poetry, which we all possess to some extent; that he revealed to me the world of men with a certain glamour that

Longfellow

has never departed from it, and first hinted at the sad and splendid significance of life. To-day it may take a more cunning art than his to work this magic incantation, and distil a happiness out of poetry; perhaps even the greatest poets can furnish little else than solace to our doubtful maturity; but I for one must for ever remember the haunting flavour of "Hiawatha," or the lines "To the River Charles."

To bring Longfellow's poetry to the test of any sort of critical scrutiny, however, is a different matter. One must put aside the promptings of personal gratitude and remembered preference, and make some attempt at impartiality, however inept. Perhaps the high-water mark of Longfellow's poetical achievement is to be found in his sonnets. At least it is in these rather than in his longer narrative poems that he speaks with the unequivocal note of genius. They have a distinction and dignity of utterance not always to be found in his work.

The Poetry of Life

His mastery of technique made him at home in that difficult form, while the strict limitations of the sonnet gave his facile genius just the restraint it sometimes lacked.

In "Evangeline," for instance, I cannot feel that Longfellow is always successful. The great ease and looseness of the form, imposing few restrictions on his narrative, often betrayed him into writing prose, — or at least unpoetical verse. He does not always succeed in being simple without being common and flat. So that occasionally the poem loses its rightful dignity, and seems cheap, where it only ought to seem homely. No flaws in style, however, can nullify the effect of the story, or make its pathos seem tawdry. It is too genuine for that, and will always have its scores of readers as long as simple people continue to care for simple things, and youthful hearts are moved by tales of sorrow and of love.

In "The Courtship of Miles Standish," Longfellow is somewhat more succinct in

Longfellow

style. He seems to have gained a more perfect control over his hexameters in the ten years which passed after the writing of "Evangeline." Perhaps the greater lightness of the subject may have given a greater neatness and precision to his hand; certainly from a technical point of view the later poem seems the better, though less stirring and serious in its human appeal. That it should have become, like "Evangeline," a classic in American literature (or perhaps we had better say in English literature), is not surprising. Longfellow's inalienable renown rests on a sort of universal suffrage. He has contributed more classics, more recognized favourite poems, to our poetry than any other American author, more, indeed, than most English authors. And among his longer works none hold a more secure place than these two tales of early Colonial life told in flowing hexameters.

Only two other extended works of their author can be placed beside them in popu-

The Poetry of Life

larity, — the “Tales of a Wayside Inn” and “Hiawatha.” In thinking of these important undertakings, and in reading Longfellow’s life and the account of his literary achievements, one cannot but be amazed at the facility and ease with which he composed. That “Evangeline” should have been written in little more than a year seems creditable enough, but that “Miles Standish” should have been finished within three months and “Hiawatha” in five seems almost incredible. Yet Colonel Higginson notes that “‘Hiawatha’ was begun on June 25, 1854, and published on November 10th of that year.” So that our poet must have written about fifty lines every day, including Sundays, and then only allowed about fifteen days for the printer and binder to do their work. Evidently some people were not slow in those days. I hardly know which to wonder at most, the unflagging and abundant vitality of such genius, or the astonishing rapidity of such book-making. But there

Longfellow

can be no doubt of Longfellow's copious capacity for production. At a time when he was longing for a good snow-storm to block the door against interruptions, while he was working on "The Divine Tragedy," he was still able to write "a scene or two every day." And again he wrote fifteen of the lyrics of "The Saga of King Olaf" in as many days, and that "with all kinds of interruptions," — an altogether remarkable performance, which we can scarcely parallel. Our sounding new cities are built out of nothing in a few years, or a few months, but something seems to delay our great new poems.

Just wherein the peculiar charm of "Hiawatha" rests, it would be hard to say. But the unwonted measure, with its monotonous "feminine endings," as they are called, and the unusual style, with its recurrent phrases, were blended together by a happy inspiration for the depicting of its scenes. They keep that air of pristine innocence which

The Poetry of Life

everywhere pervades the poem; they do not rob its themes and characters of the natural dignity which belongs to them, and yet they have none of the sophistication which would have necessarily characterized a more conventional treatment of the subject. In blank verse, for instance, these folk-tales would have been much less effective. It is perhaps rash to say that the task could not have been better done, or that no form could have been found more appropriate for this particular purpose. Perhaps we do not know the Indian well enough to judge. Our conception of him, or at least our conception of his legends, must always be coloured by our remembrance of Hiawatha. And I confess there is an inescapable wizardry hanging about the poem which I can never shake off. It is one of those things which I could never even attempt to judge impartially. Its cadences and pictures are too inextricably tied up with memories of charmed days long ago, when bears inhabited the back lot, when

Longfellow

hostile tribes skulked through underbrush at the pasture's edge, and we used to go moose-hunting (on real snow-shoes) with wooden guns of our own manufacture.

Longfellow's most ambitious work is a comparative failure. Like so many great poets, he experienced the irony of the muse, and when he attempted most, was permitted to accomplish least. "Christus" was born of a noble conception, whose fulfilment lay beyond its author's power. It was, indeed, Longfellow's intention to make this his *magnum opus*. His meditations upon it dominated a great part of his literary life, and the actual labour expended upon it was greater than on any other one of his writings. Yet it would scarcely be missed by the average reader, if omitted from his works. He was far from being at his best in the drama, even in a drama of the cloister, such as "Christus" is. There is another insuperable obstacle, however, to his success in such an undertaking, which becomes apparent in

The Poetry of Life

“The Divine Tragedy,” the first part of this noble venture. It is simply this, that in retelling the tales of the life of our Lord from the New Testament, he is competing with that great masterpiece of literature, the New Testament itself. The story of Christ has been told once for all. An artist or writer who would use that sublime figure for the centre of interest in his theme, must not adhere to the Bible version of that great life, but must diverge from it. His work, of course, must not controvert the Scriptures, but it must be an imaginative supplement to them. It must be apocryphal. By introducing the words of Christ in all their familiarity into his poem, Longfellow inevitably lost his hold upon his readers. His work became a graceful transliteration, instead of an original creation. The epilogue, for example, is simply the Apostle’s Creed, taken verbatim from the Book of Common Prayer. The whole poem, therefore, is a mistake, an error in artistic judgment.

Longfellow

We are not to judge any poet by his errors, however, but by his successes, the great things he accomplished for our lasting benefit and enjoyment. We need great poetry to-day — though we do not know it — more than we need anything else. All that industry can give we are constantly adding to life; but the spiritual enhancements, the aids to happiness which poetry and art and culture alone can give us, we are as constantly neglecting. With all the affairs of daily life we deal with commendable promptness and power; to the affairs of the intellectual life, however, we are still too indifferent. It is an old plaint, indeed, one that our preachers and critics are never tired of dinning in our ears; but it is just, nevertheless. And as we gradually come to realize our human needs in a spiritual and intellectual direction more and more, we shall turn with more and more avidity to art and poetry to satisfy us. Nor will poetry in that day be found deficient. It will arise

The Poetry of Life

at our demand, fresh and great, to supply our strong requirements, and we shall have a national poetry commensurate with our country, with our race, with our dreams.

But we shall never be exempt from our debt to the old poets for all they have done for us, and for all they are doing from day to day. For if "the poetry of earth is never dead," neither is the poetry of man. And among those who have wrought in that wide field of human endeavour with so much lofty and sincere devotion, the blameless Longfellow is eminent and secure.

Emerson



Is it a hundred years since Emerson's birth? It is time for another Emerson. There will be many still living this spring to keep his memory fresh, to recount to us what manner of man he was — his personal friends, and those who had the good fortune to hear his voice.

There are others whose debt to him is also incalculably great, who can only bear testimony to the influence of the prophet and poet. The man himself they never knew. That was their loss and must always remain a regret in their lives. Nothing in later life, I fancy, can supply the impulse which young hero-worship brings; and not

The Poetry of Life

to have seen one's hero in the flesh must always seem an irreparable deprivation.

Twenty-five years ago, when we were all of us even younger than we are now, there were thousands of youthful hearts imbued with the passion for truth and encouraged in noble ambitions by Emerson's incomparable words. Scholars, dreamers, students in college, in the counting-room, by the lonely fire of logs, or within the sound of hurrying feet on the pavement—the message came to them with revelation and hope. It was a time when science was destroying superstition. To many a conscientious mind, being bred under the shadow of scrupulous orthodoxy, and yet beginning to be touched with divine doubt, the process of change was full of sadness. To the thoughtful boy, beginning to turn his eyes inward for the source of light, yet enamoured with the engaging loveliness of the earth, it seemed the height of tragedy to have the pillars of established faith removed.

Emerson

Not every one had the hardihood to accept all the conclusions of the new science without shrinking. There was need of a great friend whose unflinching courage might serve as a stay amid tottering creeds and overthrown convictions.

That friend was Emerson. Other philosophers and scientists, inflexible in the cause of truth, might overturn the temples of our fathers, but that gentle yet intrepid spirit gave us a more spacious house of worship, bidding us abandon the old without a regret. He taught us to look with equanimity upon the decay of dogma, and reassured us with confidence in the free spiritual life which dogma had overcrusted and obscured. He made us glad of our loss and light-hearted at being freed from an encumbrance. We perceived that while the signs and vestments of our paternal religion might vanish like smoke, the breath of goodness at the core of things remained potent and quickening as before.

The Poetry of Life

To render this incalculable service for a growing generation, secured for Emerson a unique loyalty and enthusiasm, and we came to look upon him with that tender reverence which unquestioned goodness always inspires. I know not how it may be with those who are of age to assume the *toga virilis* to-day, but I fancy there is no living voice to hearten and inspire now as there was then. However credulous our ears, however fervent our fancy, however noble and unselfish our aspiration, we listen in vain for the confident voice of joyous revelation sounding through the world. There is now no prophet in Israel, and the Philistines may triumph unrebuked.

In all his prose, in all his verse, Emerson is the lover of truth, the advocate of the spiritual in life, and the foe of all mean considerations. Compromise was for him impossible, and worldly wisdom but another name for poltroonery. So single-hearted was he, so thoroughly the preacher of

Emerson

righteousness, that his work does not give us the satisfaction in sensuous beauty which we derive from many poets — his inferiors. It has even been said of him, in this regard, that he was not a great artist, that his message was delivered without regard to effect, that in him the matter was of more importance than the form, that he had no style. But this is hardly so. Consider how thoroughly the pellucid spirit of the man permeated all his words, making his phrases, often homely and unadorned, more memorable than the most richly wrought utterances of other men. His work is like his person, as one imagines it — the most radiant and diaphanous tenement of soul. So clear was his conception of the truth, it could not be diluted nor obscured, but must come to us by the shortest way, as simply and directly as possible. He was a speaker of precepts and maxims, not a builder of rhyme — at least not in the sense that Milton and Tennyson were. With him the

The Poetry of Life

main thing was not the creation of a detached and finished mechanism in words embodying so much moral truth or philosophic thought, but rather the expression of his convictions with the least possible amount of reliance on language. He cared for his message more than his medium.

Yet in spite of this, I think we must concede the greatness of Emerson as an artist — as the master of a style peculiarly his own. For it is the mark of an artist so to impress himself upon his medium, so unmistakably to qualify his work, as to make it a unique product, the very image and likeness of himself. It is always possible to say of the art of any great master: "This is his; it can be the work of none other; here is the very man himself." And of whom can we say this, if not of the adorable sage of Concord village? He was an original thinker, it is true; but he also was an original artist; he wrote like no one else. Both in method and in substance he shares

Emerson

with Whitman the distinction of being the most novel and significant of American poets. For incomparable freshness of phrase and trenchancy of diction they are only approached, in a younger generation, by that other strange, solitary New Englander, Emily Dickinson. And Emily Dickinson's output, for all its brilliancy and vigour, was somewhat too slight, too unvaried, and too thin, to lift her to a place among the mighty masters of English poetry, though her place among the lesser immortals — the little masters — is secure.

Emerson himself is not easily comparable with other poets. At this time of his centennial, a white day in the annals of New England, it is more profitable to heed his lesson than to take his measure. In the bewildering maze of a breathless commercial civilization, it is well to have something tonic and unflinching to refer to. We never needed Emerson's radiant faith in ideas and ideals more than we do to-day, and such

The Poetry of Life

a faith never seemed farther from our thoughts. If we have read him and pondered him when we were boys, and derived any moral stimulus from his wholesome, glad morality, let us read him and ponder him again. He is a deep well, and we may go to him often for refreshment, with no fear of his failing. And if any of us have not yet made his acquaintance, let us hurry to repair that misfortune as quickly as may be. To tell the truth, we need the Philippines much less than we need another Emerson; but since we have got the Philippines, we need an original Emerson all the more. He will help us to add honesty and refinement, taste and beauty and modest sincerity, to our sturdy self-assurance; so that our civilization may stand for something noble in history, as well as something gigantic.

Mr. Riley's Poetry



EVEN if Mr. Riley's delightful poetry — which, along with his prose, now has the distinction of a beautiful uniform edition — had no claim to distinction in itself, the fact of its unrivalled popularity would challenge consideration. But, fortunately, his work does not depend on so frail a tenure of fame as the vogue of a season or the life of a fad. The qualities which secure for it a wider reading and a heartier appreciation than are accorded to any other living American poet are rooted deep in human nature; they are preëminently qualities of wholesomeness and common sense, those qualities of steady and conservative cheerfulness which ennoble the average man, and in which the

The Poetry of Life

man of exceptional culture is too often lacking. Its lovers are the ingenuous home-keeping hearts, on whose sobriety and humour the national character is based. And yet, one has not said enough when one says it is poetry of the domestic affections, poetry of sentiment; for it is much more than that.

Poetry which is free from the unhappy spirit of the age, free from dejection, from doubt, from material cynicism, neither tainted by the mould of sensuality nor wasted by the maggot of reform, is no common product, in these days. So much of our art and literature is ruined by self-consciousness, running to the artificial and the tawdry. It is the slave either of commercialism, imitative, ornate, and insufferably tiresome, or of didacticism, irresponsible and dull. But Mr. Riley at his best is both original and sane. He seems to have accomplished that most difficult feat, the devotion of one's self to an art without any deterioration of health. He is full of the sweetest vitality, the sound-

Mr. Riley's Poetry

est merriment. His verse is not strained with an overburden of philosophy, on the one hand, nor debauched with maudlin sentimentalism, on the other. Its robust gaiety has all the fascination of artlessness and youth. It neither argues, nor stimulates, nor denounces, nor exhorts; it only touches and entertains us. And, after all, few things are more humanizing than innocent amusement.

It is because of this quality of abundant good nature, familiar, serene, homely, that it seems to me no exaggeration to call Mr. Riley the typical American poet of the day. True, he does not represent the cultivated and academic classes; he reflects nothing of modern thought; but in his unruffled temper and dry humour, occasionally flip-pant on the surface, but never facetious at heart, he might stand very well for the normal American character in his view of life and his palpable enjoyment of it. Most foreign critics are on the lookout for the appearance of something novel and uncon-

The Poetry of Life

ventional from America, forgetting that the laws of art do not change with longitude. They seize now on this writer, now on that, as the eminent product of democracy. But there is nothing unconventional about Mr. Riley. "He is like folks," as an old New England farmer said of Whittier. And if the typical poet of democracy in America is to be the man who most nearly represents average humanity throughout the length and breadth of this country, who most completely expresses its humour, its sympathy, its intelligence, its culture, and its common sense, and yet is not without a touch of original genius sufficient to stamp his utterances, then Mr. James Whitcomb Riley has a just claim to that title.

He is unique among American men of letters (or poets, one might better say; for strictly speaking he is hardly a man of letters) in that he has originality of style, and yet is entirely native and homely. Whitman was original, but he was entirely prophetic

Mr. Riley's Poetry

and remote, appealing only to the few; Longfellow had style, but his was the voice of our collegiate and cultivated classes. It is not a question of rank or comparison; it is merely a matter of definitions. It is the position rather than the magnitude of any particular and contemporary star that one is interested in fixing. To determine its magnitude, a certain quality of endurance must be taken into account; and to observe this quality often requires considerable time. Quite apart, then, from Mr. Riley's relative merit in the great anthology of English poetry, he has a very definite and positive place in the history of American letters as the first widely representative poet of the American people.

He is professedly a home-keeping, home-loving poet, with the purpose of the imaginative realist, depending upon common sights and sounds for his inspirations, and engrossed with the significance of facts. Like Mr. Kipling, whose idea of perpetual bliss

The Poetry of Life

is a heaven where every artist shall "draw the thing as he sees it, for the God of things as they are," Mr. Riley exclaims:

"Tell of the things jest like they wuz —
They don't need no excuse!
Don't tetch 'em up as the poets does,
Till they're all too fine fer use!"

And again, in his lines on "A Southern Singer":

"Sing us back home, from there to here:
Grant your high grace and wit, but we
Most honour your simplicity."

In the proem to the volume "Poems Here at Home," there occurs a similar invocation, and a test of excellence is proposed which may well be taken as the gist of his own artistic purpose:

"The Poems here at Home! Who'll write 'em down,
Jes' as they air — in Country and in Town? —
Sowed thick as clods is 'crost the fields and lanes,
Er these 'ere little hop-toads when it rains!
Who'll 'voice' 'em? as I heerd a feller say
'At speechified on Freedom, t'other day,
And soared the Eagle tel, it 'peared to me,
She wasn't bigger'n a bumble-bee!"

Mr. Rilev's Poetry

“What We want, as I sense it, in the line
O' poetry is somepin' Yours and Mine —
Somepin' with live-stock in it, and outdoors,
And old crick-bottoms, snags, and sycamores !
Putt weeds in — pizenvines, and underbresh,
As well as johnny-jump-ups, all so fresh
And sassy-like ! — and groun'-squir'ls, — yes, and 'We,'
As sayin' is, — 'We, Us and Company.' ”

In the lines “Right Here at Home,” the same strain recurs, like the very burden of the poet's life-song:

“Right here at home, boys, is the place, I guess,
Fer me and you and plain old happiness :
We hear the World's lots grander — likely so, —
We'll take the World's word for it and not go.
We know *its* ways ain't *our* ways, so we'll stay
Right here at home, boys, where we *know* the way.

“Right here at home, boys, where a well-to-do
Man's plenty rich enough — and knows it, too,
And's got a' extry dollar, any time,
To boost a feller up 'at *wants* to climb,
And's got the git-up in him to go in
And *git there*, like he purt' nigh allus kin ! ”

It is in this spirit that by far the greater part of his work, the telling and significant part of it, is conceived. The whole tatter-

The Poetry of Life

demalion company of his Tugg Martins, Jap Millers, Armazindys, Bee Fesslers, and their comrades, as rollicking and magnetic as Shakespeare's own wonderful populace, he finds "right here at home"; nothing human is alien to him; indeed, there is something truly Elizabethan, something spacious and robust in his humanity, quite exceptional to our fashion-plate standards. In the same wholesome, glad frame of mind, too, he deals with nature,—mingling the keenest, most loving observation with the most familiar modes of speech. An artist in his ever sensitive appreciation and impressionability, never missing a phase or mood of natural beauty, he has the added ability so necessary to the final touch of illusion,—the power of ease, the power of making his most casual word seem inevitable, and his most inevitable word seem casual. It is in this, I think, that he differs from all his rivals in the field of familiar and dialect poetry. Other writers are as familiar as he,

Mr. Riley's Poetry

and many as truly inspired; but none combines to such a degree the homespun phrase with the lyric feeling. His only compeer in this regard is Lowell, in the brilliant "Biglow Papers," and several other less known but not less admirable Chaucerian sketches of New England country life. Indeed, in humour, in native eloquence, in vivacity, Mr. Riley closely resembles Lowell, though differing from that bookman in his training and inclination, and naturally, as a consequence, in his range and treatment of subjects. But the tide of humanity, so strong in Lowell, is at flood, too, in the Hoosier poet. It is this humane character, preserving all the rugged sweetness in the elemental type of man, which can save us at last as a people from the ravaging taint of charlatanism, frivolity, and greed.

But we must not leave our subject without discriminating more closely between several sorts of Mr. Riley's poetry; for there is as much difference between his dialect and his

The Poetry of Life

classic English (in point of poetic excellence, I mean) as there is between the Scotch and the English of Burns. Like Burns, he is a lover of the human and the simple, a lover of green fields and blowing flowers; and, like Burns, he is more at home, more easy and felicitous, in his native Doric than in the colder Attic speech of Milton and Keats.

This is so, it seems to me, for two reasons. In the first place, the poet is dealing with the subject matter he knows best; and in the second place, he is using the medium of expression in which he has a lifelong facility. The art of poetry is far too delicate and too difficult to be practised successfully without the most consummate and almost unconscious mastery of the language employed; so that a poet will hardly ever write with anything like distinction or convincing force in any but his mother tongue. An artist's command of his medium must be so intimate and exquisite that his thought can find adequate expression in it as easily as in the

Mr. Riley's Poetry

lifting of a finger or the moving of an eyelid. Otherwise he is self-conscious, unnatural, false; and, hide it as he may, we feel the awkwardness and indecision in his work. He who treats of subjects which he knows only imperfectly cannot be true to nature; while he who employs some means of expression which he only imperfectly controls cannot be true to himself. The best art requires equally the fulfilment of both these severe demands; they are the cardinal virtues of art. Disregard of the first produces the dilettante; disregard of the second produces the charlatan. That either of these epithets would seem entirely incongruous, if applied to Mr. Riley, is a tribute to his thorough worth as a writer.

His verse, then, divides itself sharply into two kinds, the dialect and the conventional. But we have so completely identified him with the former manner that it is hard to estimate his work in the latter. It may be doubted, however, whether he would have

The Poetry of Life

reached his present eminence, had he confined his efforts to the strictly regulated forms of standard English. In poems like "A Life Term" and "One Afternoon," for instance, there is smoothness, even grace of movement, but hardly that distinction which we call style, and little of the lyric plangency the author commands at his best; while very often in his use of authorized English there is a strangely marked reminiscence of older poets, as of Keats in "A Water Colour" (not to speak of "A Ditty of No Tone," written as a frankly imitative tribute of admiration for the author of the "Ode to a Grecian Urn"), or of Emerson in "The All-kind Mother." In only one of the dialect poems, on the other hand, so far as I recall them, is there any imitative note. His "Nothin' to Say" has something of the atmosphere and feeling as well as the movement of Tennyson's "Northern Farmer." But for the most part, when Mr. Riley uses his own dialect, he is thoroughly

Mr. Riley's Poetry

original as well as effective. He has not only the lyrical impetus so needful to good poetry; he has also the story-teller's gift. And when we add to these two qualities an abundant share of whimsical humour, we have the equipment which has so justly given him wide repute.

All of these characteristics are brought into play in such poems as "Fessler's Bees," one of the fairest examples of Mr. Riley's balladry at its best:

“ Might call him a bee-expert,
When it come to handlin' bees, —
Roll the sleeves up of his shirt
And wade in amongst the trees
Where a swarm 'u'd settle, and —
Blamedest man on top of dirt ! —
Rake 'em with his naked hand
Right back in the hive ag'in,
Jes' as easy as you please ! ”

For Mr. Riley is a true balladist. He is really doing for the modern popular taste, here and now, what the old balladists did in their time. He is an entertainer. He

The Poetry of Life

has the ear of his audience. He knows their likes and dislikes, and humours them. His very considerable and very successful experience as a public reader of his own work has reinforced (one may guess) his natural modesty and love of people, and made him constantly regardful of their pleasure. So that we must look upon his verses as a most genuine and spontaneous expression of average poetic feeling as well as personal poetic inspiration.

Every artist's work must be, necessarily, a more or less successful compromise between these two opposing and difficult conditions of achievement. The great artists are they who succeed at last in imposing upon others their own peculiar and novel conceptions of beauty. But these are only the few whom the gods favour beyond their fellows; while for the rank and file of those who deal in the perishable wares of art a less ambitious standard may well be allowed. We must have our balladists as well as our

Mr. Riley's Poetry

bards, it seems; and very fortunate is the day when we can have one with so much real spirit and humanity about him as Mr. Riley.

At times the pathos of the theme quite outweighs its homeliness, and lifts the author above the region of self-conscious art; the use of dialect drops away, and a creation of pure poetry comes to light, as in that irresistible elegy, "Little Haly," for example:

“ ‘ Little Haly, little Haly, ’ cheeps the robin in the tree ;
‘ Little Haly, ’ sighs the clover ; ‘ Little Haly, ’ moans the bee ;
‘ Little Haly, little Haly, ’ calls the kill-dee at twilight ;
And the katydids and crickets hollers ‘ Haly ’ all the night. ”

In this powerful lyric there is a simple directness approaching the feeling of Greek poetry, and one cannot help regretting the few intrusions of dialect. The poem is so universal in its human appeal, it seems a pity to limit the range of its appreciation by hampering it with local peculiarities of speech.

The Poetry of Life

At times, too, in his interpretations of nature, Mr. Riley lays aside his drollery and his drawling accent in exchange for an incisive power of phrase.

“The wild goose trails his harrow”

is an example of the keenness of fancy I refer to. Another is found in the closing phrase of one of the stanzas in “A Country Pathway”:

“A puritanic quiet here reviles
The almost whispered warble from the hedge,
And takes a locust’s rasping voice and files
The silence to an edge.”

In “The Flying Islands of the Night” Mr. Riley has made his widest departure into the reign of whimsical imagination. Here he has retained that liberty of unshackled speech, that freedom and ease of diction, which mark his more familiar themes, and at the same time has entered an entirely fresh field for him, a sort of grown-up fairyland. There are many strains

Mr. Riley's Poetry

of fine poetry in this miniature play, which show Mr. Riley's lyrical faculty at its best. In one instance there is a peculiar treatment of the octosyllabic quatrain, where he has chosen to print it in the guise of blank verse. It is impossible, however, to conceal the true swing of the lines.

“ I loved her. Why? I never knew. Perhaps
Because her face was fair. Perhaps because
Her eyes were blue and wore a weary air.
Perhaps! Perhaps because her limpid face
Was eddied with a restless tide, wherein
The dimples found no place to anchor and
Abide. Perhaps because her tresses beat
A froth of gold about her throat, and poured
In splendour to the feet that ever seemed
Afloat. Perhaps because of that wild way
Her sudden laughter overleapt propriety;
Or — who will say? — perhaps the way she wept.”

It almost seems as if Mr. Riley, with his bent for jesting and his habit of wearing the cap and bells, did not dare be as poetical as he could; and when a serious lyric came to him, he must hide it under the least lyrical appearance, as he has done here.

The Poetry of Life

But that, surely, if it be so, is a great injustice to himself. He might well attempt the serious as well as the comic side of poetry, remembering that "when half-gods go, the gods arrive."

Mr. Swinburne's Poetry



IT is never very wise to try to make just estimates of our contemporaries. At best, we can only give opinions limited by our angle of outlook and coloured by the atmosphere of our own time. This must be particularly so in the case of poetry, for the reason that poetry makes such a strong appeal to our sympathies and is never a matter to be judged by the reason alone.

To speak of Mr. Swinburne with proper appreciation one must go back to the early eighties, when his wonderful poetry was taken less as a matter of course than it is now. Those were years when our college tasks were interrupted every little while by the appearance of some new volume of precious

The Poetry of Life

poetry by Browning or Tennyson, by Morris or Rossetti, and long hours would be spent in eager, delightful reading. Arnold, it is true, had ceased to write, except as a critic, but his name and personality were none the less touched with glamour, his work none the less cherished. The sixth of the immortals of that far-off golden age was the author of "Atalanta in Calydon," and in some ways he was the most compelling of them all, astonishing and unrivalled in his accomplishment.

He was not so much a mentor as a sorcerer, and it was with a sort of divine intoxication that we used to chant "The Triumph of Time," "The Garden of Proserpine," the close of "Anactoria," or the choruses of "Atalanta." In volume and magic of sound no English poet had ever matched these things, it seemed. They carried us away by their unexpected splendour of diction, their novel and incomparable harmonies, their noble fervour. They came upon the

Mr. Swinburne's Poetry

impressionable ear like enchanted strains from some mysterious land, fabulous, lonely, and mournful, yet lovely with all the loveliness of unforgotten joy. Their sorrowful cadences, their sad refrains, their pitiful sentiment, appealed to the wilful melancholy of youth, while their lofty and uncalculating radicalism quickened its generosity. It did not occur to us in those days that restraint was any part of perfection, or that these miracles of poetic artistry would have been more beautiful had they been less recklessly diffuse. At least, if any such suspicion ever crossed our minds, we loyally put it aside.

But those bright days of romance could not last. One by one the great singers brought their work to a close, leaving none to take their places; while their youthful admirers heard the call of the world, and were forced, however reluctantly, to go about the world's business. Then, too, there had to come a time of riper judgment, more

The Poetry of Life

discriminating appreciation, more exacting taste. As years went by they brought a change of spiritual and mental needs; the sensuous music of "Poems and Ballads" grew a little monotonous and unsatisfying in our ears, and failed to charm us as it had at first. What the reason for this may have been who shall say? In the cold disillusionment of an age of prose I find myself wondering whether it was due to a failure of enthusiasm in ourselves, or whether there is really an inherent deficiency somewhere in Mr. Swinburne's poetry which makes it incapable of holding one for long. Poetry at its best, like all art at its best, must surely be a thing of such power as to sway men and women of all conditions and requirements with more than a passing influence. Its hold must be permanent, its zest perennial, while its subtle power to move us must prevail against the slowly benumbing frost of time. Poetry which falls short of these demands, which charms us for a time and

Mr. Swinburne's Poetry

then can charm us no more, which brings our senses under the spell of its enchantment, but in the end fails to answer our rational questions, can hardly be called poetry of the first order.

Brought to the test of judicial questioning, much of Mr. Swinburne's poetry is found to fail in this respect. At least so it must seem to many of his admirers, I fancy. And while they must for ever be gratified for the delight which he gave them, they must somewhat sorrowfully admit that he can give the same delight no longer, — that while the beautiful masterpieces of other great Victorians are as potent as of old, his have somehow lost their charm. Why is it that "The Scholar Gipsy" and "Thyrsis" continue to allure us, while "Ave atque Vale" appeals to us almost in vain? And why do we grow weary of "A Forsaken Garden," while the simpler measures of "The Neckan" and "The Forsaken Mer-
man" still move us profoundly with their

The Poetry of Life

pathos and romance? How is it we can read again and again "Tristram and Iseult," "Rabbi Ben Ezra," "Fra Lippo Lippi," and "Sohrab and Rustum," and hardly once care to turn to "Tristram of Lyonesse," or "The Last Oracle," or "Delores"? Why do not the familiar words enchant us as they did? How have the charm and potency and conviction escaped from the verse? Must we conclude that all Mr. Swinburne's passionate reverberance is not comparable to "the surge and thunder of the Odyssey," after all?

What makes this difference? I have an idea that this poetry never was quite as great as it seemed to us. Youth is full of ideals, it is true, but it is also much taken up with the senses. It does not often demand a convincing reason, or look for truth beneath appearances. The sensuous beauties of the world, the obvious sensuous beauties of art, appeal to it. And if there is one quality which Mr. Swinburne's poetry always ex-

Mr. Swinburne's Poetry

hibits, it is sensuous beauty, beauty of form. You may repeat the stanzas beginning, —

“ O fair green-girdles mother of mine.
Sea, that art clothed with the sun and the rain,” —

or that incomparable chorus, —

“ Before the beginning of years
There came to the making of man,” —

until the whole world seems made out of poetry, so splendid and compelling is the fabric of the verse, so free and sincere and impassioned its headlong flow. Yet how easily it becomes redundant!

There, I believe, is the essential flaw in this masterly poet's work. He is, if we may judge, a man of unbounded exuberance, of unbridled enthusiasm; he knows no moderation nor restraint; he is all superlative, always excessive; he will never use an adjective where he can possibly use two; he is never satisfied with a perfect line without wanting to duplicate it. From a single poetic thought he will brew a barrel of ver-

The Poetry of Life

biage. He seems never to have comprehended the value of economy in art. It never has occurred to him that reiteration is almost always a mark of weakness. He has never perceived what power there is in being concise. He is, as was said of Gladstone, "intoxicated with the exuberance of his own verbosity," and can never be quenched as long as there is an adjective left in the dictionary. He must exhaust the very resources of language before he will desist.

The blunder is fatal. It is a juvenile error which a little judgment ought surely to have corrected, but one which Mr. Swinburne has never outgrown. All of his later work, like his earlier, suffers from this redundancy of expression, this lax and indiscriminate exaggeration. So indulgent has he been of his native talent that there are scarcely half a dozen of his poems that would not gain by pruning and condensation. With the great mass of his work, of course, no such amending could be possible. Its blemishes are too

Mr. Swinburne's Poetry

inherent. His genius itself is too diffuse and ungovernable ever to submit to those nice limitations which perfection in any art requires of the artist. You may open him almost at random and find examples of his besetting sin. For instance, you may turn to "March: An Ode," and read the first line, —

"Ere frost flower and snow blossom faded and fell, and the splendour of Winter had passed out of sight,"—

and feel yourself still in the presence of the same sonorous voice that first sounded in the "Poems and Ballads," though with just a suspicion of weakness. Before you reach the foot of the page, however, you come upon the line, —

"That the sea was not lovelier than here was the land, nor the night than the day, nor the day than the night,"—

and at once feel that all force has evaporated from the poem. "Nor the night than the day, nor the day than the night"—what pitiable bathos, what tawdry ineptitude!

The Poetry of Life

Yet, to speak severely, he has hardly written a page that is entirely free from any such meaningless superfluity of words. His very facility has been his undoing. This great copiousness of language, while at first indicative of abundance of power, produces in the end a sense of incompetence and vapid-ity. Incontinence is a mark of feebleness, not of force, and implies inefficiency or decrepitude. In art, as in life, too much is as bad as too little. Only within the range of the golden mean is perfection possible. In all of Mr. Swinburne's work, in his prose as well as his poetry, we cannot help feeling his lack of balance, his lack of real enduring power. He seems to be led away by every new combination of words that suggests itself to his ear; he cannot light upon a happy phrase without wanting to repeat it in a slightly different form. He has a passion for proficiency rather than perfection, and is always betrayed into overstatement. It cannot be said of his poetry

Mr. Swinburne's Poetry

that he writes without inspiration, nor of his prose that he writes without insight; but it must often be said that he writes without judgment. He has passion, indeed, a noble passion, for human liberty, but a passion so intemperate that it is more like the hysteria of the invalid than the divine frenzy of the oracle.

It is a thousand pities that a man of such genius should never have learned the value of moderation, that prime requisite of beauty. For perfection lies on the magic boundary between deficiency and excess, and can no more reside in the one than in the other. Successful art, like successful life, must be modulated, modelled, limited, bounded, directed. The flawless line of the statue appears only when the superfluous marble has been cut away. Without modulation all crude native force must lose half its effectiveness and be dissipated in irrelevancy, whether it is manifesting itself in nature, in society, or in art. It is not enough that

The Poetry of Life

poetic inspiration should be spontaneous and plentiful in any given instance, it must be regulated, controlled, and tempered by logic, before it can wholly serve the best purposes of poetry.

Again, all art, and particularly the art of poetry, must not only be restrained and free from excess; it must be balanced in all its essentials; it must devote itself to satisfying our curiosity as well as playing upon our emotions and charming our senses. It must help to satiate our love of truth, our desire for knowledge, our longing for a reasonable explanation of the universe, at the same time and in the same measure that it helps to satisfy our love of sensuous beauty and all the generous aspirations of the spirit. Poetry has obligations, in other words, not only to the fastidious taste and the inflammable heart of the reader, but to his clear reason as well. These latter requirements the poetry of Mr. Swinburne fails to meet. Poetry, indeed, must not smack of philosophy, yet

Mr. Swinburne's Poetry

every poet must have a philosophy of his own, and that philosophy must be inherent and discoverable in his work. In poetry of the first order the philosophic pith is significant and valuable. In less important poetry it is insignificant and of little worth, either because it is trite, or because it is false, or because it is vague or fantastic.

Some such reason as this, if I am not mistaken, lies at the root of Mr. Swinburne's comparative failure as a poet—his failure to reach that influential place in current literature which his great gifts would have otherwise entitled him to hold. For while we all gladly acknowledge his eminence, we must also regretfully admit the slightness of his hold on the regard of his age. He has been belauded and revered as a master by all lovers of technique; he has failed to make himself felt as a power in his generation. For all his splendid achievement he pipes to us in vain. He does not touch the heart of the multitude as Tennyson and

The Poetry of Life

Longfellow touched it; he does not stimulate thought and satisfy our mental unrest as Browning did; he has none of Arnold's clarity and repose. He fills the ear without feeding the mind, and we turn away in disappointment from his resonant but empty dithyrambs.

All these ungracious things must only be said, of course, in the interest of the severest criticism, in an attempt, which is perhaps futile, after all, to judge the poetry of our own day in comparison with the greatest poetry of all time. And they may be said, I hope, without any detriment to Mr. Swinburne's fame. For, in spite of all detractions, he remains one of the chief ornaments of the Victorian age of poetry, that is to say, one of the illustrious poets of the world. As a wizard of versification, a startling and magnificent artist, he remains without a rival.

The Rewards of Poetry



(A Letter to the Lyric Muse from an Imaginary Correspondent.)

IT is now more than a year, my dear mistress, since my last poem was written. As I was wont to be so unfailingly diligent in your service, my conscience tells me I should attempt to explain the long silence, for I truly feel that somehow there has been a breach of duty on my part, a failure to live up to my own sense of what is becoming, if not to meet your gentle illumined expectations.

Perhaps it has not seemed long to you; perhaps you have not even been aware of

The Poetry of Life

the cessation of my devoted endeavours, nor missed my customary offerings at all. To me, however, the time has seemed heavy and interminable, and I have only borne it, I am sorry to admit, with grievous vexation and a rebellious heart. It has been a bitter and profitless year of estrangement. Had I felt that it was the result of your displeasure, that you had purposely withdrawn your favour from me, that I was being chastised like a loved but erring child in need of discipline, I think I could have endured the separation, the lonesomeness, the defeat, with a comparatively equal mind. But that circumstances and conditions alone should have been the cause of this apparent neglect, is the fact that makes my unhappiness so sombre and sincere. Our life, it seems, is never what we will, but always a hurried compromise with the inexorable drift of events, and we go forward through time and the tangle of affairs as a canoe goes upward through the headlong brawling rapids of a

The Rewards of Poetry

stream to the far-lying uncertain reaches of success between the meadows of contentment.

You who live constantly in the quiet open light of ideals, like a dweller among lofty mountains where the air is always serene, very likely forget sometimes how it must fare with unfortunate mortals on the earth, forced to snatch a perilous livelihood in the bewildering hubbub of modern times. With your radiant beauty, your perennial youth, your unconquerable joyousness, your calm and happy wisdom, I dare say it has escaped your notice that the world has grown old since the golden age of Hellas, when Marsyas piped from the riverside and Pan responded from the rugged hills. That was before the blight of modernity, "the strange disease called modern life," had fallen upon men. Life was lived in many ways more sanely then than now, even though the range of knowledge was less unlimited than ours. The people of those

The Poetry of Life

days surpassed us in the fortunate conduct of their lives,—in securing a just poise of existence, in making all their endeavours subserve the great purpose of happiness. They knew well that there is one thing more important than to be strenuous, and that is to be glad. It is true we have far outstripped them in conquering the forces of the earth and the secrets of science. Our resources of wealth and knowledge are truly almost incredible; and yet we seem almost powerless to convert them into enjoyment; and our modern world lies in a vast turmoil of excitement, battle, and doubt, beneath unlifting clouds of hesitation and dismay. We wear out our hearts and brains in the ceaseless fret of affairs, and grow gray before our time; yet seldom reach the goal of all ambition,—one simple hour of joy.

This sorry plight of the world, I say, you may never have observed. For when you do come among men, and visit any mortal with the inspiration of your gracious pres-

The Rewards of Poetry

ence, he is at once transfigured. He is no longer one of the average company of humans, but a radiant being, possessed and gay, and even wise. So that to you, beholding his happiness, it must seem that all men are happy, that the earth is immortally fair, and that the life of mortals has suffered no change, no deterioration, as the centuries have gone by.

I am sure that is true in our own case. When I first loved you, it was not even necessary that my sentiment should be returned, since I was filled with it as a lamp is filled with flame, and all the dark of the room is illumined even though no watcher is by. You did not need to favour me; my own infatuation was enough to change the face of nature; and when I approached your shrine with my first offerings and supplications, so precious in their origin, so trivial in themselves, you must have beheld a mortal almost transfigured by one touch of the great passion which your piercing beauty

The Poetry of Life

arouses. Doubtless in me, as in so many before me, you took the exception for the average, and judged the whole world was still young. I thought it so myself.

Alas, that was not the whole truth! For while the elation of love made weariness seem a fable, and the age of the universe a myth, the actual signs of failure and unhappiness were abroad, had we but had eyes to perceive them, sprung from seeds of sorrow and decrepitude sown long ago. But we were as blind as crazy happy lovers always are, and never guessed that the actual world could be different from our iridescent vision, or that people could actually be tainted with anxiety and terror and care.

It did not matter to me then. It does not matter to you now. In your immortal life, dear angel of joy, there is neither age nor care nor the shadow of grief. Others will come to you, in the long, unfailing years, with songs as fresh and a thousand times

The Rewards of Poetry

more worthy than mine, and win your immortal love with the exigency of their mortal needs. Yet few will come beneath your spell with a rapture more genuine, a joy more unquestioning, than carried me away in those youthful perished summers of the North. How could I know, then, the truth of the world, being so full of the truth of your unworldliness?

Did it, indeed, seem to you in those old days, when I haunted your door with all the folly of a mortal lover, all the fervour of an immortal, that the whole earth was fervent and bewitched,—a lovely illimitable garden of dalliance and dream? Let me tell you it is only when we mortals are in love that we share in your divinity, only while we are under the domination of your inspired ideals of tenderness and beauty, that we put off for a time many unlovely traits. In this life we lead upon earth, I must remind you, there are pitiful sorrows, blighting disappointments, senseless accidents, blunders, dis-

The Poetry of Life

eases, annihilations, and countless forms of envy, hatred, malice, cruelty, and greed. We live and strive and have our being in ways too ghastly and revolting for you to imagine. We do so, I suppose, because of those unlovely characteristics we have derived from our inhuman ancestry, an inheritance from worse than barbarous times, the vast chaotic æons of tooth and claw; and we are willing to continue doing so, I suppose, because our faith in our better instincts, our intuitions derived from beings like yourself, is so timid as yet, so poor and feeble and frail. In war we strew the lovely earth with ruin and with death, struggling among ourselves for the possession of lands, as children struggle and push one another in the face for the possession of an apple or a candy dog. In peace, throughout all the activities of modern life, our behaviour is even worse, being more underhand and mean; we follow a code, our business code, whose iniquities are no less ruthless and vile,

The Rewards of Poetry

though more devious and concealed than the flagrant cruelties of the code of war. These things are so common among us that they cause no remark. To you, however, should you contemplate them, they would appear unbelievable in their folly. Even to those who have once come within the sway of your pure intelligence, their enormity seems appalling.

Indeed, when any mortal has ever felt the benediction of your spiritual influence, to however small a degree, and known the love of beauty and the desire for truth which your friendship always instils, he can never again be quite insensible to the dangerous insanity and animosity of his fellows, but must always tread warily through life, fearful that at any moment the chimera of human perversity may turn and destroy him. So that to have been a devotee of your innocent cult in his youth is not the best preparation a man can have for success, as the world reckons success, since it gives him a tinge

The Poetry of Life

of idealism that must always afterward colour his thoughts and deflect his judgment. A man who has loved poetry when he was young, will not be likely, when he grows up, to love money with that absorbing singleness of heart which alone can establish his position among our respectable church-members.

For the God of the world is a jealous God, and tolerates no divided allegiance in his worshippers. To those who wear his badge, and toil without ceasing to gather riches in his name, he grants many and great rewards, — lands, houses, raiment, rich foods, horses, automobiles, railroads, senatorships, dividends, and cushioned seats in his own fashionable houses, where dreary ministers arise to promulgate the monstrous cant of a false Christianity. But to those who have ever in the rashness of youth dared to scorn the enticements of Mammon, and have turned their faces to you in a credulous search for goodness, the God of this world is relentless.

The Rewards of Poetry

You will know, however, dear Beauty, that while I mock with sincerity, I remain without bitterness. If you cannot comprehend the perplexity of living the poetic life in a world so topsyturvy as men's inordinate greed has made it, you can certainly understand the indifference to small adversities which all your followers must feel. Passing, in the public eye, for slightly demented creatures, harmless enthusiasts, impractical visionaries, they are content with immunity, if only it may be allowed them, and happy enough with the inward irradiation which the joy of your companionship brings. Unburdened by the distractions of worldly eminence, they are free to behold the pageant of life not only without envy but with sympathy and sometimes with understanding. Moreover, vituperation mends no mistakes.

To those who have never known you it must be a constant source of wonder what the rewards of poetry can be to induce any

The Poetry of Life

sane person to give it even the devotion of a day. That one could follow it for a lifetime must seem like the wildest lunacy. Indeed, there are times, hours of dreariness and dejection, in which for some cause or other you appear to have deserted me, when I almost share that popular incredulity, and myself indulge in the blasphemy of doubt. Many expensive pleasures in which people find enjoyment, or at least diversion, I can readily forego; they seem to me a very dull way of killing time; but when it comes to the actual pinch of necessity,—when I have had to pawn my cuff-links for a car-fare, or when I have not had the price of a smoke in my pocket, I confess to you, I have been filled with something more acrid than “the ignoble melancholy of pecuniary embarrassment.” A smouldering fury of resentment consumes my fastidious soul on such occasions; even the humourous incongruity of the occasion fails to rouse me; and I begin to comprehend that blundering in-

The Rewards of Poetry

stinct for revolution which makes savages in the midst of civilization.

I am afraid in this regard I have not the fine superiority to circumstance which was so conspicuous a trait in a vanished comrade of mine, who could remain imperturbable under the petty annoyances of low finance. He seemed to perceive that the necessity was a matter of course, and that it was enough to be a poet without wanting to be a millionaire as well. I have always admired that stable courage in him, which could accept things as they are, and never fretted over the fact that the rewards of poetry and the rewards of the world are different and not always convertible. You may wait, I fear, for several generations before you find another poet who will devote himself more whole-heartedly to your service, and will accept the conditions of life with so wise a resignation as he habitually showed, with so unspoiled a temper, and a disposition so un-

The Poetry of Life

embittered by the tedious, discouraging career of an artist in letters.

It is not always a comfortable road that your devotees have to follow. Though it is wide enough and easy to trace, with joys of a rare sort here and there, it has many solitary stretches barren of consolation. At its outset there is an enticing glamour hanging over it, very alluring to the strong and young, but, in sober truth, few roads require more resolution in the traveller. It is so easy to set out for your fabled and dazzling shrine; all that the adventurer needs is a pencil and pad and a vacant afternoon. With this slight equipment, the immemorial daring of his tribe tells him, he can conquer fame and carry your glory in triumph above the crowd. But after a few years upon the way, he realizes that all he has are the pad (slightly diminished), the pencil (a little worn down), and the vacant afternoon (radiant still, but seemingly not so long as it used to be); and your shining temple as

The Rewards of Poetry

far away as ever. Meanwhile the cakes and ale have not been overabundant, and hé is lucky if he has a clear conscience and sound courage to show after his many days of dusty wayfaring.

Nearly twenty years ago now, a young man at Harvard began to give his days to the cultivation of poetry, infatuated by the glamour of your fame and beauty, and tasted the first-fruits of ambition when a string of his verses appeared in *The Atlantic*, your favourite periodical. Since then he has had little other occupation than to do your will and preach your worship in the world. One would suppose that in that time he might have achieved a position of some substance and security, such as men in other professions attain in half the time. Such is hardly the case, however. Only a few months ago, after being out of town for the summer, he called at the office of that friend and protector of many of your votaries, the inestimable Runnels, to inquire how his manuscripts

The Poetry of Life

had fared in his absence in their rounds of the editorial rooms.

“Well,” said Runnels, “here is one poem that has been to — let me see — one, two, three, four, seventeen places. Here is another that has been to twenty-three. And here is a third one that has come back from twenty-nine editorial visits. I think perhaps you had better take them yourself, and see what you can do with them.”

Not a very encouraging prospect! Yet I can never repine. The compensation of having known your companionship outweighs with me all other considerations. Only, I would not have any one fancy that your service, perfect freedom though it is, is also a perfect picnic. If any young gentleman is bent on becoming the poet of the future, the position is open, the applicants are few, but his credit at the bank of patience must be unlimited, for he will have to draw on it heavily and often.

The poet's relation to the world is not very

The Rewards of Poetry

often a happy one, unless, like our friend Horace, he is blessed with a joyous penetrating interest in the lighter side of society. Even that delightful Roman would have fared ill, I dare say, had it not been for the comfortable estate of Mæcenas. But we have come far away from those times; the artist has grown proud of his vocation under the growth of democracy, and is not to be patronized any more. I cannot say that I blame him. And yet, if you look at the fine arts as a whole, you perceive that to be free and beautiful they must be independent of the market to some extent. Just how that is to be done, each artist has to determine for himself, and in the very solving of the difficulty he establishes his kinship with this struggling world of men, and gains, I must believe, strength and understanding in the contest, — if it be not too hopeless and too long.

There has lately been a good deal of discussion of a possible decline in the taste for

The Poetry of Life

poetry. Whether or not poetry is less widely read than it used to be, is difficult to say. I notice one thing, however, which gives me grave fears for the supremacy in which high poetry was once held. There are no old poets any more, no men of assured genius and achievement continuing their labours with unabated zeal. Scores begin their ambitious careers as your followers; almost none persist in their calling beyond early middle life, no matter how authentic their inspiration may have seemed. Men, if I may name them, like Mr. Aldrich, Mr. Dobson, Mr. Lang, Mr. Stedman, Mr. Gosse, — why do they pipe no longer in your honour? Did they not love your art? Have they not proved themselves genuine and worthy upholders of your best traditions? Yes, indeed! How comes it, then, that they are silent? The time was when every year or two would see a new volume of poems from one of them or another, yet now they seem to belong to an age that is past. It is not that they are old,

The Rewards of Poetry

it is not that their work was ephemeral; there must be some other reason for the hush that has fallen upon them. Our elders, Whitman, Emerson, Tennyson, Browning, Whittier, Morris, Longfellow, and the rest, all grew old in the delightful service of poetry, courageous and productive to the last. Only one quitted your service long before the term of life was closed for him, — one of the most lovely and sincere of mortals, one of the best of poets. While still a young man, the inflexible necessity of fortune compelled Arnold to abandon his true vocation, and devote himself, in his fine sedulous way, to more immediate and prosaic duties. His heart, we all must believe, was always yours, but the unavoidable demands of the world permitted him no respite to follow his bent. And though the example of his cheerful, courageous life remains to us, the fate which befell his poetic career seems to me no less pitiful than the premature death of Shelley or of Keats. Had he been

The Poetry of Life

permitted to give his whole life to poetry, who can say what beautiful masterpieces might not have been added to the English tongue?

And in our own day I suspect that the exigent call of the world is growing more and more imperative; its conditions more and more rigorous; and that it is becoming yearly more difficult for the artist in ideals to maintain his independence, — to fight for standing-room and breathing-space, — while he pursues his exacting craft. I suspect that if a number of living poets could be questioned, it would be found that they have allowed their voices to become silent, not from any failure of loyalty toward yourself, but simply from the increasing difficulty, not to say indifference, of the times. What we all recognize as the prevalent complexity and turmoil and distraction of life to-day, with its multitudinous exactions, puts an overwhelming burden upon every citizen, and permits of almost no devotion to lei-

The Rewards of Poetry

surely intellectual occupations. The sky of being is no longer radiant, but overcast as with a cloud of discouragement and depression, and we are surrounded with an atmosphere in which joyous creative spontaneity is all but impossible. The bounding vigour of youth may support it for a time, but the grim passage of leaden days will wear out the strongest heart at last, and leave the spirit no more elasticity for lofty enterprise.

Say what we will in defence of the times, there is no denying their vigour, their practicality, their insensitiveness to beauty, and the sad contempt of most people for all that poetry means. In a recent discussion of this subject, a sturdy follower of yours has said the final word, "A scarecrow advertisement on our crowded streets is rated of more worth than a copy of the Winged Victory. Otherwise, the victory would be there."

There is no answer to that argument.

The Poetry of Life

Again, I read only last evening this astonishing sentence at the opening of an article by a Japanese nobleman on "The Heart of the Mikado," "Fortunately for his people, the emperor is a poet." Fancy any one in this country saying in a serious essay, "Fortunately for the United States, Mr. John Hay was a poet." It was something in him the public wished to forget or condone, nothing to be proud of.

In all this, dear, happy Muse, am I quite mistaken? Is it because we are weaklings that we can find no longer the opportunity for song, and your altar is neglected? I write to you with tumultuous feelings of regret, not to excuse my growing negligence of you, but to explain it. However sad you may feel at our parting, my own sorrow is still greater. To you it may seem only the breaking of one more fair promise, but to me it is the frustration of kingly hopes.

Stripped of prevarication, it comes to this; I am in debt to the world. During

The Rewards of Poetry

the years spent in your service, I have had the workman's three meals a day; if I have not been elegantly dressed, I have certainly been decently clothed most of the time; and if I have had neither horse nor house to call my own, I have at least not slept in squalor. If such modest equipment as I have enjoyed could still be honestly maintained, all would be very well indeed. But as a matter of fact, my actual and unavoidable account with society shows a considerable balance on the wrong side of the book, with a tendency to increase rather than to diminish with the passing years. This, of course, we can neither of us afford to tolerate. We who profess to set so much store by the finer ideals, can hardly shirk the most ordinary demands of fair play in the daily conduct of affairs.

When I tell you, therefore, that I must leave you, and turn my attention to the practical business of discharging my debts, I feel sure you will approve my cause, even

The Poetry of Life

though it should seem to be a slight to yourself in the eyes of outsiders. People have been lenient with me long enough; no doubt on your account. But there is a limit to human patience, and a point beyond which good nature ought not to be strained. I must not bring you into discredit, while professedly attempting to forward your cause. You have had many followers, whose lives were sadly at variance with those ideals of lovely and happy existence of which you perpetually dream. Even if I could rival such predecessors in achievement, the undertaking would still be questionable at such a cost. And I have no right to count on any such success. Your worship must be kept free from disrepute and your name from disrespect, at all hazards.

You see, then, the drift of my apology, the very good reason for my apparent abandonment of your favour and your cause. And I trust to your large wisdom for ample forgiveness, if for the future I transfer much

The Rewards of Poetry

of my labour and my allegiance to your less distinguished but more opulent sister, the muse of prose.

Still I linger over the page. I cannot bear to bid you farewell. Like a lover parting from the woman he loves, my heart is torn by regrets, and my mind at moments almost wrecked by despair. Just as I have begun to master the difficult technique of your art, just as you have begun to impart to me the most important revelations, I must resign the absorbing and delightful task of being your amanuensis, and leave you, perhaps never to return. As a novice I came to you in joyousness of enthusiasm, and now I can imagine no happier fortune than to be allowed to continue in the enjoyment of your teaching, whose reason and beauty I was just beginning to comprehend. I abandon your way with grief, but there is no alternative.

Good-bye once more, dear soul of perfect utterance, whom I have loved so well,—

The Poetry of Life

spirit of imperishable beauty! I turn from the hearth where we have been happy together, where you have often conversed with such gaiety and wisdom. Henceforth the long hours must be given to the piety of profitable toil. For your sake, and to protect our threshold from profanation, I must be prepared to answer the dreaded knock at the door, which I have come to recognize as the inescapable summons or the peremptory dun.

Do you think I would be pitied? Not I, dear heart. I speak of trivial annoyances, the mere outward daily fret of life which may conquer human strength, but cannot subdue the soul. I refer to the rewards of poetry, not the compensation of the poet. Not all the rewards of Philistia are equal to his true and immaterial recompense. There is no arithmetic to tell, no symbol to express, the happiness you have given me, the serenity of spirit you have taught me to prize, and which no adversity can take away.

Cheerful Pessimism



A FRIEND of mine, with a ready and plentiful wit, discriminated between two persons of his acquaintance by saying that one was a cheerful pessimist and the other a tearful optimist. The distinction is as suggestive as it is delightful, and comes near to dividing the world in two. The incongruous blending of sad and gay in both classes lends the universal application to the saying—makes it human and genuine. “Thank God, the worst has happened,” says a Chinese proverb, pessimistic, but game to the last. “Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him,” says the tearful optimist, Job. Here I am believing everything is just as bad as it can be, and yet with a fine indestructible

The Poetry of Life

core of valour still remaining; and there you are, convinced of the excellence of the earth, protesting the unalterable prevalence of law and order, yet touched with the mouldy blight of melancholy.

After all, it is only a difference in the angle of vision. From your side of the fence it is a green world touched with blue; from my side it is a blue world shading into green. And all on account of an hour's difference in our birth. For you the stars stood in one position at the time of your terrestrial advent; for me they had ranged themselves in a new order. But for both of us the same omnipotent influences of the planets and the suns, the same fortune to inherit from, though you have your portion and I have mine. We float together in a tide of being in the grasp of the same great wind, in the pull of the same great moon. On the perilous, breathless crest of a wave you call yourself an optimist—with your heart in your mouth; I call myself a pessi-

Cheerful Pessimism

mist, seeing nothing but a wall of water towering overhead as I gasp in the trough of a sea. In a moment we change places. But I have the advantage of you in this, that I can dive from trough to trough, while you cannot skip from crest to crest. You must wallow down the sliding declivity of your unstable mountain of vision, to be cast up again for another momentary prospect. Very well, I take your word for the glorious sea view; meanwhile I prefer the equable tenor of my mid-sea way, engulfed at times, but avoiding your sickening undulations — a Titanic dawdling for which I have no stomach.

Cheerful pessimism is the creed of comedy. By comedy one does not mean, of course, the cheap buffoonery which parades before us falsely in the name of the kindly muse. For Comedy is the wisest of all the divine sisters, and, while she enjoys the folly of others, she is herself sane and free. It is she who saves us from our own fatuity,

The Poetry of Life

mistress of so many great joy-givers, from Chaucer and Shakespeare to Browning and Robert Louis Stevenson. Not only is so much great poetry under her care, but all the entertaining stories and pictures of social humanity, from Fielding and Hogarth to Du Maurier and Mr. Meredith.

Comedy not only makes us laugh, she makes us see; while her solemn sister Tragedy has a way of blinding the sight and distorting our vision with fear. Tragedy makes us start with terror, while Comedy only wrinkles the corners of the eyes. Tragedy makes us lean and spectacular and uncompanionable, while Comedy makes us good comrades, passes the longest day with pleasantry, and puts us to bed without a regret. Nay, nay, Tragedy, thou tearful optimist, I will none of thy lofty icebergian platitudes and sententious aspirations. But I will follow our beloved Comedy, cheery, ironical, pessimistic, to the turning of the street. I had almost said to the ends of the earth, but

Cheerful Pessimism

that would be to lapse into the tragic phrase! Even in Comedy's back there is something irresistibly alluring, and to meet her once face to face is to be her adoring slave for life. But imperial Tragedy, let who will gaze upon that awful mien, or follow that ceremonious tread! Here, at least, is one poor child of earth who pulls down his window-shade as he sees her approaching. Knock at some less lowly door, I pray, O queen; for to thy fearsome summons I am not at home. But comely Comedy may enter when she will, and stay as long as the law allows. To her I say:

“ There is no lock for thee.
Each door awaits thy hand ! ”

As Mr. Aldrich has said with his fine grace, —

“ Some Melpomene woo,
Some hold Clio the nearest ;
You, sweet Comedy — you
Were ever sweetest and dearest ! ”

And for the pursuit of the ideal, the creative instinct, the happy moment of inspira-

The Poetry of Life

tion, I am not persuaded that any better mood than that of cheerful pessimism has been found. Certainly if we are to be touched by the things of art, if our minds are to be convinced and our emotions enlisted, it must be — it can only be — by one who has plumbed the deepest abyss. And yet, just as certainly, will he fail to hold us, if he has not brought to light, like a diver from the sea, some pearl of great price, some talisman of joy. Your optimism is too apt to have a tearful tinge. Let me be never so stoutly settled in the optimistic faith, there still survives and recurs at times the inescapable sorrow of the world. And then, of course, disappointment comes to add its drop of bitterness. Whereas our brothers who hoped for nothing, had the glad surprise of discovering shreds of happiness and vestiges of good at every turn.

Taken all in all, you would have a long argument in proving to me the creed of the

Cheerful Pessimism

cheerful pessimist is the worst in the world.
And though she deny me with every breath,
I shall still cleave to Comedy, mistress of the
heart of man.

Masters of the World



YOU may say of conduct, it is never purely ethical, but has always elements of the æsthetic as well. What we do is of great importance in this difficult world; but how we do it is of quite as much importance. It is not enough to do good; we must do good gracefully, so that while righteousness is served, beauty may be served also. For the end of each is perfection, and total perfection must include what is fair as well as what is noble. The appearance of the act, as well as the gist of the action, is always to be counted.

More than that, it is always to be asked whether a line of conduct is wise, whether

Masters of the World

it is in conformity with the requirements of the economy of the world and the conservation of life. However well meaning, however graceful we may be, we may still work havoc rather than assistance among our fellows, if we take no care to act thoughtfully, wisely, judiciously.

So many lives are stunted and hampered, and their effect almost nullified, for lack of consideration in this regard! How devotedly, how unreservedly, with what untold ardour and self-denial, the saints of the earth in the long march of ages have given themselves without stint to the cause of good! Poverty, hardship, hunger and cold, perils and buffets, insult and contempt and neglect, sickness and travel, and unrequited labour, — all these they have endured with cheerful patience or rugged fortitude, that the right might at length prevail, and the consuming spirit within them behold the triumph of the cause which enlisted their mighty hearts. Whatever their creed or nation or sect or

The Poetry of Life

age, they have been called by common consent the sons of God, and credited with almost more than human excellence. Builders of churches, founders of religions, carrying some new tidings of hope into thronging cities of eager men, or spreading the consolations of their gospel abroad to the far corners of the earth, they have earned a universal respect, a name for piety, and imperishable glory, as men fancy, in a kingdom not of this world. They were seekers of perfection, and perfection to them meant the supreme dominance of goodness, the victory of righteousness over evil.

Yet they were not alone. Others, too, have dreamed of perfection, — the dreamers who beheld far off the ideal of universal culture, and the dreamers who brooded on the creation of flawless beauty, — the dreamers who longed to make life intelligible, and the dreamers who longed to make it lovely, — the scholars and the artists. The saint, the scholar, the artist, — these three be-

Masters of the World

tween them divide the dominion of the world. The ambition of the artist, like that of his brother the saint, has been prosecuted with zeal and courage and much enduring toil. Yet his aim is somewhat different. To the one life is an opportunity for action, for influencing the course of events, and for ameliorating the condition of temporal and eternal affairs; to the other it offers the plastic media of a radiant fleeting universe, to be moulded and repatterned after his own will into shapes more beautiful than the eye has yet beheld. To the one the outward world, with all its entrancing variety and loveliness, appeals with a delirious enthralment; to the other the inward universe is made clear in ordered excellence and majesty. The one capital mistake of either saint or scholar or artist lies solely in this, that he fails to remember the importance of the others; yet the three are equal, and the work of each is of equal use to the world, — more than that, it is of equal dignity and

The Poetry of Life

equally essential to the furtherance of the cause of man's perfection.

In that long future to which the soul looks forward, the day will come when we shall awake as from a restless dream, and perceive the mistake of our distracted endeavour. We shall see clearly that not in the predominance of rarefied spirituality, nor in the supremacy of inflexible reason, does man's normal perfection reside, any more than in the vexatious tyranny of the flesh. It will be borne in upon us that an equal balance of these contending forces, brought to fine poise in each personality, is the only true type of character after which we should strive. The terrible waste of energy we now suffer in the suicidal friction of varying ideals, will be apparent; and we shall say to ourselves, "What folly has been ours, to be thus constantly at strife! How foolish to have striven to overcome the flesh, to mortify our goodly beauty and our strength!

Masters of the World

How absurd to suppose we could ever divorce ourselves from ourselves!"

For in truth our differing natures are but different phases of one indivisible nature. If man cannot live by bread alone, neither can he live by prayer alone, nor by taking thought alone. It was natural that in the beginnings of self-consciousness, sustenance and the satisfying of bodily needs should seem the only necessity. It was natural, too, that as man became aware of the pleasures of the mind, other needs should seem to him more worthy than those of the body. Just as naturally will spread the glad realization of the newer, larger ideal of perfect manhood, which gives free play to each normal instinct, and allows an equal culture for the three natures so strangely brought to focus in the clay-built structure we inhabit.

Nay, more than that, it will be revealed to us, gradually and like a joyous gospel, that in following this new standard of normal

The Poetry of Life

culture, we are not only giving vent to the varying and seemingly opposed powers we possess, but that the cultivating of one implies the growth of all. We shall see how essential health is, not only to happiness, but to righteousness and clear thinking also,—how every service rendered this perishable tenement makes for clarity of mind and sweetness of temper,—and how we can never foster one faculty without bettering our whole being, nor ever approach entire excellence while any need, whether of mind or body or spirit, remains ruthlessly neglected.

To such a code the intellectual life alone can never seem of paramount importance; but the discovery of truth must be followed by actual accomplishment. Nor will accomplishment suffice without grace. To consider wisely is of the first importance; nor is it less important to deal justly and honestly with our fellows. The imperative necessity for making life comely and attractive, how-

Masters of the World

ever, is hardly recognized as of equal merit. Yet beauty in itself is only another kind of virtue, and one test of noble conduct is fair seeming. It is, indeed, possible to be good, to be scrupulous, to be humane, to be kindly, while giving scant attention to the figure we cut in the world. This is a common ideal; we all know people of careless, unlovely habits, whom we still declare to be the salt of the earth. But why should our tone be apologetic? Why should they content themselves with their native goodness, and make no effort to be pleasing as well? It is surely only a warped and stunted virtue which resides in frowsy asceticism; just as all beauty must be perishable and touched with blight, which does not embody a generous moral essence. To give one's self to good deeds, and still care nothing for the graces of living, is to rob those very deeds of half their power; while to attempt to cultivate grace, without sincerity and meaning and impulse, is equally futile. The world will

The Poetry of Life

not long be deceived by either faulty conception of the whole duty of man. For we must remember that the universe is normal, and proceeds on normal laws. It is only our fragmentary ideas that are at fault, and all our unhappiness comes from attempting to live according to wrong notions. In the end, in the long run, however, life must be made square with ideals, and the false and unlovely be pared away.

To govern our daily life according to right principles, then, is our chief concern, if you will; but to govern it according to the preferences of taste, concerns us also. We are to make our conduct not only exemplary, but fair and pleasing, so that our friends may think us charming as well as scrupulous. These passing days are a tissue of appearances to be woven into patterns of ugliness or beauty beneath our hands. No time is too precious to spend, no detail too small to be considered, in bringing the fabric of life, as it passes through our fingers, ever nearer

Masters of the World

and nearer to some preconceived image of beauty. The good of all ages who have been imbued with a passion for righteousness, have never hesitated to spend themselves generously, for the cause they loved, the advancement of goodness; nor should those who care for what is beautiful ever hesitate to give themselves as liberally to make beauty prevail in the world. They should once for all assure themselves of the great and abiding worthiness of their cause, also, knowing it of equal dignity with the cause of righteousness. It is not less honourable to work than to pray. The only dishonour is in slovenliness and faintness of heart; for when we aspire we must aspire with all our might, and when we work we must work with infinite patience and infinite care, so that the greatest wish is not too large for the fluttering soul, nor the smallest detail too insignificant for attention. There is no other road to perfection.

If you observe the masters in any of the

The Poetry of Life

arts, or in any of the professions, or in any business, you will find that they work without hurry, without fret, with an equal regard for great things and small. They know proportion, indeed, but they know, too, how fine a balance exists between success and failure, and how small a trifle may mar the issue of an undertaking.

I often used to marvel at the endless pains some people would take over the small concerns of life, the hanging of a picture, the trimming of a bonnet, or the number of buttons on a coat; but I have come to see that success depends on trifles, and that the right adjustment of the smallest detail of living is quite as important as the sequence of syllables in a memorable lyric or the proximity of colours in some splendid painting. Moreover, the pleasure of the average man in all he does may be just as keen as the artist's delight in his work. Every one of us may become an artist in the conduct of life, if he will turn his mind to it, culti-

Masters of the World

vating his taste, and, above all, using patient care. And we shall come to know a satisfaction in so doing; for all things done well have this great recompense, whatever they cost in time and labour, — they give us an imperishable delight which can never spring from hurried or slighted tasks.

Notice the difference between men in this matter, how easily some seem to live, and with how much difficulty others go about their business. Here is one who is never hurried, never ill-natured, never anxious, accomplishing much; while there is another who frets and toils and complains and never has a moment's leisure, yet accomplishes nothing. It is largely a matter of art, the art of living. The first has poise, the second has not. The first has the serene temperament and happy spirit of an artist, while his fellow has only the fussy nervousness of a dabster. The first would undertake vast affairs with a light heart, and carry

The Poetry of Life

them through without friction; the second would worry over the merest trifle, and spend all his energy in hesitation, timidity, and indecision.

The Poetry of To- morrow



HAVE we not reason enough to believe that the poetry of to-morrow will be greater than the poetry of to-day, simply because we believe that to-day is greater than yesterday?

In the elder days the house of knowledge was narrow and low; and art was no more than the telling of a tale whose beginning was "Once upon a time," and its ending, "lived happy ever after." And the religion of that house was mixed with terror. But there came a change. The restless children of that house, possessed by a spirit of divine discontent, must lift the roof and push out the walls. Master Newton, Master Columbus, Master Galileo, Master Darwin, and

The Poetry of Life

scores of others, refused to live in the old shack where they had been born. It was good enough for their fathers, but by no means good enough for them. They intended to have a roomier habitation, cleaner, airier, and more modern. They gave us the spacious intellectual mansion we occupy to-day, and of which we boast. But who knows how long it will serve the needs of our growing human family? Some day a lad will be born who will kick a hole through the wall for another window here, tear out a place for a doorway there, and push away a corner for a new wing in another place.

If there is no limit to knowledge, there can be no limit to art, either, since art contains our comment on science, and reflects the growth of our minds. But this progress, as we call it, this expansion, is not even and uniform. It is rather spasmodic and intermittent. If there have been times when the house of knowledge underwent alterations, repairs, and extensions, there have been

The Poetry of To-morrow

other times when its tenants were content to occupy it in squalor and unillumined lethargy, receiving it from their sires and handing it on to their sons, deteriorated and outworn.

Yet the ages of depression, of faint-heartedness, of despair, are only momentary in the history of the world. They are the unfit product of time, and in the natural selection of eternity they will not survive. We are here in spite of sorrow, because there is a joy in living common to the oyster and the octogenarian, the elephant and the epicure. And in our art the joyousness must outweigh the sadness.

It has often been said that the greatest poet is he who most perfectly voices the trend of emotion of his time. It is claimed that the greatness of Arnold, for example, is attested most clearly in such poems as "A Summer Night," "Dover Beach," "The Youth of Man," and other beautiful meditations which are full of the grievous

The Poetry of Life

sadness of his age and its moral incertitude. It is said that his claim upon the future for remembrance will lie in his mournful note, because a moral sadness was most distinctive of his own time.

This is only partly true, however. What will the future care for our sentimental gloom, our moral doubts, our sad searchings of the spirit? It will only care to remember in us those traits and traditions that may help it to live. Even in the day of doubt, the dolorous singer will not be listened to by all his contemporaries as gladly as will the sturdier minstrel who sets his face against the desperate dolefulness about him. Arnold, the gracious and wistful abjurer of strife, has his place among the great English poets, first of all by reason of such faultless creations of beauty as "Sohrab and Rustum," "Tristram and Iseult," "The Neckan," and "The Forsaken Merman," and only secondarily because of his meditative works. If our descendants turn to him hereafter as

The Poetry of To-morrow

one of the eminent poets of the Victorian age, and take delight in his poems, they will judge him by their own standards; and whatever these standards may be, let us assure ourselves they will not value the utterances of doubt more highly than those of joy.

In front of Chaucer's tomb lie the two Sons of Thunder of the Victorian age, Browning and Tennyson. We have honoured Tennyson the more of the two, because his speech was easier to comprehend. Men hereafter, I am sure, will not honour Browning the less, for in time it will seem puerile that we could have thought him obscure, or could have missed the forthright rush and lyric sincerity of his work. If Browning shall be more esteemed hereafter than Tennyson, one reason will be in his abundant and unconquerable faith. Every creation that came from his hand taught self-reliance, heroism, joy. The race of man, alike with the creatures of the field,

The Poetry of Life

persists by just those qualities. The great poet is he who fosters such positive virtues in the heart.

It was easy to be a poet in the morning times of the bold Elizabeth, for then heroism, joy, and self-reliance were everywhere. Conquest and expansion were in the air, and triumph and elation in every wind that blew. To-day is not less great in discovery, only our discoveries are intellectual, and, therefore, less obvious, less stimulating to the common imagination. The Elizabethans found new continents, and brought back reports of unimagined dominions oversea. We have made far explorations into the unknown, and made faithful reports of them, but our home-coming is attended with no floating of banners, no sound of drums. It is more difficult for us to translate our portentous news into ringing songs than it was for those old discoverers. We deal in treasures so much less palpable and picturesque than they.

The Poetry of To-morrow

But to-morrow, doubt not, the Captain of the Ocean Sea will come, the adjuster and revealer of new realms of poetry, who will establish us in our new-found heritage. We may know him by sight, though that is doubtful. We may honour him during his lifetime, though that is not likely. His work will be done without conceit, yet with disregard of the blame of his fellows or their approval. In spite of his essential sensitive-ness, both adulation and neglect will leave him unmoved. Just what his work will be, none can say, for he himself, when he shall arrive, will not be able to tell the secret of his ecstatic vision. The task which his fancy shall so cunningly contrive in an idle noon, his craftsmanship may finish before sunset; yet it will give him no hint of the sudden revelation that may be awaiting him within the doors of the following dawn.

Nevertheless, there are some traits of his work that we may be sure of. That it will be large and glad and valiant is certain; for

The Poetry of Life

these qualities inhere in the heart of man, not to be thrust out by the overthrow of empires, nor the founding of republics, nor any trifles of history whatsoever. These are the things that help the race forward; and anything that does not so help it will speedily be forgotten as a surmounted hindrance. But one thing is also certain, the poetry of to-morrow will not be commonly understood; it will appeal only to the children of its own to-morrow. And this, not because it will be incoherent, but because the true artist speaks from within, by an authority which he himself does not always understand; and his new word, so potent to himself, is a sealed book to most of his troubled fellows. He will be gently obstinate about his work, yet none will be a more willing learner than he, gladly considering even the most casual criticism.

Nature, the beautiful outer world, is all that the Invisible found to say before the appearance of man. Art is the constant

The Poetry of To-morrow

slow insistent endeavour of the same power to utter itself still more coherently, still more intelligently and finally through the speech of man. If the only end of art were to please and entertain, the critic's task were an easy one. But art has always had something else to do as well. It must please in order to influence, but it has always been infused with the desire to influence and control. It does not specifically wish to be didactic, but it always has at least a covert aim, a wish to impose a dominant standard of beauty upon life. It will lead and stimulate and suggest. It will content itself with the creation of the beautiful, knowing that therein lies its best and most effective means of aiding the cause of nobility and truth. Its influence will be as generous as the sun and as impassive as the dew, as abundant as the wind, as resistless as the sea, and as subtle and sure as the impress of environment upon the unborn child. Poetry is a criticism of life, indeed, but it is also much more than


The Poetry of Life

that. It is an aspiration toward a new life, the persistent and prescient cry of the soul.

The poetry of to-morrow will not necessarily be so unlike the poetry of to-day. Perhaps only the knowing will be able to recognize it at once. There is no need to trouble ourselves about it. The ages are not in a hurry. It is only London and New York that are in a hurry. In due time a greater than Shakespeare will arrive. It is foolish to suppose that the Word which was in the beginning, and which has spoken through lips to men so often in these many centuries, will leave us without any testament at last.

The Permanence of

Poetry



IT is often claimed that the day for poetry is past, that we live in an age of prose, and for the future shall get along very well without the solace which poetry was wont to supply. It is a question, however, whether those who make this claim have not conceived far too narrow a scope for poetry, and been heedless in thinking what poetry really is. They have, one must believe, allowed themselves to take a very superficial and hurried view of human history, and been content to accept the current notion of the fine arts and their place in our social order.

What is that notion? How do we at the present day think of the fine arts, and of

The Poetry of Life

poetry in particular? And what place do we commonly assign them in our scheme of life? Is it not true that we nearly always think of them as luxurious occupations, forms of harmless amusement or innocuous pastimes, to be tolerated perhaps, but yet without any real hold on people, and without any spontaneous life in public sentiment? By the fine arts most of us understand those eccentric, if not questionable, pursuits which fill our rich houses with pictures and statues, and our opera-houses with extravagant music. We have come to think of the fine arts as foreign to our real life, as esoteric, expensive, precious, unnecessary, and, therefore, to the ordinary mind, just a trifle ridiculous.

This is not an unjust view of the fine arts as they exist among us to-day. They live by sufferance, not by right. We do not acknowledge their title to a place in modern civilization; we accept them as the more or less foolish accompaniments of wealth. They have no source in popular feeling;

The Permanence of Poetry

they do not spring up irresistibly from our social conditions; they command no respect save among a small highly educated class. Our people at large have no such sense of beauty, no such native good taste, as the common people of France, for instance, or of Japan.

Yet for all that, admitting the wholly anomalous and artificial character of all the ancient arts as they survive among us to-day, does it follow that they will always be so entirely divorced from our social and national life? May there not come a time when our debased political institutions will be purified, when our public morals will be elevated, when our industrial and commercial ethics will come to acknowledge more honourable standards? May we not look forward to a day when old-fashioned honesty will be restored to the code of American ideals? May we not hope that our present era of unmitigated commercialism, barbarity, and greed, is only a passing phase in the story

The Poetry of Life

of the world, and that time will renew our enthusiasm for things of the mind and the spirit? To see clearly one's own faults, or to mark the shortcomings of one's own time, is not to be a pessimist. The pessimist is one who thinks nothing could be better. Admirable, therefore, as our life may be to-day, it is our business as sane men to look for its flaws and strive to mend them. Perfection, not self-gratulation, is the duty of mortals.

Granted, then, that art and poetry are in a sorry plight at present, shall we conclude that their day is over? While there is even such art life as there is, is there not hope? Had we not better ask ourselves if we are quite sure what art is, and what poetry is, before we proceed to set them lightly aside in the storeroom of oblivion with other discarded lumber of time? Our creeds must change as knowledge increases, yet faith remains of paramount importance. Our conception of the universe must change with

The Permanence of Poetry

accession of science, yet love of truth only becomes more necessary. So, too, we need art in all the business of life more imperatively to-day than ever before. For art is a manner of doing things, not the thing that is done. Art is not the painting itself, but the loving fervour, the hard knowledge, the skilled industry, that went to make the painting. When anything is ill done, it reveals a lack of art. And this lack of art may spring from lack of sincere devotion in the artist himself, or from a lack of wisdom, or from a lack of skill.

And this question of poetry? Is poetry a task for children and idlers, a sort of Chinese puzzle in words, something to divert the mind, an employment for invalids and weaklings? I believe if we consider a moment, and recall the hold which poetry has had on men's minds, the influence it has exerted on life, we must conclude it is something far more vital and forceful than that. Poetry has been a great power in the

The Poetry of Life

world. If it is not a great power at the present time, that does not prove that we have outgrown it; it only means that we have forgotten it for the moment. We can no more outgrow poetry than we can outgrow gravitation. The mode of poetry may change, as the customs of nations change; we do not enjoy the same kind of poetry that our ancestors did; our own poetry must be native to us, and must express our own thoughts and sentiments, rather than those of an alien clime and a forgotten age; but the natural phenomenon which we call poetry will always be present in the world.

Why? Because poetry is nothing more than the form which human speech assumes under the stress of clear thinking and lofty aspiration, under the terms of beautiful utterance. The laws of poetry are not conventional, but natural. The first poet to use any given form of verse is rather a discoverer than an inventor. Take, for example, the phenomenon of the iambic pen-

The Permanence of Poetry

tameter line in English poetry. See how universally it is used from Chaucer to Tennyson; all of Shakespeare, all of the Elizabethan drama, all of "Paradise Lost," all of Pope and Dryden, all of "The Ring and the Book," all of the "Idylls of the King," indeed, a large portion of our poetic literature is done in this measure. Now how shall we account for this phenomenon? Shall we say that succeeding poets slavishly followed their distinguished predecessors in the use of the blank verse line? Did they have to study to learn the trick? Not at all. They used it spontaneously, naturally, unconsciously. They never could tell you why. And if a poet should be born in England to-morrow and reared in entire ignorance of English poetry, he would discover blank verse for himself. Its recurrence and persistence in English mean that it is a vital form of expression, which springs inevitably into use, just as a nod of the head

The Poetry of Life

is an instinctive motion of assent, and not merely a conventional gesture.

The study of versification, or the outward form of poetry, becomes an empirical science. We simply collate our facts and deduce our laws; for the laws of poetry are truly laws, and not rules. There may be rules for writing sonnets, but there are no rules for writing poetry. The poet is himself always acting under laws of expression, which are far too complex and universal for him wholly to comprehend. He is only a vent for expression—a medium through which certain powers find play in harmonious accordance with their natural laws. When he permits himself to rely on intuition, when he feels instinctively for the perfect phrase, then he attains something like perfection of utterance. When he attempts to interfere with inspiration, and to write after some plan of his own devising, then he fails. When Wordsworth wrote from instinct, at the dictate of his genius, he was great. When

The Permanence of Poetry

he allowed himself to put in practice certain conclusions of his own as to how poetry should be written, he became tedious. So, too, of Whitman; when he gave free play to his genius, he spoke with the tongue of a seraph; but when he attempted to imitate himself, when he tried to put in practice certain notions of his own as to what poetry ought to be, he failed. The artist must be a student of his own art, it is true; but he must never try to practise his art according to rule. That is folly. For, as I say, there are no rules, but only laws of art. And these laws are elemental, psychic, and govern the artist himself. He is swayed by them, and it is his business to be sensitive to them and obey them. Whether he chooses to study them, and try to comprehend them or not, is a different matter. He may be a scientist as well as an artist; but in order to be the one he does not have to be the other.

The form of poetry, then, is a phenomenon determined by the laws of nature, and

The Poetry of Life

as such we may very well consider it a permanency. I do not mean that the forms of poetry are unchanging. They are not. Just because they are living, they will vary constantly. We shall never be able to predict the new forms poetry may take, nor should we attempt to impose conventional limits on versification. Every new poet will find his own new forms, but form of some sort, rhythm of some sort, he will have. He can no more escape those conditions than spirit can escape the influence of all the natural forces when it enters the house of clay.

The subjects of poetry, too, are permanent as well as its form. The things which poetry deals with are the perennial hopes and fears of the human heart, the phenomena of the inner life. From these poetry has made, and will always make, the religions of the world. Nor does it disregard the facts of science. All science and all philosophy come within the scope of poetry. It is the function of poetry to assimilate the new

The Permanence of Poetry

knowledge and make use of the discoveries of science. It cannot do this immediately, however; it has to wait until these new facts become familiar to men's minds, before it can treat of them in its own heightened and impassioned way. For this reason we often hear it said that science and poetry, or science and religion, are opposed to each other. But that is absurd. The soul cannot but love what the mind sees to be true. And when that truth is expressed in terms of beauty, our senses must be delighted as our hearts are encouraged and inspired.

If all this be so, it does not very well appear how we can ever outgrow the need of poetry. It would rather seem that we shall need it more and more, under the increasing distractions and complexities of life. The more truth we know, the more we shall need some means to assimilate it and make it effective for our happiness. The more wealth we acquire, the more we shall need some wise guide to its proper use. An ex-

The Poetry of Life

pansion of power, without an accompanying increase of wisdom, is a mere embarrassment, and only makes life more difficult. Poetry in its largest sense helps us to make use of our knowledge and power in ways that tend toward a happier existence, and there can hardly be anything more important than that, or of more lasting interest to men.

THE END.

Deacidified using the Bookkeeper process.
Neutralizing agent: Magnesium Oxide
Treatment Date: March 2009

PreservationTechnologies

A WORLD LEADER IN COLLECTIONS PRESERVATION

111 Thomson Park Drive
Cranberry Township, PA 16066
(724) 779-2111

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



0 005 814 298 0

