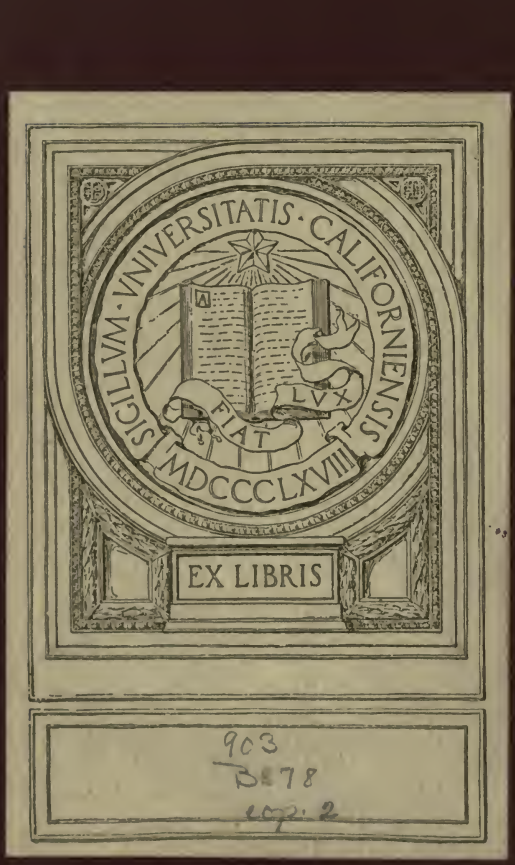

# ETHICS AND ÆSTHETICS

OF

# MODERN POETRY

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BY

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TO

THE MEMORY

OF

HARRY BUCHAM BROWN

# CONTENTS.

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J. B. S.

# SCEPTICISM AND MODERN POETRY

## *SCEPTICISM AND MODERN POETRY.*

THERE are doubts and doubts. Not so many, perhaps, as is generally supposed, of those 'honest' ones in which there lives—according to Tennyson—'more faith than half the creeds.' It has, in fact, become the fashion in certain quarters to over-compassionate the doubter, to accredit him with a greater depth, and even with a more thorough conscientiousness, than the man convinced. But with every desire to find the reasonableness of such a view, we have entirely failed to discover why the holding of a creed should imply a smaller share either of intelligence or honesty than the holding of a doubt. Credulity has its negative side as well as its positive one, and there is as much room to slip on the one side as on the other. Clough—himself the most conscientious of poetical sceptics—admits, that if on the one hand 'hopes are dupes,' on the other, 'fears may be liars;' and, in short, there is no good reason, other things being equal, for supposing that the man who rejects evidence may not

be quite as great a fool as the man who accepts it. Creeds, no doubt, are easily adopted. We in a sense fall heirs to them. They lie about us from our very infancy, and as soon as we are able to think, they are recommended to us by those whom we very naturally respect. In this way, it is not to be denied that we are apt to creep into them with only too little enquiry. But on the other hand, are the great majority of doubts not only equally weak at the root and held with infinitely more self-complacency, not to say conceit? Search faith for its foundations, and in too many cases we dare say they will be found loose and flimsy enough: but subject doubt to a like scrutiny—strip it of all the mystical generalities it seeks to clothe itself in, and the pensive poetical sadness it so frequently affects—and in all but the rare exceptions, you will find that it is neither more nor less than our old friend Sir Oracle in a new disguise. The philosophy that questions everything with a regretfully necessitous air, and a sorrowful shake of the head, passes with too many for originality, and even profundity, until the trick is found out. That there are honest doubts, however, and honest doubters, we do not mean to question—godly doubters even—doubters of the order of 'that white soul,' as a living poet so beautifully says of Socrates—

> Which sat beneath the laurels day by day,
> And, fired with burning faith in God and Right,
> Doubted men's doubts away '—

doubters whose doubts ultimately tend to broaden and deepen the foundations of faith rather than undermine them. Doubt of this description is but faith's handmaid, and to whom faith is perpetually indebted, whether it has the candour to acknowledge the debt or not. In a certain sense it is the test of truth itself, and no faith is worth the name that cannot pass through its fires unscathed.

Perhaps there has been nothing more suicidal to the real interests of religion than the shallow theology which without distinction, and without a hearing, bundles all scepticism into that too convenient limbo of certain minds to which are relegated the works of the devil. The easiness of the process might itself cast a doubt on its efficiency.

For on the supposition even that the classification is correct, and that scepticism without discrimination might be put down in the diabolical category, those who know the devil best—or at least the spiritual difficulty his name is made to represent—know well, that he is not to be balked in this way by a mere wave of the hand.

In fact there is no question as to whether we shall be

troubled with doubt or not: we must. In a mixed world of good and evil, a state of things is not even conceivable that would afford 'no hinge or loop to hang a doubt on.' The world where it is not, must be one either altogether sacred to truth, or wholly abandoned to lies. Doubt and faith live under the same imperfect conditions, and the point at which one dies, the other also and consequently dies. And if the necessity of the case could only teach the impossible purist who wishes to ignore the existence of doubt altogether, to look it more steadily and honestly and thoughtfully in the face, where he has found only the devil before, he might possibly discover the presence of God as well, in the periodical recurrence of the doubter in the history of all living faith. The damage that 'honest' doubt can do to the real supports of faith must ever be trivial; while its use in knocking away the conventional props of it is inestimable. The common and easy acceptance by the many of that rather vulgar personage—the regulation Mephistopheles of poetry and the drama—has probably done a good deal in modern times to instruct that prevailing incapacity to disassociate the questioning spirit from the diabolical. But in order to see that such a conclusion is the shallowest of generalities, the weakest of confusions, it is only necessary to fall back on the history of Christianity itself. The most

important of truths were doubts once. Those soul certainties which men can plant their feet upon, and feel with Milton that—

> If this fail
> The pillared firmament is rottenness,
> And earth's base built on stubble —

were nearly all dangerous heresies at one period of their history. The strength of the Christian religion in our day is as much indebted to her heretics as to her saints; or rather, should we say the maturer verdict of time in many cases has pronounced these two titles to be one?

But, however gladly men may acknowledge the existence of these honest doubts, which, closely looked into, are but the transitional phases of faith, they must also admit that these are few compared to the unnumbered host of doubts which have little or no root in conscience, and which appear rather to proceed from a self-satisfied indifference to any faith at all. This kind of doubt has none of the troubles that afflict the genuine and honest article. Its deepest pains seem to be readily assuaged in a kind of sentimental and *quasi*-philosophical regret.

It is mostly this half-hearted and half-affected variety of doubt that has taken a poetical form in modern times, and the fact to us affords a perfectly sufficient reason why a great deal of the poetry produced under such conditions

has never risen above mediocrity. There are perhaps few things in themselves more irrecoverably prosaic than doubt. Few, on the other hand, more evocative of the poetic faculty, or more susceptible of poetical treatment, than faith.

Doubt disintegrates, disperses, repels. Faith attracts and knits together. It acts as a kind of centre of gravitation in the planetary system of things ideal, controlling the most erratic of orbits : standing to the intellect in much the same overmastering relation that Cressida's love stood to all her other feelings, when she declares—

> My love
> Is as the very centre of the earth
> Drawing all things to it.

Faith is the tonic of the poetical scale, the key-note to which the most wildly discursive imagination must return in the end before the ear can rest satisfied. Hence we have absolutely no poetry in which doubt is anything like the central or dominant interest ; while we have, as in the Hebrew poetry, as gorgeous palaces as imagination ever sanctified, whose material is supplied and whose genius is inspired from faith alone. When doubt is made use of at all in poetry, as in that highest quotable example, the Book of Job, it is introduced more as a foil to faith—the intense shadow of an intenser light—a wrestler

brought into the arena only to be overthrown by his mightier opponent. Doubt can command no prolonged sympathy, and consequently can find no permanent footing in any of the higher places of poetry. Faith, on the contrary, seems to clothe itself with poetry without effort; attracts all poetry to it as a seemingly natural consequence; interwinds and interweaves its life with it, until —to use the strong Shaksperian phrase—the two have 'grown together,' and their parting would be 'a tortured body.' They are the dermis and the epidermis of the ideal anatomy, and their severance means mutilation. Poetry can find no more than a partial and passing attraction in anything that is doubtful; she is at best but a stranger and a pilgrim in the debatable land. Her final election and abiding home is faith. She clings to faith as a child to a mother, and will not be shaken off, as plainly as if she had declared, once for all, *thy God shall be my God, and thy people my people.*

The poetical scepticism of the present day has of course retired from the gloomy atheism of the beginning of the century. The old controversies, deistical and theistical, have nearly died out in literature. The world at length seems to have lost patience with the philosophy that does not at least postulate a god of some kind or another to begin with; at all events, any such philosophy

has been left high and dry by the poetical tide of the present generation. And, to tell the truth, there was no choice. One or other must perish ; they could not live together. The dewless desert of blank and barren denial was no place for the gentle muse. Imagination cannot breathe its atmosphere and live. And yet, though not present themselves, these old controversies have left us an inheritance. The times have changed, and we have changed with them. The gloomy, not to say stagey atheism that had a certain fascination for the youth of thirty or forty years ago, has given place in our day to a refined and vaguely idealistic pantheism, which, without any of the old obtrusion of unbelief (it has even a kind of niggardly recognition of a personal God about it), still exercises a limited influence on poetry—a weaker solution of the strong waters of atheism, not so objectionable as the old form, on account of what it admits of evil, as of what it excludes of good. Without attempting any hard-church definition of its influence—and indeed we question much if many of its poetical exponents themselves could give a perfectly lucid account of what they believe and what they do not believe—we are yet of opinion that it puts a limitation on genius, and especially on poetical genius, in nearly the same proportion that it falls short of a definite faith.

Leaving all moral considerations out of sight as not within our province, it seems to be necessary, for æsthetical reasons alone, that the poet, of all other artists, should possess a belief that shall at least be clear to himself. Above all other men it behoves him, in the words of one of the greatest of his brotherhood, to be—

> One in whom persuasion and belief
> Has ripened into faith, and faith become
> A passionate intuition.

There is a certain degree of heat at which language fuses, and becomes the possible vehicle of poetical feeling, and the point of liquefaction is never registered below conviction, but above it. We do not say conviction is all that is necessary. Oxygen itself would quickly consume life, yet a man must consume oxygen to live. Conviction alone will not produce poetry, but it is an essential component of the atmosphere in which alone poetry can be sustained. At the degree in the mental thermometer which chronicles conviction, the possibility of poetry begins. Anything below that lacks one of the first conditions of its existence.

The poetry that has been produced without due regard to this essential quality, has seldom outlived its own generation; and, in fact, any attempt to get the materials

of poetry out of half belief, argues a defective poetical perception at the outset.

It is possible indeed, leaping to the opposite extreme, to get something like poetry out of the gigantic and passionate denial of Satan himself, as Milton has abundantly proved ; or even, to a certain degree, out of the pagan abhorrence to the God of Christianity, as illustrated by a living poet. For, waiving altogether any question as to the moral fitness of rehabilitating even under an impersonal or dramatic mask that which, in the hearing of the majority of his audience, can only be regarded as flat blasphemy, there can be no doubt that Mr. Swinburne has reached his highest poetical possibility in what we may classify as his ethnical poems. Without troubling ourselves about whether the inspiration comes from above or below, there is a force about his audacious profanity that we do not so readily find in his other efforts. Good or bad, Mr. Swinburne's capacity for blasphemy is unquestionably *une qualité*, as the French would say, with their subtle substratum of meaning.

In the hands of a poet like Milton, the Titanic war against heaven is capable of a certain amount of diabolical picturesqueness ; but the merely human unbelief, the distracting doubt, and the shuffling ingenuity that nibbles at this creed and that without arriving at any definite

conviction of its own, is the most unpoetical thing in the world.

No amount of artistic skill can make its effusions pleasing. Seeking sympathy and finding none, they seem to be all conceived in the melancholy minor, without any of the natural plaintiveness of that key, and with a double share of its hopeless dejection. There appears to be a place in the realms of the imagination for either God or devil ; but upon the Laodicean lukewarmness, upon the apathetic neutrality that is neither cold nor hot, poetry turns her back.

To trace the effects of scepticism, and the stern limitation put upon poetical genius by the want of that faith which ripens into Wordsworth's 'passionate intuition,' would open up too wide a field, extending as it does through all the infinite phases and degrees of doubt, from the first shadowy suggestion down to the ultimate utter denial. But that each step downward is hurtful in its degree, whatever disguise it assumes, could be easily proved. Even the affectation of atheism, as in much of Byron's poetry, is an artistic expedient fraught with infinite danger to the user of it. Although one feels that the atheism of Byron is not real, but in most cases a mere stage property, one gets sick of it before all his scowling heroes are exhibited. The Laras, the Corsairs, the

Giaours, are painted in on the same gloomy and threadbare background—a varied fugue on the one everlasting theme—a change of costume, but the same old unhallowed anatomy visibly sticking through. Nothing short of the genius of Byron could have achieved even a partial success with such a clogging nightmare on its back.

It is perhaps not to be so much regretted that atheism should prove such a complete extinguisher to anything like second-rate poetical power, as that it should have sometimes dragged down to the second place, gifts that should have ranked with the highest. It overshadows the resplendent genius of Shelley like a black thundercloud above a rainbow, and gives everything he has left behind him a phantasmagoric and evanescent character. Reading his works is like walking through the dreamlike palace of Kubla Khan. On every side, and in such profusion as has never been approached by man, lie the potentialities of poetry, but yet in a great measure, only the potentialities. He has left no palace behind him worthy of his genius or his materials. If ever mortal had the materials, and the power of the enchanter to call them forth, it was he. No one ever possessed in a greater degree the faculty of bringing himself *en rapport* with the hallucination of the moment.

Images of the most ethereal tenuity, that would have

presented themselves to other men's minds in some vague and nebulous way, stood forth to the order of that imperial imagination with the distinctness and precision of objective realities. And yet with all this power he is still but the enchanter. Wherever you go it is fairy-world still, and affords no solid ground for mortal foot; and though you cannot resist its haunting beauty, you are equally haunted by a sense of its almost ghastly unreality. The kindred points of heaven and home are even more nearly akin than they are commonly supposed. Shelley's inability to conceive a heaven with a God in it to whom he could pay reverence, seemed to drain away all humanness and homeliness out of him, until his poetry became quite as unearthly as his adverse critics judged it unheavenly. Starving one side of his moral nature, the other side was supersaturated, and rendered morbid by an overflow of the imaginative secretions that should have fed both. This insubstantial characteristic of his work was unfortunately one upon which Shelley rather prided himself. Writing to a friend, he says he 'does not deal in flesh and blood.' 'You might as well,' says he, 'go to a gin-shop for a leg of mutton, as expect anything earthly from me.' That want of fixity, too, which the absence of central faith invariably induces, that want of a peaceable mental anchorage—the green pastures and the still

waters of the Hebrew poet, with whom, however, he has so much in common—acts as a continual drag on his powers. There is a provoking absence of that massive and leonine repose which usually consorts with the greatest gifts, and which one naturally looks for as a concomitant of his. But we look for it in vain. He was always in an ecstasy, in the somewhat lost but literal meaning of the word—always *out of himself.* If his genius had a fault, it was too impressionable. The merest mouthful of the Delphian vapour put him into fits. He was ever on the tripod, and is only a modern incarnation of that priestess of Apollo, mentioned by Plutarch, who raved herself to death in the temple. His Pegasus in this way was good for a short run, but had little waiting power. Consequently, the defect does not interfere with the perfection of his shorter lyrics, which are simply unique and unapproached ; but its limiting influence is painfully apparent in all his works (though less marked in the Cenci) that require any long-sustained effort. The deficiency was one well understood and keenly felt by Shelley himself. In a letter to Godwin, he says,—'I cannot but be conscious, in much of what I write, of an absence of that tranquillity which is the attribute and accompaniment of power.'

Sad indeed that this defect, this want of reference to

the fundamental key-note of power, should have marred the music of such an otherwise heavenly instrument.

That the atheism—or at least the pantheism—of Shelley was a mental unsoundness of a constitutional and hereditary kind, does not, we think, admit of a doubt. In these days of irresponsible faultiness, studded over with dipso- and klepto-maniacs, when so many are anxious to prove that we are 'villains by necessity,' as Shakspeare would have put it,—'fools by heavenly compulsion; knaves, thieves, and treachers by spherical predominance,'—we have often wondered that some charitable *doctrinaire* with a scientific turn of mind has never started his atheomaniac. If the world could be convinced—and there is no lack of plausible argument to prove it—that the different degrees of unbelief are frequently no more than the varied phases of mental disorder, and that absolute atheism itself, in the vast majority of cases, is only an irresponsible mania, proceeding from sheer intellectual defect,—if we could only have it settled that our sceptics, and more especially our cultured and scientific sceptics, are what they are by 'a divine thrusting on,' they might possibly be taught to hold their views with a little more humbleness of mind than they have hitherto done. In Shelley's case, atheism was a thing that ran in the blood. His father seems to have

had a fame for eccentricity in the direction of profanity, and was said to have been a disciple of the Chesterfield and Rochefoucauldean school; while Shelley himself declares—in an unpublished letter quoted by Mr. Rosetti —that his grandfather, old Sir Bysshe, 'was a complete atheist, and *founded all his hopes on annihilation.*'

To a somewhat similar cause—the want of any deep-rooted conviction in the author's mind—may be attributed, we think, a great deal of that watery and Werthery instability that characterises too many of Goethe's heroes, although in his case in a more modified degree. Goethe's unbelief did not kick at heaven as Shelley's did in the Prometheus. His scepticism was of a milder and more passive type, or perhaps it might be more accurately described as a kind of moral *juste milieu*, with a singular inaccessibility to attraction on one side or the other. His moral sense was insulated, so to speak —encased by a coating of intellect which was an absolute non-conductor. There is no better representative than he of the spirit described by Tennyson as

> Holding no form of creed,
> But contemplating all.

With less of this power to maintain an attitude of moral neutrality, Goethe's own character, as well as that of many of those he created, would have been much more

humanly and poetically complete. His shortcoming in the direction of personal faith cannot be kept down, and is continually cropping out in his heroes. In many of the leading men he has drawn there is hardly any strong moral aspiration, and in some no discoverable preference or predilection whatever. The only exception to this we can think of is in the character of 'Goetz von Berlichingen,' and that was a production almost of the author's boyhood, or at least at an age before men have begun to question or doubt. There was evidently a lurking suspicion in Goethe's maturer mind that anything like well-defined religious views in a man argued weakness, and weakness was the one vice Goethe abhorred, even to a weakness. But that he was equally well convinced, on the other hand, that no feminine character could possibly be complete without such views, may be as safely inferred. His women are singularly rich by the very excess of those qualities of faith and trust so conspicuously awanting in his men.

This absence of any kind of moral partiality in the author found its counterpart in the moral tenuity and aimless vacillation of Werther, Egmont, Wilhelm Meister, and Faust. Beside the intense purpose of Shakspeare's heroes, such men as these are little better than shadows. Even in the presence of Shakspeare's secondary

characters—of his villains even—we are never altogether out of an atmosphere of faith. Among the very worst there is an implied recognition of God, a power without and beyond them, in an accusing if not approving conscience.

Without any of that modern moral attitudinising that pirouettes on a pivot of its own self-consciousness (and which the world could so well do without), no man's work carries upon it more clearly and unmistakably the marks of an overruling conviction and a dominant purpose. So evident is this quality in Shakspeare's works that one might almost imagine that—like every fresh effort of Haydn's genius—they were commenced with prayer and carried out under the power of old Herbert's motto—

> Think the king sees thee still, for his King does.

Perhaps the most striking illustration in more modern times of the manner in which the poetical faculty may be overridden and paralysed by the action of doubt, is to be found in the life and writings of Arthur Hugh Clough. The more his life is studied, the more it appears to rise above the common conventionality of doubt, and to represent the highest possible phase of conscientious scepticism—one, indeed, of those sacrificial

souls which the Creator seems to throw from Him at intervals into the ocean of religious opinion to keep the waters in a healthy fermentation, and save them from stagnating by tradition, or freezing by convention into mere lifeless forms. His case presents many unique and interesting points. Differing from Shelley, inasmuch as the very elements left out in Shelley's half-human composition were amongst Clough's most conspicuous endowments—the social side of genius—its simple homeliness, and the keenness of its human sympathies—was in him beautifully complete. Differing, again, from the scepticism of Goethe—for Clough's moral predilections were strong, and anything like indifference was with him impossible—his scepticism seemed rather to rise out of an almost morbid over-keenness and over-sensitiveness to the requirements of conscience. With a strong and perpetual craving for some solid ground of belief, he would yet have no part of his faith at second hand. Following Clough's career from his school-days at Rugby onwards, it is a melancholy and even a humiliating thing to find how much even of the unseen and spiritual force of a great man's mind is overruled by the irresponsible circumstance of its earthly surroundings. With all its unquestionable excellences, there was a fatal flaw in the Rugby training under the Arnold *régime.* In many cases

—and these cases necessarily the most important—it had a tendency to over-stimulate the moral sense. It sent boys out into the world with a dangerously premature moral equipment; an education that yielded a good deal of dogmatic brain-force, but at the sacrifice of intellectual accuracy and the finer moral discriminations. An old head upon young shoulders is a doubtful blessing in any case; but when it takes the special form of an adult faith grafted on a spiritual anatomy whose bones are set not yet, there is no doubt in the matter. With the great majority of strong natures, it is simply the best conceivable arrangement for ultimate moral shipwreck. Not the most carefully administered education, accompanied by the utmost solicitude of parents, can ever take that highest part of every man's education out of the hands of his Maker. Father or mother or teacher may in some measure mould the outward frame, but God alone can breathe into its nostrils the breath of life, and make such an education a living thing. Clough (who by the inherent tendency of his nature would have been a seeker after God had he had no higher advantages than a heathen) has always seemed to us to have been the victim of a premature moral development. He came from Rugby with the Arnold mint-marks fresh and strong upon him, with his mind fully made up, and an

amiable determination to do battle, if need be, for all the theories of his worthy master. But man proposes, God disposes. A moral influence was lying in wait for him that he had never taken into account, and which proved to be the turning-point of his life. When he went into residence at Oxford in 1836, the Tractarian movement was at its height. Newman was stretching out, through pulpit and platform, through verse and prose, those subtle prehensile tentacles of his, that touched so softly, and yet have closed so firmly, upon modern thought. It was an atmosphere Clough had never breathed before, and it proved too much for his tender years. Speaking of it afterwards, he says that for a long time he was 'like a straw drawn up the draught of a chimney.'

The fierce struggle he passed through can never be altogether known, and is only shadowed here and there in his poems, and a few chance exclamations in his correspondence; but of the severity of it there can be no doubt. His mind was not altogether unhorsed—he had too firm a seat for that—but he may have been said to have lost his stirrups, and never again to have recovered them until the harrowing interregnum that dates between doubt and well-assured belief had done its work upon him, and worn him down to the brink of the

grave. Torture like his turns the confident cant of your easy-minded believer into something that almost approaches blasphemy.

All that he suffered in that pitiless purgatory will never be revealed—that valley of the shadow of death, so thickly strewn with the bones of the spiritually dead, by what inscrutable decree of Providence we know not; but that all was borne without a murmur, and with a rare humility and integrity, his life is a sufficient guarantee. With all his doubts and difficulties, we should be inclined to question the catholicity of the Church that refused to extend to him the invitation of Laban, '*Come in, thou blessed of the Lord: why standest thou without?*'

But for the fate that brought him so directly under the wheels of the Tractarian movement, he might have been living yet; and few, who have paid his works any attention, will doubt but that he would have held an important rank amongst living writers. That this unfortunate interruption and harassing mental conflict fatally interfered with his æsthetic development as a successful poet, is very abundantly proved by nearly all the poetry he has written. He carried his doubts about him by force of habit, and not least doubted his own powers, and the quality of his own productions. His doubts to him indeed

> Were traitors,
> And made him lose the good he might have won,
> By fearing to attempt.

He kept his most important poem, the 'Amours de Voyage,' in MS. beside him for nine years, and only published it at last in a kind of modestly furtive way in an American periodical—the 'Atlantic Monthly.' His doubt seemed to find him out and to hunt him to cover whenever and wherever he ventured out. He could not escape it. There was nothing left for him, but, in his own melancholy words, 'to pace the sad confusion through.' Baffled and tempest-tost by conflicting opinions, he exclaims, in one of his poems :—

> O may we for assurance' sake
> Some arbitrary judgment take,
> And wilfully pronounce it true.

We almost wish he could have done so, even at some little intellectual sacrifice. But that was just the thing he could not do. He was too keenly suspicious of his intellectual life. With him there was no deeper form of dishonesty than that which shrinks from its own conviction. There never was a character more spotlessly free from anything even approaching compromise in this respect. His intellectual honesty was without a flaw. Everything went down before his convictions—his living at Oxford (it should not be forgot that in his position

pecuniary sacrifice meant poverty), and with it, in many men's eyes, his social status as well. And last, what to him was of far more value than these, the confidence of his dearest friends, and at the head of the list Arnold himself. Happiness, health, all went; and in their place, to use a phrase of his own, came 'spiritual vertigo and megrims unutterable,' and loneliness and misery. Everything his conscience required of him was paid, down to the last farthing. All was given away, till only his great unrooted honesty remained to him. Religion would indeed be a rhapsody of words if in such a case a man could not spend his life and yet in the highest sense possess it. *Whosoever shall lose his life shall preserve it.* It is a beautiful belief, and it never was beat out into the metal of actual hard fact with a sublimer self-denial than in the life of Clough.

# MODERN CREEDS AND MODERN POETRY

## *MODERN CREEDS AND MODERN POETRY.*

Some of the more recent modifications of poetical scepticism are of so vague a character, that they hardly admit of definite classification. If we find the atheism of the poet difficult to account for, and apt, as we have seen in the case of Shelley and others, to be self-contradictory, it is quite as difficult on the other hand to give any satisfactory estimate of that cloud of æsthetic sentiment in which some of our teachers of Science envelope their materialistic conclusions. The poetical exponents of Cosmic emotion, and the worship of Humanity are hard enough to understand sometimes, but their effusions are certainly not less puzzling or less contradictory than the strange outbursts of something very like religious enthusiasm we sometimes get from those exponents of Science who accept the doctrine of physical and moral necessity, and the hypothesis of a universe without a mind.

Between Mr. Swinburne's eloquent apostrophes to

Humanity without a God, on the one side, and Professor Tyndall's 'poetic thrill' on the other, there is not much to choose, although perhaps there is not the same likelihood of the pagan ecstasy of the poet becoming naturalized in modern English soil. It is in fact as completely out of time as many of his Christian readers will conceive it to be out of taste. The anachronistic mixture of the pagan with the Christian element in many of his ethnical poems—in such a one for example as Dolores—recalls the ludicrous incongruity in the Lusiad of Camoens where Vasco de Gama, caught in a storm, addresses his prayers to Christ, but it is Venus who comes to his assistance. It is not likely that such poetry will ever be anything but *caviare* to the majority of English readers. Sentimental materialism however, the scientific creed of a soulless universe, duly anointed and glossed over with what may be called the liberation of pent-up poetry, which some of its exponents so well know how to apply, seems to be much more in keeping with what Shakspeare would have called 'the tune of the times,' and is destined to have a much wider appreciation. It is surely a novel if not an ominous fact that in the country which used to be specialized as having a hundred religions and only one sauce, an assembly can be found to approve, if not applaud, the philosopher who enlivens the tedium of a

scientific lecture with the condescending admission, that he has no objections to a belief in the existence of a soul, as 'an exercise of ideality.' No doubt a great deal of such scepticism is unreal and affected, and to tell the truth the affectation is getting to be rather *banale.* Too many of the smaller adventurers on the impacific sea of science and theology seem to trim their sails to the prevailing breeze, and must assume the sceptical attitude if they have it not, in order to maintain their character as pioneers of advanced thought; men who cultivate that kind of rhetoric which always seems to be so pregnant with the promise of the times, and who, by dint of spelling 'progress' with a big P, constitute themselves the apostles and prophets of a Future which with strange persistency refuses to become a Present, men who, as long as they can get an audience to applaud them, will probably continue to hail the erection of the latest calf in Horeb that presents itself.

Scepticism in fact is fast becoming *la maladie de siècle*, and as there are always so many people who must still be in the fashion, even in their maladies, we have naturally enough something too much of it. It is amusing to notice how the spirit is beginning to filter downward and find a bed in that lower stratum of intelligence, whose voice is so frequently little more than an echo of the stratum

lying immediately above it. How many of the popular exhibitions of heresy and scepticism so-called, remind us of Voltaire's barber, who strove to convince his illustrious patron that 'although he was only a poor "perruquier," he did not believe in God any more than the gentlemen did.' New, and popular, and shallow as much of this scepticism undoubtedly is, and subscribed to, with perhaps as little exercise of thought or conscience as when the broadest of broad churchmen signs those articles of his confession he makes no secret of disbelieving, it nevertheless makes progress. It has its deeper and more intelligent aspects too, and to some of these the Church is lending a tacit justification.. From the present stubborn attitude of conservative theology more than half of our real scepticism is the natural revolt. If the Church can reasonably charge Science, as she most certainly can, with gross materialism, Science can retort that the Church has taken too little care to keep her creed abreast of her convictions ; has made too tardy acknowledgment of what she owes both to Science and the higher criticism ; has tempted men too far away from the terra firma of known fact towards the region of hypothetical and profitless speculation ; and has perhaps thrust aside with too rude a hand the veil of that inner sanctuary behind which facts are silent and dogmatism intolerable. It is quite possible

to revere men's higher though undemonstrable aspirations, and yet at the same time reap some little benefit from those who tell us that—

> It seems His newer will
> We should not think so much of Him, but turn,
> And of the world that He has given us, make
> What best we may.

Between the extremes on either side there ought to be room both for scientific theology and reverential science. There are a good many people, however, who have got thoroughly sick of what they have come to look upon as the incomprehensible phantoms of Theology, and who yet are eagerly disposed to close, not alone with the facts, but with what is quite as mysterious and incomprehensible in Science. They have always been taught to attach their faith most strongly to those problems which, on anything like *à priori* grounds, it is as impossible for Theology to affirm as it is for Science to deny, so that in throwing off the one extravagance for the other there is little sacrifice to make. And besides, from the extreme of over-belief to the extreme of under-belief there is no great distance. Like other extremes they are apt to meet. The evil generation that must have a sign—or in other words the mind predisposed to believe in anything, provided it is miraculous and humanly speaking incomprehensible—is not uncommonly just the other side of the same mind,

which questions everything of which the rest of the world is very well assured.

The retention and imposition by orthodox theology of much questionable matter, long after such matter has ceased to be of any value to living wight, and in which acquiescence or non-acquiescence can neither help nor hinder him, in this world or the next, has no doubt done much to encourage the spread of scientific scepticism. The rapidly growing objection to admit ecclesiastical dogma as such, makes room for the new guest, who perhaps would never have gained an entrance had Theology wisely relaxed, and made those concessions a little earlier, which after all can only be a matter of time. In the meantime the breach widens, for although Science may fail to formulate and organise a cult of its own, it will never come back to the one it has left. It will probably continue to exercise its ideality in the 'illimitable azure' of some of its professors, and clothe itself in such liturgy as it can appropriate from our best pantheistic poetry. The poetical side of scientific scepticism is indeed a curious study and well worth examination. It proves how utterly futile is the attempt to stamp out the religious and imaginative instinct, not only in human nature generally, but in the very hearts of those who deny its power, and who are never tired in trying to prove the unreasonableness and baselessness of its aspirations.

With the labour of a life, Comte builds up a system intended to exclude God at every crevice, and then proceeds to organise a religious cult, palpably inspired from the Church of Rome, with priesthood, sacrament, and calendar all complete, and, in the beatification of Clotilde de Vaux, something very like the worship of the Virgin added; while the philosophy of his most famous friend and correspondent, J. S. Mill, if not altogether overthrown, is shaken to its foundations by the publication of a volume of posthumous essays which shows the author in a character and attitude little short of adoration towards the religious conclusions his philosophy tended to undermine. Again Professor Tyndall, the modern exponent of the doctrine of Necessity, the acceptor of a cosmic order which dominates if it does not dispense at once with the will of God and man, and necessarily limits the life of the soul to the dissolution of its fleshy tenements, can still speak of the human mind turning to the Mystery from which it has emerged 'with the yearning of a pilgrim for his distant home,' and in the face of that power whose control and interference his philosophy excludes, can still quote, with approbation and evident sincerity, the words of the great poet who tells us of—

> A spirit that impels
> All thinking things, all objects of all thoughts,
> And rolls through all things.

Every reader of the autobiography of J. S. Mill and these wonderful posthumous essays on religion, must have felt that there is something deeply pathetic in a heart like his, groping about for anchorage upon ground his philosophy tells him is either heartless hard rock or shallow shifting sand. Except indeed in a mind from which all human interest has been drained away, the lower materialistic conclusion and the higher aspiration of humanity cannot lie comfortably together. Explosion seems to be a chemical necessity, and when by that explosion the ark, that may have hitherto carried the believer's faith through all the storms of life, goes to pieces, it is curious as well as pathetic to see how ready the self-wrecked mariner is to avail himself of any floating spar he can snatch from the general ruin, upon which to buoy up those indestructible longings, those hopes which will not part with him as long as there is a breath left in his body. This continual looking about for an emotional substitute for religion in the materialistic mind has a strange significance. It is a fresh endorsation of the profound truth, which lies at the bottom of Voltaire's rather irreverent witticism, that if God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent Him. We may or may not be of much account to Him, but He is absolutely indispensable to us.

Science may effect a great reform in widening the

conception, and in purging the worship of God of much of that ignorant superstition, theological fog, and sacerdotal trumpery, with which it has been too much mixed up, but when it overturns the temple itself to make room for some force in nature which it immediately proceeds to endow with all the attributes of Almightiness, it is simply repeating the blind iconoclasm of the older and more necessary reform, which when it had demolished the cathedrals proceeded to build barns of its own, in which to worship the very same God, with a form and ceremonial no better fitted for its purpose, while at the same time it had an equal liability to sink into empty and unmeaning ritual.

But the worship of the poetical materialist is more incongruous and inconsistent from another point of view. Professor Tyndall, and those who think with him, propose to banish the religious sentiment from the sphere of knowledge and relegate, if not confine it, to the sphere of emotion. In much the same way J. S. Mill admits the idea of a life after death as the indulgence of a hope in the region of imagination merely, and tells us that although it is probably an illusion, it is sufficiently valuable to retain on moral grounds. But would these teachers have us keep our reason in one drawer, and our emotions in another, with a God for each? Is there room

in the same brain for this double-barrelled divinity? Is it possible to be rationalistic on one side of the head and devout on the other? And yet how else can we follow such teaching? To dismiss God from the cerebrum, and find room for him in the cerebellum, is no great compliment to one's Maker, and it is hardly a form of faith which recommends itself to reason whatever it may do to rationalism. It would indeed be a new and grotesque exaggeration of that Protestant form of indulgence, now happily dying out, which allows its believers to be worldly for six days and heavenly-minded on the seventh. Moreover the existence of a soul with a future life is either true, or it is not true. There is no room for mortal foot between the yes, and no, of such a subject; and the philosophy which objects to the doctrine on materialistic grounds, but would still retain it as a poetical phenomenon, is unworthy of a reasonable creature. If matter has to account for everything it must account for poetry too, and the religious sentiment as well. And if it cannot throw any new light on these things; if it fail to solve the problem of that spiritual nature in man of which these things speak and testify, it only proves that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in its philosophy, that the Frankenstein monster so dear to the scientific mind is a creature easily

circumvented, but the living specimen, fearfully and wonderfully made, as originally turned out of the hands of his Creator, is as profound a mystery as ever. Of the teachers of such a philosophy it may be said—

> Ils ont eu l'art de bien connaître
> L'homme qu'ils ont imaginé,
> Mais il n'ont jamais deviné
> Ce qu'il est, ni ce qu'il doit être.

With no hope beyond the limits of earthly life St. Paul tells us we are of all men the most miserable. Now it is surely trifling with one's misery to recommend him to reject the doctrine of immortality as a fact, and accept it as a beneficial fiction, and seems indeed to offer to the mind a more humiliating and much less honest alternative than the most out-and-out atheism. Existence would not be worth accepting on such conditions. The great working and suffering mass of the world would sink under the hopeless cross of such a faith, and to all but the fleeting ephemera, to whom the short and paltry present is sufficient, life would quickly shrivel up into a ghastly study of euthanasia and the nearest way out. In such a case

> 'Twere hardly worth our while to choose
> Of things all mortal, or to use
> A little patience ere we die ;
> 'Twere best at once to sink to peace,
> Like birds the charming serpent draws,
> To drop head-foremost in the jaws
> Of vacant darkness and to cease.

To ask a man to let go that part of his faith without which his religion would be a vain and cruel delusion, without which his life

> Is darkness at the core,
> And dust and ashes all that is,

and then to turn round and propose that he may be allowed to retain it as a highly respectable dream, is fortunately a modern modification of belief not very likely to recommend itself to the bulk of mankind. And that such a conviction did not recommend itself with the strength of conviction to the mind of J. S. Mill seems pretty evident. There will always be many, no doubt, who accept the *philosopher's* enforcement of that gospel according to Bentham in which he was so exclusively and inexorably trained as the highest outcome of his life, but in the light of the posthumous essays, there must be many more who regard the *man's* unconquerable scepticism towards his own rationalistic conclusions as the most valuable fact he has left behind him.

Within its own province, it would be difficult to overrate the value of the modern revelation of science, and the school of thought, in theology or elsewhere, which ignores it, or even fails to appreciate its importance, is simply shortening its own days, losing its hold on the cultivation of its time, and turning a deaf ear to one of

the grandest and greatest of the oracles of God. But when the apostles of exact science leave their own sphere of demonstrable fact, traverse the line of the knowable, and begin to make experiments in the field that lies beyond it, they seem too often to fall, as in the case of Comte, an easy prey to the most incoherent mysticism. Within its own proper lines Science is invaluable and invulnerable, and within these lines error is nowhere shorter-lived. And for this reason, that in the purely scientific mind there is no historical dogma to contend with, no moral spectre to appease, no preconceived claim or confession of faith to be satisfied or squared off with; so that Science may be said to be perpetually undergoing a process of self-purification and self-correction. Unlike the fixed laws of systematic theology—in whose very fixedness their main strength is erroneously supposed to reside—the deductions of Science have this advantage that the light of every fresh day and every fresh mind is continually pouring through them. In Science the discovery of an error is hailed as a triumph, in Theology it is suspected as an enemy, and too often fought with to the death. But once out of its own legitimate field, Science seems to leave all power, and even common-sense, behind it. Amongst things that are immeasurable and imponderable it seems to lose its head; its microscope and scalpel,

its tests and solvents, its chemical and mechanical appliances, and perhaps more than all these, the scientific habit of thought, seem to encumber rather than help it. It does not appear to realise the difficulty of treating the religious instinct as it would an exact science. In those subjects whose every element lies fairly within the compass of human comprehension, and whose every conclusion can be proven experimentally, or fairly generalised from ascertained phenomena, its inductive methods may be of advantage, but the moment that exact science in the person of the logician or the philosophical necessitarian enters the domain of imagination, his function is benumbed. The 'two-and-thirty palaces' bamboozle him thoroughly. There are voices in the earth and the air he can make nothing of. Like Stephano in the enchanted island, although he had aspired to be king, he is at last reduced to the pitiful confession, that there 'he is not Stephano but a cramp.' Pure reason so called is all very well in its own field of exact definition, but where it comes in contact and has to do with imponderable forces, its laborious attempts to relegate everything to the limbo of emotion which its philosophy fails to account for, and its methods fail to circumvent, may be a convenient way of evading the difficulty, but it by no means disposes of it. Nor are such attempts altogether acceptable to the

inner consciousness of him who makes them. He swears allegiance to his new belief, but still hangs on half-unconsciously to the hope that the relinquished creed may be partly true after all. In the later semi-religious phase of Comte's philosophy, in the poetical predilections of Professor Tyndall, and in the admitted moral value of J. S. Mill's hypothetical immortality, we have only the natural and irrepressible aspirations of men whose faces may be turned towards Babylon, but who in their inmost thoughts are still dreaming of the Zion they have left behind.

This perfectly natural feeling of regret towards a departing faith is not, however, confined to our philosophers and men of science. It gives tone and colour to much of our later sceptical poetry, as well as to a good deal of poetry which does not earn that epithet except from the extremely orthodox. It lies at the heart of some of the most eloquent passages of the laureate's immortal elegy, and is the principal source of the mournful and pathetic inspiration of Mr. Arnold.

In order to see how true this is with regard to Mr. Arnold's genius, it is only necessary to recall the *motif* of some of his finest poems. It is the secret root of the poet's own uneasiness which gives him the power to describe the majestic despair of Empedocles on Etna, and express the godlike discontent and impatience of a

soul that has broken with the past, thrown off its philosophies as utterly inadequate to explain the riddle of the world, but yet has failed to accept the future, or find any satisfactory substitute for the faith it has rejected, an attitude of soul well described in one of the author's most characteristic poems, where he represents himself as

> Wandering between two worlds, one dead,
> The other powerless to be born.

This rupture between the old and new seems to present itself to him in every situation. He hears it in the winds and the woods, and the sea takes up the cry; standing by a moonlit shore at full tide, the old plaint breaks forth in a lyrical burst unsurpassed in modern poetry for grandeur and breadth :—

> The sea of faith
> Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore,
> Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furl'd;
> But now I only hear
> Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
> Retreating to the breath
> Of the night-wind down the vast edges drear
> And naked shingles of the world.

If Mr. Arnold's poetical theory be true, when speaking of Heine, he tells us that all genius is but the passing mood of the spirit in whom we have our being, he must himself have been selected for the melancholy mood,

and set apart as the special exponent of the still sad music of humanity. Wherever his contemplation wanders; by 'Dover Beach,' or by 'Heine's Grave,' with the world-weary author of Oberman, or with the Carthusian ascetics of the Grand Chartreuse, the same deep undertone of sorrow is everywhere present. Through the thin dramatic disguise of the singer, in all these poems one can read between the lines the trouble of the poet's own soul:

> A fever in his pages burns
> Beneath the calm they feign;
> A wounded human spirit turns
> Here, on his bed of pain.

All his communings with nature and human nature take the same sad and sober colour. His gladdest notes are not all glad, but seem to be conceived in shadow and set in the same low and plaintive key. His quarrel in one of his poems with the calmness of old age, and with death itself, because it does not fulfil the ardent promises of youth, and takes him out of 'the daylight and the cheerful sun,' though singularly Greek in feeling, is yet made to ring with a sorrowful pathos palpably projected from the later faith. It is the song of a Greek soul singing under the cross and thorns of a half-accepted half-rejected Christianity.

Since the days of Elizabeth contemporaneous religious

difficulties have never received the attention, and have never been more vigorously incorporated and reflected in English poetry, than in the present day, and since that day to this it has perhaps never been more needful that it should be so. In Mr. Tennyson and Mr. Arnold we have the interpreters of the spiritual troubles of an age fraught with issues less salient it may be, but certainly not less operative in time to come than those of the Reformation, and the spiritual interpretation of the times would hardly have been complete without them both. With them both the subject is pretty comprehensively discussed and illustrated. In Mr. Arnold we have all the languor and weariness of soul, all the restlessness and hankering solicitude of an age, whose creed is more or less at war with its convictions; an age which has wakened, or whose attention has been aroused, to the inadequacy of its older authorities and will no longer accept existing standards in matters of faith, although it may not as yet have got its feet on firmer ground; an age that turns its back on the formulæ of the past, but yet has no sufficiently formulated future it can fairly embrace; refusing, and even overthrowing the old foundations, it yet would seek some external basis for that kingdom of heaven within us, that faith which is not of man, neither received of men, nor taught.

An age, in short, which dispenses with the revelation written on the stony tables of authority, and which has outgrown the legal swaddling-bands of its historic and dogmatic parchment, and yet is hardly prepared to accept, without some guarantee outside itself, that ever-abiding revelation written not on stone but on the fleshy tables of the human heart and conscience. If in the poetical genius of Mr. Arnold (his prose works are not here taken into consideration) we have the regretful exponent of a tottering theological system, the Jeremiah of a decadent Israel, in Mr. Tennyson as reflected at the height of his power in the pages of 'In Memoriam,' we have the prophet of the wider faith to come. For it is hardly too much to say that from the shadow projected from that divine poem, we have a more certain indication of what the theological future will be, in those questions it sets itself to solve, than in all the volumes of theology proper the century has produced.

In the scepticism of Mr. Tennyson (we use the epithet in this case for the sake of illustration, for in our opinion it is not earned) there is a much more hopeful note than in that of Mr. Arnold, although at times he storms the strongholds of orthodoxy much more directly, and with much more telling effect. In the 'In Memoriam,' sorrowful as the poem is, there is little of the hopeless

despondency and dejection of Mr. Arnold's view. What seems to lower the power and the pulse of the one singer, seems to stimulate the other. The doubt of the one looks hopefully and towards heaven, that of the other, despondingly and towards earth. The one seems to be earnestly seeking some surer ground, and possesses to the full

> The faith and vigour, bold to dwell
> On doubts that drive the coward back,
> And keen through wordy snares to track
> Suggestion to her inmost cell;

while the other, with not less courage, seems still to be more or less ashamed and afraid of being caught in the attitude and the company of those who stand convicted of having convictions. Like the hero he describes in his great poem, who it appears was also troubled with the disease of the age, the laureate faces the spectres of his mind and lays them; and as he bravely fights on, he finds in the conflict a surer footing for his faith. In his deepest perplexity he never loses hold of the 'living Will that shall endure,' and overwhelmed with sorrow can still represent himself as

> falling with his weight of cares
> Upon the world's great altar stairs
> That slope through darkness up to God,

with a humility, and at the same time a security of conviction, which Mr. Arnold fails to attain.

The different treatment of the same subject by poets of the same age, may, generally speaking, be ascribed to different idiosyncrasy and diversity of gift, but in this case it must also be attributed in some degree to diversity in point of view, and the route and method by which the subject is approached by each writer. The solvent of the poet's perplexity in the 'In Memoriam' is a great sorrow. Death is one of those old masters in philosophy, not likely to be superseded even by the most advanced of thinkers, and who in his shadowy hands will sometimes bring more substantial gifts to men than all the schools put together. Mr. Tennyson's doubts, like those of thousands of his less gifted fellow men since the world began, are buried in the grave of a friend. On the other hand, the test which Mr. Arnold brings to the solution of the sceptical problems of his age is a purely intellectual one. The results of the two processes are before the world. In the first case the doubts are dispersed and vanquished, and the closing song of the great elegy in which the triumph is achieved, rings like the joy in heaven when a new world redeems itself from chaos, and takes its place in the choir of its starry peers. In the other case the old vapours still cling, and the doubts of the singer still encircle him like the shirt of Nessus. He fails to shake himself free, and there are no more pathetic lines in the

whole range of his noble poems, than those in which he cries out, like a creature in pain, for the faith of an age still untainted by the disease of modern life, and into which he could have thrown his whole heart—

> Oh had I lived in that great day—
> How had its glory new,
> Filled earth and heaven, and caught away
> My ravished spirit too.

Lord Byron used to declare, that if Lucretius had not been spoiled by the Epicurean system, we should have had a far superior poem to any now existing. One is almost tempted to say of Mr. Arnold, that but for the influence of a corresponding scepticism in our own age, he might have taken a much higher rank in English poetry. An interesting parallel indeed might be drawn between the Roman sceptic and his English antitype. When the Roman philosopher writes to his friend Memmius, to whom he dedicates his poem, telling him not to turn away from his somewhat dry discourse, and assures him that he too (Lucretius) if he chose, could have invented as many pretty poetical lies about the gods as the other bards did, we are almost sorry, when we think of his force and felicity, that he did not do so, rather than exhaust his genius on so poor and unpoetical a theme. In the English poet one feels the same regret, that he did

not give a wider berth to the theological troubles of his time, that he should not have left the Empedoclean perplexities, both in their ancient and modern manifestations, to take care of themselves, and have given more room for the exercise of the matchless idyllic gift which produced such poems as 'Thyrsis' and 'The Scholar Gipsy.'

Many other interesting points between the two poets suggest themselves. In fact Mr. Arnold may be said to occupy in several respects a very similar position, in his attitude towards modern faith, to that occupied by Lucretius towards the Pagan pantheon. Neither of them can altogether bring themselves to part with the faith they leave behind them, nor satisfactorily give form and definition to that which has to succeed to it. The vague external power with which the philosophy of Lucretius invests the 'nature of things' may be fairly compared with the not less shadowy and impersonal deity which Mr. Arnold speaks of as that 'Power not ourselves.' Again in the Roman poet's rapturous invocation of the gods, that strange inconsistency in the mouth of an avowed Epicurean his commentators have failed to account for, we have something very like the English poet's irrepressible outbursts of intense sympathy with a faith he can no longer accept. Both poets, too, seriously

believe, and deeply lament, and perhaps too obtrusively affect a moral *pose*, towards the degeneracy of their own age. The decadence of the particular time in which he lives is, however, a theme so common to the poet it would hardly be worth while drawing attention to it here, except to note a certain similarity of manner and treatment by the two writers in this particular. Lucretius delights to picture himself standing upon the serene ramparts erected by the learning of the philosophers, and from whose passionless and unclouded heights he can look down upon the race of blind and miserable mortals, striving night and day for their empty and ridiculous honours.[1] It can hardly be necessary to point out that the patrician exclusiveness of Lucretius is not without its counterpart in the modern poet. The taint of the 'superior person' which weakens so much the effect of everything he says, and that intolerable note of condescension towards the wretched Philistine he addresses, as it were, from the *templa serena* of his Roman prototype, has perhaps never been more strongly marked in any English writer of real genius.

The exponent of freethinking in the century immediately preceding that of Augustus, had, however, a very different task before him, and in many respects a much

[1] See opening of Book II.

less difficult one, than the poet of the Victorian era. He had a very different divinity to dethrone and a very different public to deal with. The orthodoxy of our day occupies a sort of debatable ground liable to invasion on all sides, from theologians of every shade of belief and degree of enlightenment, and except on the broadest grounds, any attempt at religious unity—that miracle for which the world yet waits in vain—seems as hopeless a task as to seek for a pair of spectacles which will adjust themselves to the eyes of the entire human race. In the almost passionately religious age of Dante it was as likely that the poet should espouse the affirmative side of Christianity, as in the age of Lucretius it was likely he should embrace the materialistic and negative view, towards the worship of the gods of Greece. But what with the fresh revelations of Science and Criticism, and the contributions to both sides of the question from the reconsidered history of the whole past world, the positive and negative threads have got so intimately mixed and woven into the web of modern life, the question becomes a very difficult one. If we are not to tear the web to shreds we must needs be both resolute and tender, and firmly close our eyes to the fact that the scrupulously conscientious exponent, like the late Professor Maurice for example, is almost sure to be misunderstood between

those who believe too much and those who believe too little. No wonder that a poet like Mr. Arnold should cry out for the whole-hearted honesty and simplicity of apostolic times, in an age whose religious teachers in their ordination vows are asked to declare their 'unfeigned belief' in *quasi*-historical statements, which many of them in their heart would no more think of seriously accepting as fact, or attempt to prove to any fairly educated person, than they would think of accepting the truth of the Ptolemaic cosmogony, unfeignedly believing the geographical accuracy of the different circles in Dante's Hell, or substantiating the personal identity of Thor and Woden. And yet believers and teachers of this kind are found who in the holiest of situations will recite these so-called histories for solemn fact, and with (in their mouths) the altogether profane prologue of 'God spake these words.'

What good can possibly befall a religion in which this thinly crusted falsehood is not only accounted safe and respectable and pious, but he who dares to question the fact is looked upon as one of the suspected? The time is surely coming round again when the question Milton asked of the religion of his age, may be justly asked of ours, 'Do you think the Living God a buzzard idol?' It would almost seem so, or who would attempt to hood-

wink Him with a worship and subscription like this. Yes, in the atmosphere of the thirteenth century, it was easy, if not inevitable, that the poet should be religious, and in the decay of the Greek pantheon it was as easy and almost as inevitable he should be a sceptic. But in an age, much of whose creed is amorphous and impossible to define, and much more of it carefully concealed, but yet secretly hanging in painful and sickening suspense, it becomes exceedingly difficult to find a poetical exponent who can give the theological body of the time its form and pressure.

> Our poesy is as a gum, which oozes
> From whence 'tis nourished ;

and in order to be a complete exponent of the religious nourishment of the present day, a poet would need to be Lucretius and Dante in one : to have something like the democratic iconoclasm of Luther, and the conservative spirituality of A Kempis conjoined.

It is the possession of this double nature in so large a degree by Mr. Tennyson—the characteristic alone of the highest form of genius—the Socratean faculty of seeing both sides of a question with equal power, which has enabled him to become, in so important a sense the interpreter of the transitional character of the philosophy, religion, and to some extent the politics

of his time ; his power to stand on the debatable ground on which these questions are discussed, giving strong poetical form to each of the opposing factions, and yet remain himself untouched and untainted by what he would himself call 'the falsehood of extremes.'

This double-sided gift finds ample and subtle room for exercise in such a poem as 'The Two Voices,' and with such perfect fairness, one is almost at a loss sometimes to decide whether the pessimistic or the optomistic voice has the best of the philosophical duel. Again it is seen in the 'Palace of Art,' where the field is contested by self-sufficient culture against self-forgetful humility. In such a poem again as 'You ask me why so ill at ease,' the same faculty is employed to hold the balance even between the sober-suited and somewhat lifeless conservatism of settled government, and the licentious freedom which ends in anarchy and tyranny. In the 'Princess' the same twofold attitude is maintained against the extravagant theory, on the one hand, that would convert a woman into a kind of forbidding female man, and the equal unsoundness on the other side, that tends to keep her the mindless ornamental supernumerary which modern education so frequently turns her out. In 'In Memoriam' we meet the same double endowment in its richer and profounder aspect, in which the two voices

within the poet discuss under the shadow of death some of the darkest riddles of the world, and in a poem which has unquestionably given a prophetic solution to many of the problems which have vexed the poet's day.

Whether by accident, or by that rare intuition which belongs to the consummate artist by nature, we cannot tell, but the ground accepted by the poet in 'In Memoriam' on which to test the scepticism of his age could not have been better chosen. The trumpet of death sounds a truce to all petty differences and distinctions, whether mental or material. In the one event which happens to all there is a dreadful communism, a kind of butcherly disregard of the ordinary forms of society, which brings us all to a common level: 'Your fat king and your lean beggar are but two dishes to one table.' The presence of death in the poor man's house casts just as holy a shadow as it does in the rich, and the poet who addresses us from that platform speaks to us on the level of a universal fate, and on ground made sacred by a common sorrow and a common humanity. In such a situation the wisdom of 'the superior person' would be ludicrous if it were not something much worse. In such a house, at such a time, there is something more helpful to the heart in the unconscious prattle of the smallest child than all that the most perfect system of theology, or the

most careful creed-making pedagogue has ever yet discovered. Hence it is that in the august presence of

> The Shadow, cloaked from head to foot,
> Which keeps the keys of all the creeds,

the author of 'In Memoriam' has no favourite panacea to offer, and proposes no infallible tests by which the various problems the situation suggests may be finally set at rest. Nay, he goes further, and even takes the precaution of guarding the reader against any such misconception of the object he has in view, and tells him plainly :

> If these brief lays, of sorrow born,
> Were taken to be such as closed
> Grave doubts and answers here proposed,
> Then these were such as men might scorn.

If the poet in grappling with the scepticism of his age has acted wisely in thus declining any assistance from the orthodox weapons of the pulpit or conventicle, and has rather preferred to fall back upon those elementary principles and feelings which for the most part constitute the common basis of all the really operative creeds in existence, he has shown the same or perhaps greater wisdom in refusing the authority of that still more intolerable egotism issuing from the opposite quarter of materialistic science, which in his time has swelled into

almost papal proportions, and seeks to claim a final right of judgment in a field of study where the word 'finality' should be the only heresy, and where if faith be not progressive, it is only a lower modification of priestcraft. To condemn all philosophy as spurious except that which treats of the finite and the phenomenal; to believe nothing, and to worship nothing, except what lies within the radius of one's own observation, is to descend to the lowest and narrowest form of fetishism, the fetishism of self. The poet steers clear of both extremes; he does not speak to us as a school divine or a physicist, or as a doctrinaire of any sort, but as a man; and as the production of a man and not a specialist, the poem has its abiding value. That endless and ingenious fooling over the question as to which particular division of theological opinion Shakspeare favoured, is not wholly fruitless, since the very fruitlessness of the discussion goes to prove how utterly impossible it is for any really great genius to become the exponent of a party, or the mouthpiece of a faction. In 'In Memoriam' one cannot detect even between the lines a leaning towards one *ism* or another. The death that gave back again to the mind of his friend its elemental freedom, seems to have lifted his own above its earthly moorings and earthly tendencies; he battles on single-handed, and

beats his music out to an accompaniment in which neither the sophistries of science nor the casuistries of a half-hearted orthodoxy find any place. For such a task a brave and freedom-loving man was wanted, one that in his own phrase was ready to follow truth in scorn of consequence; and such a one the age has found in the author of 'In Memoriam.' The image of 'Freedom on her regal seat' has ever been one of the great sources of his inspiration, and since the days of Burns we have had no more passionate worshipper of the great goddess, and no such divine Promethean scorn of anything in the shape of the quasi-spiritual fetter. Like the friend he consecrates in his immortal elegy, 'he will not have his judgment blind,' and, speaking of himself, he tells us elsewhere how unendurable life would have been to him except in

> A land where, girt by friend or foe,
> A man may speak the thing he will.

That such a poem should have presented difficulties to the orthodox mind is perhaps not to be wondered at, and cannot be helped. Without absolute freedom from the fetters and restrictions of authoritative human codes, poetry of the highest kind is impossible. If much of the best poetry of the book of Job or the book of Psalms had not found a conventional shelter behind the ægis of

the authorised Canon, there would have been no more suggestive fields for the heresy-hunter than in the perplexed philosophy and probationary scepticism of the great poets who produced these works; and if the professional gauger of dogmatic truth has been unable to square off several passages in the 'In Memoriam' with the received standard of the particular sect to which he belongs, there are many, on the other hand, who are of opinion, that if the poem has troubled Israel at all, it has troubled it as the angel troubled the waters at Bethesda, so that those who come to wash therein find strength and refreshing to their souls. In common with the sacred writers above mentioned, who left orthodoxy to take care of itself, the poet, in giving battle to his own doubts, and expression to his own sorrow, has lifted up 'a cloud of nameless trouble' from many a weary and darkened life, and the poem will not hold any less sure or less grateful a place in the memory of men, because it is not built upon the set lines of any doctrinal system, but rather, clearing itself from all such earthly lendings, stands out to the eyes of the imagination a spiritual Camelot—

> built
> To music, therefore never built at all,
> And therefore built for ever.

# MYSTICISM AND MODERN POETRY

## *MYSTICISM AND MODERN POETRY.*

If mysticism, like sublimity, be not Hebrew by birth, it is at all events not English. The characteristic more strongly marked than any other in 'the tongue that Shakspeare spake'—as Wordsworth called that glorious vehicle of ours—is perhaps its forcible and terse directness, and the facility it affords in either speaker or writer for the exercise of that eminently English faculty called 'coming to the point.' Of the nation too, as well as the language, one may safely risk the assertion that mysticism is entirely out of character. The French proverb, 'Ce qui n'est pas clair, n'est pas Français,' applies if possible even more forcibly to English than to French. How it should have come to pass then, notwithstanding these peculiarities of race and language, and in an age, too, whose matter-of-fact utilitarianism has been both well marked and well abused, that such large proportions of that branch of our literature in which we are supposed to rival the best productions of any other nation, should come to exhibit so much that is supersubtle in manner

and enigmatical in thought, is not very easily explained. Whether it is that our poetical best—as Mr. Ruskin has asserted, and Mr. Carlyle more than hinted—has been already achieved, or whether it is that civilisation has a tendency to blunt, and in a certain sense to vulgarise, the faculty of wonder, or that the poetical faculty itself is defective in our day, may be hard to determine, but the fact indisputably remains, that much of what has been offered to the present generation as poetry differs from what has been hitherto accepted by English-speaking people as highest of its kind, and that difference is largely attributable to the introduction of an intricate and perplexed phraseology, and an amount of ingenious excogitation presenting difficulties to the ordinary reader of poetry he has not hitherto been asked to overcome, and which the majority of readers will not willingly encounter twice. That such poetry is pretty widely read is not to be denied. Anyone taking ordinary notice of what is going on around him—in books and out of them—must have frequently come across specimens of a growing class of readers who indulge a feeling of exclusive and exceptional superiority, by affecting a sympathy with a range of thought or a set of principles—in literature or art, as the case may be—which they would fondly have you believe, in their well-worn idiom, is 'caviare to the general.'

Critics of this sort usually discover themselves by an undignified solicitude lest they should be mixed up in any way with the groundlings, or indeed classed in any lower category than that of the enlightened minority they suppose the poet to have comprehended in the phrase 'fit audience, though few.' The pleasing illusion of their critical superiority to the rest of the world has been nursed into a kind of monomania; and if you will only humour them so far as to permit them to believe themselves the occupants of some fancied judgment-seat a little higher than their fellows, and from which they can look down with infinite complacency on what they delight to call the British Public, the amount of amusement to be got out of them is practically unlimited. It is from this class, we imagine, that the great majority of the readers and admirers of our enigmatical poetry is recruited, and in fact the style of criticism has grown up with, and partly grown out of, the style of poetry.

We do not of course doubt that 'the fit and few' are always, more or less, represented in every age. That 'eternal public,' as Mr. Emerson calls it, which selects and hands down from generation to generation all that is worth preserving in literature, is ever with us. It does not follow, however, that we believe in a monopoly of that august function by any class of critics, who, eager

for the office, may choose to declare—sometimes rather loudly, and sometimes in an even more oracular whisper—that 'they are the people.' On the contrary, we suspect that the members of that unseen court are seldom demonstrative, seldomer still obtrusive, and never self-elected. The literature that conforms to the dictation of a clique—be it poetry or prose—is not likely to be of permanent value. At best, it will only catch the applause of the hour, by and by to fall beneath the riper verdict of time.

Perhaps the best means of arriving at the value of much of the mysterious poetry of modern times would be to compare it with what has already passed this final judgment bar, and by this test—unless the 'eternal public' has materially changed its mode of summing up—we are inclined to question whether much of it will stand examination. At the outset, however, let us guard against being misunderstood.

In poetry, and especially in English poetry, which is more deeply imbued with a moral and even a religious element than that of almost any other country, it is not to be denied that much which is mysterious is inevitably so. What Wordsworth calls

> The weary weight
> Of all this unintelligible world

is not to be shuffled off merely because we may not like the burden. We are not asked whether or not we shall accept it. It is already ours. Nor is it advisable that we should vex ourselves in the attempt to throw it off. The Power that sees from end to end of what appears in our eyes but the ravelled skein of life, probably sees good reasons for the arrangement, though these reasons may be to us as inscrutable as the dispensation itself. Let it not, then, be supposed that our objections extend to mystery in this sense, or that we have any sympathy with that easy and empty scepticism that laughs at everything it does not understand. Speaking of material things, it is, or ought to be, easy enough to be perfectly clear, but in that class of subjects belonging to the spiritual or moral world, and in which poetry so largely deals, it may not be so easy to define with exactness. No; as long as the proportion of human knowledge is but a drop in the ocean of the unknown and the unknowable, as well try to put a door on the curiosity of a child as to attempt to shut out mystery. It has its own true functions and its own high uses, from which it would be wrong, even if it were possible, to displace it; and, moreover, in an age where it is thrust down by the formalism of a hard and passionless utility, which freezes up its natural channels, and robs it of its legitimate object and action, it is sure to burst out

in some wild unhallowed way, a fact our modern insanities, revivals, spiritisms, pilgrimages, and the like, have very abundantly proved. No ; man does not, will not, can not, live by the bread alone that ministers to his animal necessities, nor even that which satisfies his reason only. The stamp of his Maker is not so lost upon him yet but that out of the ruins of his nature he will turn with a kind of heavenly home-sickness, an irrepressible upward instinct, towards that interest of which his highest nature is capable—call that interest what you will, religion, poetry, art, philosophy. Deprive him of *that*, and life is a failure. Without *that*, life is but a vulgar pack-horse, dragging a dead body behind it. Mystery is inevitable. All human knowledge is so poor and partial ; none of us know how poor and how partial until we have gone through with life, and, wakening on the other side with death-anointed eyes, find what children we have been, even in our farthest-sighted wisdom. The truths disclosed to the most gifted, to genius itself, to the prophets of God, are but as the passing glimpses of the heavens one gets in a windy night between the rifts of closing cloud.

But it is not God's unknown we quarrel with. On the contrary, life would hardly be endurable without it ; without that undying soul's-hunger, that cries after the un-

known, and lives upon the faith and hope of one day seeing it face to face. Not God's luminous cloud that leads us upwards and onwards, but the presumptuous cloud of earth is what we cannot away with ; that wretched ambition which would add a mystery of man's own making to that which is already inseparable from our condition as mortals.

Although obscurity is no new grievance against the poets, we doubt much if there ever was a time in which the charge could be more justly made than our own, or in which the indictment could be more circumstantially supported in detail by direct reference to examples. This, of course, would entail an amount of personality one naturally shrinks from, and luckily such a course is not necessary in order to prove the general question. The mischief of obscurity has been so dexterously shaded into our modern poetry, and has come hand in hand with so much of what is exquisitely beautiful, that it is hardly possible to trace it back to any definite and particular source. It would perhaps approximate the truth most nearly, however, to say that the modern renaissance of the mystical element had its source in the writings of Coleridge—a mysticism quite as conspicuous in his prose as in his poetry.

That power of the poet which can tempt us towards

the flood of the unknown, and that keeps us, in spite of ourselves, hovering about

> The dreadful summit of the cliff
> That beetles o'er his base into the sea ;

those thoughts of his that

> Dodge
> Conception to the very bourne of heaven,
> Then leave the naked brain ;

the power that verges upon the incommunicable, that lifts us out of ourselves and puts us under a weird enchantment, will ever be amongst the most attractive of his characteristics. Never was this power more successfully exercised than by the author of the 'Ancient Mariner' and 'Christabel,' and but for the existence of Coleridge's writings, some of the most prominent characteristics of our living poets would be awanting. While paying all homage to the genius of Coleridge, it may be nevertheless useful to keep in mind that the over-applauded use of one generation is apt to become the abuse of the next, so that the natural magic that drained these mystical masterpieces of almost everything like human interest, and hung them like bloodless transparencies between heaven and earth, has perhaps had more influence on the poetry of the present generation than is good for it, or good for its readers. No one, of course, suspects Coleridge of

anything like the affectation of obscurity. By the necessity of his idiosyncrasy all products of his brain must have more or less been characterised by this unique ethereality. Nothing went through that crucible but seemed to undergo a subtle rarefaction.

Mr. Rossetti talks about the tenuity of his mental substance; but it is more than tenuity. There is an almost spectral absence of solidity in much of the very best he ever utters. His luminosity derives nothing from the clearness usually accompanying matters of fact, but is rather the unearthly light that makes ghostly things transparent.

Under the spell of his words, one is almost tempted to exclaim with Peona, in the 'Endymion,'

> Brother, 'tis vain to hide
> That thou dost know of things mysterious,
> Immortal, starry!

After Shelley there is no poet of modern times that has less about him of the earth, earthy, and it is this ethereal sublimation of thought that will keep his words alive, when stronger thought than his shall be forgotten. In such a case, then, it was not to be wondered at that he should have been frequently charged with obscurity, nor did it seem to surprise the poet himself that such an accusation should be made. In answer to the charge, he

coolly declares, in the Preface to the third edition (1803) of the 'Juvenile Poems,' that 'the deficiency is in the reader,' and that 'the charge is one that every poet whose imagination is warm and rapid must expect from his contemporaries.' 'Milton,' he continues, 'did not escape it, and it was adduced with virulence against Gray and Collins.' And he haughtily concludes, 'If any man expect from my poems the same easiness of style he admires in a drinking song, for him I have not written.' Coleridge, in a letter to his friend Cottle, makes a curious confession on the subject. 'So much for an Ode,' he writes, alluding to the ode to the departing year, 'which some people think superior to the "Bard" of Gray, and which others think a rant of turgid obscurity. It is not obscure. '*My Religious Musings, I know are*, but not this Ode.' Whether or not Coleridge should have the credit of resuscitating the modern mystical school, there is no doubt that poetry of the mystical and obscure style has, since his day, been to a considerable extent the fashion. To say that poetry worth the name is ever a thing of fashion would sound almost profane, had it not always been more or less the case. Humiliating as the fact may appear, the genius that draws its inspiration, as one would fondly believe, more directly than all others from the heavens, is not uninfluenced by the goddess

that bears rule over a very different kingdom. Spenser's 'Fairy Queen' became so much the rage in its time, and was so much applauded in high quarters—the style being encouraged by Elizabeth herself—that a satirist of that age tells us that it had become the fashion for poets to fall asleep and dream about fairies, and the worst of it was that, to a man, they all awoke, rubbed their eyes, and insisted on printing their tale. Cowper, again, in the 'Table Talk,' speaking of Pope, complains

> That he (his musical finesse was such,
> So nice his ear, so delicate his touch)
> Made poetry a mere mechanic art,
> And every warbler has his tune by heart.

With Mr. Tennyson's influence abroad, who will deny it is as much the case in our day? The poet, indeed, rebukes it himself, in that weakish little poem he calls 'The Flower.' It is not unfrequently the unhappy fate of genius to live to see its philosophy, and even its manner, caricatured. The weakness of an undoubted master becomes a very insufferable vice in his imitator. The most exalted manner of a true leader such as Coleridge, or our own poets Mr. Browning or Mr. Tennyson, or Mr. Carlyle in prose, is often only mere mouthing in the disciple, who, for the most part, even

where he does not know it, is but the victim of a literary fashion.

And yet, insufferable as the vice is in the mere imitator, the original fault lies more justly at the door of those leaders in poetry who have themselves gone further into the region of mystery, and even mystification, than can be easily justified. In the career of every successful artist there seems to be a period reached at which the temptation to indulge in puzzling eccentricities is almost irresistible. An artist whose genius is proved beyond question, and who has acquired a perfect mastery over the implements of his art, is apt to be tempted into such a use of these implements as will dazzle and confound rather than simply gratify his former admirers. If the artist be a musician, when the temptation comes on he will probably launch out into such rhapsodical compositions as shall be barely within the possibility of execution, and when, with much labour, executed, are not to be understood—far less appreciated—except by a mere handful of the *cognoscenti*. If he be a musical executant himself, the craze will take a different form, and he will probably seek to astonish his audience by his performance on one string. If he be a painter, he will strive to produce some of those immortal works which Thackeray once suggested might be hung

upside down, just to see the effect. If a poet, he will writhe upon the tripod, and in the interval of his spasmodic inspirations will give to airy nothing such an embodiment of words as in the ears of nine-tenths of his audience shall be little better than incomprehensible gibberish. The delusion is not commonly one that overtakes an artist at the commencement of his career. If it does, it is generally fatal, and, if in such a case the victim of the delusion be not sufficiently loved of the gods to die young, he is forced back into obscurity, to curse the critics for the remainder of his life, and to find—as he probably will—a kind of highflown satisfaction in believing himself misunderstood, and in pitying the idiotic world for its obtuseness.

But this liability to run off at a tangent, as we have said, is one that more readily besets the artist whose fame is established. It is the disease of advanced and proven genius. It seems to grow out of previous success, and to be aggravated by previous praise. Perhaps this very same praise, or at least that malarious variety of it which Shakspeare says 'doth nourish agues,' may have something to do with it. Certain it is, that some of the most loudly applauded seem to have fallen most readily into the trap.

Paganini was admittedly the greatest artist that ever

played on four strings, before he indulged in those impossible *arpeggios* on one. Turner was already the greatest painter of his time before he gave the world those prismatic nightmares no one could make anything of. Beethoven was not proof against the temptation. He confesses to having loaded some of his compositions with technical tricks and difficulties on purpose to *flabrigast* some of his envious friends in Vienna. Mr. Browning again—to come more closely to our subject—was already an accepted poet of his age, with a fame well rooted in every judgment worth considering, before he attempted to entertain us with the ill-conditioned and perplexed philosophy of 'Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau,' or the intricate metaphysics of 'Fifine.' In fact, Mr. Browning's later poems afford a very interesting parallel to those later works of Turner—those produced in his maëlstrom period—when he indulged in quotations from the 'Fallacies,' and painted such exploded whirlpools of colour as 'The Whaler, Erebus'; or 'The Exile and the Rock Limpet.' The works of both masters present many features in common. The substantial drawing, the binding anatomy, and the natural perspective of such works is lost in a supersubtle efflorescence of colour-words. The objective genius is over-ridden by the subjective—the poem and the picture sacrificed to the craze

of the poet and the painter. They groan under the weight of what M. Taine would call 'the hypertrophy of the *ego*.' Mr. Ruskin declared that Turner painted the souls of pictures. It would hardly be less instructive to say that Mr. Browning has attempted to write the souls of poems; and it is just this ingenious introspective hunting for the souls of things, regardless of their definite form and body, that is so apt to result in works which seem to please only the *petits comités* of Art, and by the very same reason must be cancelled from that broader category of things that are fitted for human nature's daily food.

It would be useless, because not quite true, to say such poems and pictures want genius, and yet safe enough to predict that ten times more genius than they possess would not make them meritorious productions, or compensate for their monstrous unreality. Some of the earlier of Browning's poems are not less perfect and not less Rembrandtesque in their severe simplicity than those earlier pictures of Turner, from which we may select 'The Mill' as a well-known and representative example; and the leap from that picture to the 'Rock Limpet' is not more easily accounted for than that between two such poems as 'The Lost Leader' and 'Fifine.'

Unfortunately for the author or artist, these very

eccentricities, while they do almost nothing for his subsequent fame, seem to take more out of him than the works in which his immortality is rooted. Goethe declared that the second part of 'Faust'—another of the unsolved riddles of genius—cost him more than the first. Perhaps the confession may partly account for its costing the average reader so much more.

If intricacy and elaboration, and the mastering of any amount of technical difficulty in detail, could satisfactorily prove the possession of genius, the case might stand different; but this can hardly be admitted, except, indeed, upon the paradox of the French proverb, which assures us that simplicity is charming, but there is nothing so difficult.

The critic should not, however, conceal from himself that these eccentricities are very often the overgrowths of genius in excess, and that the one unpardonable sin in Art is defect. Nor should we forget—and it may be argued with great plausibility—that this charge of incoherence and partial incomprehensibility has been laid to some of the greatest works on their first appearance. Any sudden originality coming from a quarter—and in a form perhaps—unlooked for, if it should even be the herald of a much-needed reform in Art, is apt to find the world off its guard a little, and the tardy recognition which has

been afforded to some of the most important works should help us to moderate our judgments. It may not always be the fault of the artist, be he painter, or poet, or musician; eyes and ears may be awanting. You may complain of an artist that you do not understand him, but he can turn round upon you with the Johnsonian retort, 'Sir, I am not accountable for your understanding.' In the world of Art a man sees and hears no more than what he brings with him the power to see and hear, and it does not at all follow as an invariable *sequitur* that there is nothing else to see and hear. It is at all times rather a dangerous thing in Art for a man to accept the plane of his own thought and emotion as the plane of all other sensible persons, although the thing is done now and then. A critic once objected to a painter's work because, he declared, he saw no such colours in Nature. 'I dare say not,' replied the artist; 'you never see such colours, *but what would you give to see them?*' Depend upon it it is only your self-complacent *flaneur*, with a copious vocabulary of the readiest slang of Art, and an overweening belief in his own culture, and who, on the strength of his own vote, has probably returned himself among the *fine fleur*, to whom nothing further can be taught—it is only he who can afford to forget that, after all, there may be a little more beauty in the world than

has yet been dreamt of in his philosophy. Especially does this hold good in poetry. When Thackeray's Mr. Yellowplush informs us, in his characteristic way, that it is 'generally best in poetry to understand puffickly what you mean yourself, and to igspress your meaning clearly afterwards, in the simpler words the better p'r'aps,' it would be a mistake not to admit that there is a good deal of wholesome truth as well as humour in what he says; but would it not be quite as great a mistake to conclude, on the other hand, that the Pythian prophetess must be an idiot and her oracles mere raving, on no better ground than that they appear to be so in the critical discernment of Mr. Yellowplush? In this instance Thackeray's wit is double-edged, and cuts equally well both ways, as wit is apt to do; while, on the one hand, he has a lunge at the incomprehensible poets, he, on the other, administers quite as severe a rebuke to that large portion of the critical public who accept the Yellowplush standard as final. A much greater than Yellowplush,[1] or Yellowplush's literary sponsor either, has recorded his opinion that 'a poetical production is all the better for being incommensurable to reason.' Certainly had poetry admitted no other subjects within her magic circle but such as lie fairly within the apprehension of unassisted reason, some of her choicest fruits would have

[1] Goethe.

been as yet unharvested ; if, as Pascal so grandly says, 'the heart has reasons that reason does not know,' surely, then, so has the imagination. In short, to talk of limiting poetry to those subjects we perfectly understand (and these are fewer than are commonly supposed) would simply be to talk nonsense ; those facts or feelings most capable of exact definition are by no means those most susceptible of poetical treatment ; on the contrary, they are hardly necessary to Art. Simple fact and the definition of simple fact, no matter how exquisite the thing defined, if it suggest nothing more, is essentially prose. Strike the fundamental note of a stretched string, say low C, on the piano, and if you listen attentively you will hear its harmonics—its octave, its fifth or dominant, and so on, faintly answering it back. This exactly illustrates the value of a poetical utterance as compared with one of mere prose. Strike the prose note, and it announces nothing but itself ; strike a note of true poetry, and its harmonics rise up to meet you, all round about in endless suggestion. It is just those relations of life unseen of reason, those rivers of thought that are fathomless to man, where poetry has her perfect scope : she lives in an atmosphere where exact definition would be idiotic were it possible, and without that atmosphere she could no more mount than a bird could soar in a vacuum ; and why

attempt to ignore these imponderable and incommensurable relations by which we are surrounded on every side? We live upon impalpable things, are governed by imponderable forces, whether we will or no.

Is the idea of God any less an over-ruling one because we find it impossible to prove experimentally the very existence of God? Does the law of gravitation become less an object of our special wonder, or does it impress the imagination less grandly in its action, because we can neither see, nor hear, nor handle it? Is the atmosphere we breathe any less the breath of our nostrils because it is inhaled by a perfectly independent and involuntary process, and one of which our reason takes no account? Are these bodies of ours any the less fearfully or wonderfully made because the secret of organic life defies analysis; and that hunt the secret as we will,

> ——lay life's house bare to its inmost room
> With lens and scalpel,

as a recent singer puts it—we turn from the study of it only to meet the stony eyes of an imperturbable sphinx upon us yet, with the secret as far off and as inscrutable as ever? No; our incomprehensible surroundings are just those we could do worst without, and our faith in them—the evidence of things not seen, the belief that goes beyond the fact, in things not positively provable—

is, after all, of most account to us, and by far the most indispensable for all purposes of Art. In short, we are the mere fools of our senses till we have found out that there is nothing so real as what we are accustomed to call the unreal.

For all the higher uses of poetry, the things about us that are palpable and seen and temporal are only valuable in so far as they possess for us the power of suggesting those other things which are unseen and eternal.

And yet, although poetry must frequently deal with thoughts that lie beyond us, and address us in words whose significance is not to be fully appreciated except by other ears than those of flesh and blood, it does not necessarily follow that it should utter any such uncertain sound as shall bring it under a charge of obscurity. On the contrary, sublimity itself is mostly simple, and as a natural complement perplexity is never sublime. If it be true, as the French say, that '*La netteté est le vernis des maîtres*,' those who are deficient in the quality may be safely classed among the *petit-maîtres*. It is the unintelligent for the most part that are unintelligible, and one is thankful to remember that it is recorded of Him who knew all mysteries, and who spake as never man spake, that the common people heard Him gladly. Not unfrequently the very highest poetical gift, 'of imagination all

compact,' 'the vision and the faculty divine,' has been the endowment of a nature almost childlike in its simplicity. Admitting, however, that this most desirable simplicity has been carelessly and even wilfully disregarded by many of our modern poets, it might be worth while to enquire how far the reader may be justly held responsible for this state of things, and to what extent he has it in his power to correct the abuse. The reform, we imagine, must rather come through the altered taste of the consumer of this unhealthy mental condiment than the supplier of it. Beyond doubt a great deal of obscurity is permitted to exist merely because it is unchallenged. A great many shrink from questioning what to them is unintelligible, or only half intelligible, for no better reason than that by so doing they fear to draw upon themselves a doubt of their own intellectual sufficiency; and writers such as Mr. Browning and Mr. Tennyson have many admirers who appreciate and understand them much less completely than they would have it believed. Their zeal is by no means according to knowledge, and many a hundred who dote upon these writers would be plucked beyond a question on a very slender examination in their works.

Now this cowardly insincerity, bred partly of a fear of being considered stupid, and partly of a kind of fashionable terror of what would-be-clever people call common-

place, is neither a credit to admirers nor admired—just, indeed, the kind of fame we should fancy such men as Mr. Browning and Mr. Tennyson praying to be dilivered from. And verily the god who accepts such homage is a god indeed—we mean, of course, the wooden variety with the little *g*—and his worshippers are worthy of him. Away with such moral cowardice! Let us rather be ten times stupid, in the eyes of fashion, than once false to our own judgment. There is nothing good that is not entirely honest. Better for a man that all the world should grin at him for ever, than that, failing in honesty, God should laugh him to scorn but only once.

While perfectly ready, then, to condemn anything like unnecessary difficulty in the writer, it may, at the same time, be only fair in some cases to grant him certain concessions, in consideration of the altered conditions of the present-day reader to whom he addresses himself.

Among the changes that have taken place in recent times, and especially since the introduction of cheap daily papers and multitudinous periodicals, nothing perhaps has undergone a more complete revolution than the character of the general reader; in fact, the modern superabundance of these transitory forms of literature has largely developed a new type of reader altogether. The reader who 'takes in'—as the phrase goes—the special

'organ,' or organs, that reflect his own opinions, that clench his own convictions, and who takes them in and pays for them because they do so, and who on that account can nearly anticipate everything he reads, naturally enough gets to sit rather uneasy towards any kind of reading that makes a new and unexpected demand upon his attention. Writing that is not to be judged as money's worth because it reflects either this or that man's opinion, but founds its claim for attention upon a quality he is totally unaccustomed to consider, is apt to appear to him, upon the whole, as rather an impertinence. It is no wonder that a poet like Mr. Browning, or, indeed, poetry of any kind, should puzzle such a reader.

A certain amount of repose is essential to the appreciation of any Art production, and that repose such a reader does not bring. He is preoccupied; and if the world's high pressure and preoccupation continue to increase for the next thirty years in anything like the ratio it has done for the thirty years behind us, we suspect that, long before the expiry of that time, poetry, as well as the other arts, will probably have succumbed to the one divine and all-absorbing art of 'getting on,' and the more generous instincts of human nature will have retired in favour of the holier claims of number One, and the instinct of self-preservation. We mention Mr. Browning,

not that we mean to deny his obscurity, far less make any attempt to justify it. Mr. Browning has proved beyond dispute that he can express himself with an incisive simplicity rarely equalled in the English language, and for that reason alone, were there no other, we deny that his difficulties of diction are to be justified on any ground ; but Mr. Browning is not to be judged, as he too frequently is, as if he were one of the common run of obscure writers. The slipshod generalities that are held sufficient to knock over your weakling mystic do not fit his case at all. There is no mysticism about him ; on the contrary, he has a trick sometimes of being rather coarsely realistic. His difficulties for the greater part admit of a grammatical, or, at least, a constructional solution ; with him it is no defect of sight or sense, but syntax. Reading some of his later poems, one comes across one of these long heterogeneous sentences, so perfectly congested with parenthesis, and packed with subordinate clauses, that the difficulty assumes the exact character of listening to half-a-dozen people speaking to you at the same time. His subtle and abrupt inversions, his use of adverbs and participles in such a way as leaves you in doubt what he intends them to qualify, and his habit of getting along with certainly not more than half the articles and conjunctions other people deem necessary, are amongst the

worst of his faults; but these are not the defects of a mystic.

We confess we have always considered the criticism that sets down Mr. Browning as obscure—in the mystical sense—to be superficial, and based upon a hasty misconception of his genius. His peculiar domain is so much his own, and, like all strong self-asserting genius, he gives such a buffet to convention, that many men turn away at the very threshold of his enchanted palace who, would they but exercise a little patience, might live to be ashamed of their hasty first impressions. The loss, however, is theirs, not his. Admitted his language is strange enough sometimes—all strong originality must ever be more or less so—gnarled and rugged as Nature herself, but then it is Nature's rich and rugged abundance, and no sickly defect, that obscures his pages. The unchecked copiousness of his imagination sometimes veils too much the light that glides beneath it, like a southern stream that sings beneath the overshadowing fertility its own waters have fed to such strange overgrowth. But there is another difficulty; his genius does not only draw from the abundance of a rich imagination, but from a field of actual and minute knowledge altogether unprecedented in poetry, and this we suspect is the great barrier. You can hardly open his books without finding

an illustration of what we mean. He gathers both his information and his imagery from an acquaintance with subjects too minute and technical ever to be popular in any wide sense. Not unfrequently he seems to write intentionally and exclusively for students and artists, and to him who does not care to study, the poet may use Coleridge's words without the slightest disrespect, 'for him I do not write.'

As a poetical exponent of Art, Mr. Browning simply stands alone. Apart from all questions as to the extent of his gift, he is, in this respect at least, unique. No poet has ever attempted to draw from information at once so complete and detailed on the subject of painting as Browning has done in such poems as 'Andrea del Sarto,' 'Fra Lippo Lippi,' or 'Pictor Ignotus.' The same in sculpture, and again in music: 'Hugues of Saxe-Gotha' or 'Abt Vogler' could not possibly have been conceived, except by a musician. Such poems are like the discovery of a new Art medium. In the English language there is almost nothing *in kind* wherewith to compare them, and this is no doubt a principal reason why such poems are found to be obscure.

Those of us who have been to school in the Laureate's gentle reign—those who, so to speak, have sat at the feet of the poet, and are to the manner born in his philosophy

—may, from long habit, aye, and long affection, be partly blinded to his faults. In the full blaze of his fame, they have been swallowed up, to rise again perhaps with the slow sure judgment of time, and we only allude to them here because the history of the early criticism of the poet's works is inseparably connected with our subject. We are well aware that there are many who are ready to condemn as antiquated the criticism that admits he has any fault at all, and will set down the critic at once as belonging to what they designate, with infinite scorn, 'the old school.' But, admitting that much of the early criticism of Mr. Tennyson's poetry was false and short-sighted, there might be a seed of truth in it nevertheless, and the poet's own testimony may be cited to support the view that there was. To anyone acquainted with the bibliography of our great poet, we need hardly point out that he affords us one of the brightest examples of a poet benefiting by his critics; and a minute examination of his corrected readings shows that he has learned, and wisely so, less from those who have praised than from those who have censured him. The self-sufficient bigotry that sees absolutely nothing in the argument of an intelligent opposition does not see far on any side, and finds no sympathy in the many-sided nature of a true poet.

Never has artist laboured with a more scrupulous conscientiousness to present his work faultless, and purge it of all imperfection, than Mr. Tennyson has done—so much so, indeed, that in some instances he is fastidious to a fault. In some of his corrections on the early readings, the reader finds it impossible to shake himself clear of the old love, even though he approve of the new, and is often forced to reconcile himself as best he may to the questionably moral attitude of the hero in Gay's opera, who whispers love on the one side while he squeezes a hand on the other. Those, then, who affect to believe the Laureate's poetry to be beyond criticism have not the poet's own countenance for that belief. There are, we know, many young men of that class characterised by Pope, 'who think their fathers fools, so wise they grow,' who affect to pity anyone finding any difficulty in Mr. Tennyson, and who would make this very difficulty an additional article in their amiable, but not very reasonable creed. Such admirers, however, are not among the true supporters of the poet. No poet is famous, nor is his poetry beautiful, by reason of its difficulties, but in spite of them. Objections that come from intelligent quarters —their soundness or unsoundness apart—deserve to be carefully weighed. Men who have a keen and critical sense of the beauty of Shakspeare and Milton, even with

the disadvantage of having been our 'fathers'—a fact, *per se*, they may not be much inclined to boast of—should be listened to with attention, even where we suppose them to be mistaken. 'Miss not the discourse of the elders,' says the wise son of Sirach. The very prejudices of such men are seldom without some ground in reason, and carry a valuable lesson, not to be found elsewhere, for those whose determined good temper enables them to hear out such objections dispassionately and with patience. It would serve truth infinitely better were we to give them, even in such cases, all the filial respect they are entitled to, though we are afraid this view will appear more old-school than ever. But never mind; the whirligig of time brings about its revenges, and the old school may some day come to be the new one.

We have often thought we should like to try the following experiment on these clever young men:—We shall take half a dozen of them, each provided with a pen and a sheet of paper. We should then read them a passage from the poet, short enough not to tax the memory—and we could find many passages in the 'In Memoriam' to suit our purpose—and after the reading, each clever young man for himself, and without a word from the others, shall write down a plain prose version,

giving what he conceives to be the poet's meaning. If the result, or rather the six results, have anything in common further than that they are all written on white paper by clever young men, you may call our experiment a failure. But let the clever young men take care that the result does not prove five out of the six of them to be—well, not so clever as they thought themselves. The experiment is one easily tried, and those who know the amusing game of Russian Scandal will readily perceive what fun may be had out of it. Let us not be misunderstood, however. We do not accept the probable result of such an experiment as at all conclusive evidence against the poet, however conclusive it might prove to be against a good many of the poet's loudest admirers. The highest poetry cannot always be explained by anything but itself—nay, the poet who confesses, with the exquisite naïveté of Hogg, that 'he doesna aye ken himsel' what he means,' may yet mean a great deal. The highest poetry, like the highest art everywhere, possesses an inarticulate power as well as an articulate one, and has the gift of projecting itself into a region where speech dies and leaves behind it a soul of meaning that cannot be uttered.

It ought to be remembered that anyone finding Mr. Tennyson obscure and mystical does not join issue with

his adverse critics more than with his friends, although the young men spoken of seem to have forgotten the fact, or, to be more charitable, have perhaps never taken the trouble to know it. Some of the early notices of his poems, such as Prof. Wilson's article in 'Blackwood;' the first notice in the 'Quarterly' (it changed its opinion in subsequent articles); Lord Lytton's attack in 'The New Timon'; and, perhaps, more than all, Coleridge's strictures on his bad metres! are amongst the best pronounced cases of blind and blundering criticism the century has produced. Since Gifford worried poor Keats to death, by running his indiscriminate tusks into the sweet white flesh of young Endymion, the age has had nothing more coarsely uncritical. These go for nothing —but what say his friends? John Stuart Mill, one of his earliest favourable critics, warns the poet against 'disporting himself among mystics.'

The 'Edinburgh Review' in 1837, whilst admitting him a true poet, confesses it does not understand some of his verses. Again, his great eulogist, and a true critic, George Brimley, tells us that he often met with persons of 'unquestioned talent and good taste' who declared they found the poet obscure and affected. Even Wordsworth himself, according to Emerson, charged him with affectation. The supposed necessity also of such a help

as the 'Analysis of "In Memoriam,"' by Robertson of Brighton, himself a man of wonderful imagination, and even of Dr. Mann's pamphlet, 'Maud Vindicated: an Explanatory Essay,' certainly both point in the same direction, and not the less strongly that they both had the poet's approval, the former being dedicated to him by permission, the latter receiving his written thanks.

It can hardly be said, then, that this fault of obscurity is the complaint of his adverse critics only. In short, we may safely take the assertion of those who find no difficulty at all in such a poem as 'In Memoriam' in nine cases out of ten to be affectation. We do not admit, however, the necessity of such explanation as Robertson's. The poetry that speaks to a man in his own mother-tongue and still needs an interpreter can never be worthy of the name. Those who cannot appreciate the poet without such help will hardly do so with it. Mysticism of a certain kind is an inseparable and indigenous feature of the intellectual school, of which Mr. Tennyson is the chiefest apostle and the truly representative man; and it is not with the intention of finding fault with it that the subject is here introduced, for we do not hold that in his case we can have him without it, or that in him it amounts to a real mischief. His genius, moreover, possesses to fulness that inarticulate power we have spoken of as

characterising true poetry. What we desire to do is rather to point out the mischief that would inevitably follow upon a further development of his manner—without his matter—by those poets who take their cue from him, and who think they have caught the prophet's genius, when they have only caught the mantle. In this direction there is but one step from the sublime to the ridiculous. One step further in the direction Mr. Tennyson sometimes leads us, and we reach the point at which conception stands still. Some of his creations, such as the 'Lady of Shalott' and the 'Lotos Eaters,' from which all human element has been nearly drained away, possess an ethereal beauty of such gossamer consistency as to be just within the possibility of conception—no more, so that anyone going further in the same direction must weave the wind. What we complain of is, that this step is being continually attempted, and a school of poets has arisen with whom mysticism appears to be an intentional specialty: an affected, imitation mysticism, for, being a fashion in most cases, it goes no deeper than manner—a school which, unfortunately, finds too ready an audience, for it is a characteristic of this much applauded nineteenth century—a characteristic well worth taking note of, and which seems to hold good from paste beads to poetry—that the imitation in everything has sometimes a much

readier sale than the real article ; the counterfeit finding an easy acceptance, when the thing itself looks bleak in the cold wind—a school which seems to encourage the belief in its disciples that mysticism is a necessity of true poetry ; an assumption that can never be too emphatically repelled. When mysticism falls from being the crasis of the man, and becomes the mere fashion or trick of the school, the chances are that it is no longer the veil over what is in itself beautiful and profound, but rather the mist that magnifies feebleness.

And yet there are readers who accept such writing with readiness, and seem to get some sort of satisfaction out of it. There are people to whom everything seems to become trivial as soon as it is perfectly comprehended by them. For a truth that is quite clear and evident they at once cease to have any veneration ; they treat it, however sacred, with a kind of vulgar familiarity, and, if enunciated from other lips than their own, they not unfrequently affect to despise it as an exploded truism, no longer of any value. With them the proverb of '*omne ignotum pro magnifico*' holds good, for they seem to respect nothing but what they cannot comprehend.

The poet of this school who dares to call a spade a spade is at once voted one of the vulgar. He writes what anyone can understand ; he will never do !—whilst

the man of circuitous speech and doubtful intelligibility, the man who will drape his platitudes in a studied ingenuity, in order to tickle the ears of the educated vulgar, is taken upon trust, and becomes the hero of the initiated few, who accept his mysticism for a divine manifestation, even where they cannot understand him. No cloister-bleached mediæval dreamer ever carried mysticism to a more extravagant pass than some of those poets we speak of. They have fairly overshot the policy of that doctor of divinity who, in order to keep up his character for profundity, made it a point to have at least one sentence in every sermon his congregation could make nothing of. Those who have given any attention to this kind of writing know well that it would be no exaggeration to say that pages of it might be quoted that, for ordinary readers, contain, on an average, a gleam of intelligence in about every tenth line, and in some cases passages so utterly incoherent that to all rational appearances they might have been concocted in Bedlam by one of the inmates for the entertainment of his fellow-sufferers in bondage, so literally do they fulfil the hyperbole of the poet—

> Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
> Signifying nothing.

And yet such writing is frequently the subject of elaborate criticism and laudation. In an able critique on one of our

living poets—a poet who, amongst other unquestionable qualities, indulges sometimes in the fashionable freak of obscurity—the critic openly confesses that he entirely fails to understand the meaning of one of the poems under examination, although it is one upon which he has lavished extravagant praise.[1] The question arises, How far can a man honestly praise what he does not understand? We can hardly help associating it in our minds with the religion which attempts to worship what it does not quite believe, a condition of soul besides which an honest paganism is piety itself, and the religion of a gentleman. But this admission of the critic is quite characteristic of those who support by their approbation the obscure school. They will accept anything from their prophets as long as they will foam and speak riddles. To quote a favourite nursery rhyme, 'They open their mouths, and shut their eyes, and take what the king shall send them.' The fault lies as much with those who approve such stuff as with those who provide it. As long as the demand exists, the supply will be forthcoming. Like all false stimulants, it creates a false appetite, until things have come to this pass with these writers—intelligibility would ruin them. Were they for a moment to

[1] See Mr. W. M. Rossetti's remarks on Mr. Swinburne's 'Poems and Ballads,' in 'A Criticism,' page 60.

obey Falstaff's injunction to ancient Pistol, 'If thou hast any tidings, prithee deliver them like a man of this world,' there would be an end of them at once. In order to keep their power, they must continue to utter their dark sayings. Plainness would undo them. It is the evident aim of such writers to be only half intelligible. Their work would not fulfil its intention if it failed to place the reader in Puzzledom. They do not write that he who runs may read, but for him who sits in a mist.

It is a favourite theory with the admirers of this school, that a poet, in addition to being '*a maker*,' in the poetical sense, must also create the taste for what he makes. Such a theory can only be rarely and exceptionally true. The taste so formed in most cases is only a simulated one, sympathetic rather than idiopathic, conventional rather than real, and, in short, a fashion. If such a theory were true, who then, we ask, creates the taste of the poet, or who creates in us all the taste for the poetry of Nature; the taste for the light on the hills, or the dreamy horizon line of the sea; the taste for the moon and stars, and the great tumbling clouds that, like spectral icebergs, break across them; the taste for the falling snow, the moaning wind, the setting sun; the taste for primroses in spring, the music of running water, the singing of birds, the laughter of children, and all the

unwritten poetry that day unto day uttereth speech for ever? Who has the presumption to say he forms in us the taste for these? What true poet but feels that he is only a poor interpreter of Nature, and that, without creating taste, his function is high enough, if he can adequately give her music words, and minister faithfully to that taste which is born with us all, written in all men's hearts, not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God, and which speaks in us as loud as conscience, where our meaner interests have not overgrown it, and where we have not sold away the heavenly inheritance for this world's mess of potage.

Certainly the obscure school may be said to have created a taste, in the sense that dram-drinking creates a taste for further dram-drinking, for they have nursed into being an order of mind to which they can address nothing but what is 'meteor-like, of stuff and form perplexed'—a condition of mind that will accept nothing but what is obscure and enigmatical, and to whom plain speaking would be simply distasteful. It must be admitted that they humour their audience well, for the greater part of the poetry provided for their delectation seems to be carefully framed on the recommendation of Cartwright's verse :

> Let's keep them
> In the desperate hope of understanding us.

One of the most unhealthy features of this unhealthy school—a feature at the root of most of their other weaknesses—is a desire to be considered above and beyond the reach of influences that rule the many, and which not unfrequently takes the form of an extreme dread of what they call commonplace; a desire praiseworthy enough when ruled by humility, and where he who has it does not invariably conclude that the many are always wrong and he always right. We confess we begin to suspect the entire sanity of this immoderate terror of commonplace. The most hopeless condition of madness is said to be that in which the patient is convinced that it is the world that is mad and he the sole sane man in it. Carlyle writes an amusing fable of a noisy reformer who stood in the market-place and declared that the world was all turned topsy-turvy, that the passers-by were walking with their feet uppermost, and that unless something were done at once, the houses and everything else would fall into the sky. Things went on in this way for some time, till at length a friend passed by, who thinking he might do the reformer a good turn, laid hold of him, inverted his position, and set him on his feet, when the orator was obliged to confess, from his new point of view, that, after all, it had not been the world that had been at

fault, but that he himself had been standing on his head without knowing it. What if it turn out to be much the same with the victim of this fashionable hobgoblin, commonplace? The man that finds all plain truth to be but platitude had better ask himself whether the commonplace he find everywhere be really in the things he calls commonplace, and not in his own commonplace apprehension of them; and before he so grandly characterises truth as threadbare, let him have a care that in expressing such an opinion he is not exposing in himself the wretched seaminess of a threadbare soul, and proclaiming his own inability to detect the majesty of truth in its work-a-day clothes. For, after all, the disease, like that of the madman, may be in the organ of perception, instead of the thing perceived. But no such healthy doubt of his own sufficiency ever disturbs the equilibrium of the obscure philosopher. As for criticism from the outside world, he would have us believe he is wholly impervious to that. He affects to turn from that with scorn. He has nothing in common with men who do not entirely agree with him on every point. In short, to the everyday world he stands in a relation only to be described by reading Shylock's impassioned appeal to a common humanity backwards. If you prick him, he will not bleed. If you tickle him, he will not laugh. Oh, no,

that would let all the secret out and disgrace him for ever. Now, if this magnificent scorn of the world's opinion be genuine, and not mere dust in the eyes, why does he publish at all? Why not rather, Pygmalion-like, hug his own creation to his heart's content? Why unveil it to the profane vulgar, whose judgment he holds not at a pin's fee? The fact is, this magnificent hauteur and indifference to the world's opinion is not wholly sound. After the approval of a man's own sense of what is right and fit, there is no greater satisfaction than the sympathetic ratification of one's capable fellow-men. But this he has not the honesty to avow; it is just such a commonplace weakness as we should expect him pretending to despise.

It is this self-separation from the common sympathies of the world that keeps the influence of the mystical school within such narrow bounds. Always excepting those wonderful creatures who come to the world on some special errand from the Infinite—no uncommon commission now-a-days—we may conclude, in a general way, that a poet out of sympathy with his time is an anomaly and a contradiction. He may pretend to sit as far above the salt of ordinary mortals as he likes, and find what comfort he can in his creed of *Odi profanum vulgus*. Without one interest in common with things below, he may

wrap himself in himself, and having only self for subject and object—

> His cogitative faculties immersed
> In cogibundity of cogitation,

as an old English poet would put it—he may, by a sort of agonized introspection, elaborate his oracular verses, only fit for the hearing of the initiated few. It will turn out to be all against himself in the end. If he be indeed a poet, he ought to stand in a very different relation to his time ; a relation as nearly as possible the reverse of all this. Nature always favours those creatures of hers that are most suited to their external surroundings, invariably giving preference to the plant and empire to the animal best adapted to its locality, and the poet is no exception to the law. He ought to be the interpreter of his time, and find his strength, not in any power of morbid self-consciousness, but in the ability to go out of and forget self. The distinguishing quality of all true poetic genius is surely that mysterious power of self-surrender that enables it to become a second self at will. The real endowment, we suspect, is somewhat akin to the Hindu gift of avatar, the power that enables him, not to hide himself in his own cocoon, and spin out of that, but to identify and incarnate himself in the personalities of other men. A true poet is in a great measure the issue and product

of his time. However ashamed he may be of the relation, his time begets him, and, more than this, will put him down in the majority of cases at his proper value. Yes, this addle-pated public he despises will be his judge. The pretended contempt of public criticism is, in almost every case, the affectation of the imitator, and rarely the mistake of really great men. Weber tells us he invested his wife with what he called 'the rights of the gallery,' that she might freely criticise his productions, and make objections wherever she saw fit; and we all know that Molière put such value on the criticism of a shrewd old housekeeper, that he scrupulously read his manuscript to her before submitting it to the judgment of the initiated. It is recorded of Apelles that he used to hide behind his paintings in order to hear the public criticisms on them. Michael Angelo, again, told a young sculptor not to be too particular about the light on his statue, that the light of the public square would set its merits at rest. Although no one, we dare say, presumes to assert that the art of Apelles or Michael Angelo has been very materially improved upon, we have come somehow to put less value on this open-air testimony than they; and yet this daylight is a wonderful critic. It would seem that a work of Art—be it statue, poem, or picture—possesses, in common with a great many other things, both in Nature and Art,

the faculty of undergoing some chemical change more or less complete, on its exposure to the open air. Some Art products are so palpably bad that they stand the test but for a moment, and blacken in the light at once, as if they had been written or painted with a solution of the nitrate of silver; but all, good or bad, are tested by it more or less. The light that clothes—as Solomon in all his glory was not clothed—the living plant in bravery of green and gold, is just the same light that deprives the lifeless plant of any colour it possesses; and the fiercer the light, as in tropical countries, the more gorgeous the hue of the living leaf, and the swifter the bleaching and decay of the dead one. And so it is with the work of Art; expose it, and if it be true Art—that is to say, living Art—the sun, true to his old character of Apollo, the patron of Art, will smile upon it, and accumulate its beauty. If false Art—that is to say, mere dead artifice— the same sun will wither it up, and seem to take away what little beauty it was ever supposed to possess. In poetry, the light of the public square is final, and there is no criticism more hollow or more mischievous than that which teaches its aspirants to despise its judgments, and seek approval from some fancied circle within whose sacred circumference the *crême de la crême* in matters of taste is supposed to reside. Let us not be led away by any such affectation of culture in

matters of poetical criticism. Poetry has suffered much from it already. Better to fall back upon ourselves for our convictions, and cherish the possibility that men may yet be found who can look the epithet 'Philistine' in the face, and who, without undervaluing true culture, can yet strip themselves of the earthly lendings of a culture like this, and find their inspiration in a more direct and closer contact with Nature—men, perhaps, who, casting criticism behind them, can go out to the bare wilderness, and yet be so impressed with the simple grandeur of Nature as shall compel them to exclaim with the patriarchal pantheist of old, *This is the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.* True poetry is not written for any literary Israel who shall dwell alone, and shall not be reckoned among the nations. The poetry, like the truth, that is only fitted for a sect is never more than half true. It may equally be said of poetry as of truth, in the parable of the Good Seed, *The field is the world*, and anyone whose superfine criticism teaches him to narrow that field by a single furrow, by a single soul, has something still to learn. Men are all poets more or less. He who feels poetry possesses the essential quality of him who makes it. The power of receiving poetical impressions, and the power of creating them, are but different phases of the same gift. Everyone possesses the elements of those emotions out of which the poet builds, and it is

curious to see how the *afflatus* crops up here and there, even in people who fancy they despise it, for in this case

> Many a thousand of us
> Have the disease and feel it not.

And, after all, what true poet would not as soon live in the hearts of the unsophisticated many, and hear his verses sung to the clank of the loom, or the ring of the anvil, as see them lying bound in morocco on any number of drawing-room tables? But this is too severe a test for modern poetry. Not much of it will stand the light of the public square. The songs that belong to no clique or class, that reach high and low alike, and are the communion links of all classes, are not of this generation. The poets that address themselves to the public that never dies are all but an extinct species. Who can turn from the perusal of Shakspeare or Milton, or even parts of Wordsworth, and take up, with little exception, almost any of our later nineteenth century poets, without feeling the presence of a finikin ingenuity that is no necessary part of a true poet? Let us not forget, however, that it is impossible for anyone to be profited so much by living writers as by those that have been winnowed out of the past. Nor can their worth be finally judged in their own day. Delille complained that Voltaire's 'Henriade' was too near the eye and the age; and although distance will

perhaps not lend much enchantment to the 'Henriade,' the criticism was just, and has a wide application. We are too near contemporaneous literature to measure its true dimensions, or estimate its permanent influence. It takes a generation or two properly to garner a crop of truth, and separate the wheat from the chaff, so that in the literature of our own generation we have all the chaff against us. If one could only see things through the eyes of his great-grandson, what a light he could throw on such subjects. What an interesting volume he could make out of a comparison of contemporary opinions with the maturer verdicts of time. What a series of reversed judgments it would represent. But the old man with the scythe and the hour-glass is not to be hurried or forejudged. A style of poetry or philosophy may become very popular. A book may be very widely read, and widely accepted in its own day and generation. You may find it at every turn in the hands of sensible men, by rail and road and river. It may reach its thirtieth edition, and be applauded to the echo in what are called literary circles. It may be solemnly recommended and endorsed by the signature of very learned clerks; but it has another tribunal to pass. It has yet to go through a sort of Upper House before it becomes law. Time, that old justice, the only critic, after all, that can be depended upon, the sure re-

viewer of every man's work, has yet to deliver his interlocutor upon it. Slowly and carefully he gathers the evidence. These is no passion, no hurry, no bluster in his verdict. There is the grandeur and the repose of assured faith in his every step. *He that believeth*, says the prophet, *shall not make haste.* With what a majestic indifference he draws his pen through every falsehood, letting it fall back into the grave of the forgotten without one word of epitaph or comment. Verily the mill of God grinds late, but it grinds to powder. If the book have not the intrinsic self-preserving salt of life within it, not all the benedictions of all the big-wigs, not all the laying-on of hands of all the holy men, will serve its turn. It may be advertised in red, and reviewed into its tens of thousands, but there is not in the world ink sufficiently indelible, nor vellum sufficiently antiseptic to keep it alive. If the staple of its support were driven to the centre of the earth, it could not support it: *The depth saith, It is not in me, and the sea saith, It is not in me.* Down it must come. The weight of its own insufficiency hangs about its neck like a millstone. It has a natural law to fulfil. The lowest level of everything false is—the abyss, and it will not rest till it reach it. No earthly power can hold it back, and Heaven has provided none.

# THE CONFLICT OF ART AND MORALS IN MODERN POETRY

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In the history of every art there are continually recurring periods at which artistic progress, and sometimes almost artistic life, seems to be threatened by those obstructive theories and conventional rules to which art every now and then is authoritatively asked to submit. Just as religion, in its purest and most spiritual aspects, seems to lose ground in nearly the same proportion as dogmatic theology gains it, true art becomes weakened by the overgrowth and imposition of its authoritative and arbitrary methods.

Poetry, for example, was never more seriously hampered and handicapped than by the superstitious observance of the old dramatic unities of time and place. Although to all but a very small number that doctrine looks ridiculous enough from our modern point of view, and is not likely seriously to trouble us again, it was only one out of many difficulties of a similar nature which periodically arise to vex such questions. Fallacious

theories in matters of art, as well as morals, will probably continue to come up for discussion, with average regularity, as long as art is cultivated.

The theory of the dramatic unities itself was only the logical consequence of Aristotle's narrow definition of poetry, as nothing more and nothing higher than imitation. It was but an extension and application of the iron law of literal imitation to the particulars of time and place. As the world progresses, or thinks it progresses, each cultus brings along with it its besetting snares, and even old theories, supposed to be long ago historically dead and buried, seem to come back to life with such confident rejuvenescence, and clothed so cunningly in the fashionable costume of the hour, that many of them are daily passed off, among the inexperienced, as actual novelties. Just as we have had the atomic theory and fortuitous Cosmos of Democritus and Epicurus—we say nothing of the soundness or unsoundness of the theory—rehabilitated in nineteenth-century English, as the newest thing in science ; just as we have in theology the pantheism known to India for thousands of years, formulated in the mythology of Greece, and revived by Spinoza in the seventeenth century, again served up in the mystical prose-poetry of its fashionable preachers and teachers ; so, in literature and art, more than half of the disputations

arising out of such subjects are neither more nor less than revivals of old discussions with new names.

One of the most fashionable fallacies that have recently cropped up, and engaged the attention of artists and art critics, has been discussed under the attractive and, to some extent, misleading title of 'Art for Art's Sake,' misleading in the first place, because the whole argument turns upon the definition of the word 'art,' and the exact ground, ethical and æsthetical, which that word legitimately covers. The extreme supporters of the art for art's sake theory seek, indeed, to draw an impassable line between the ethical and æsthetical, and declare that, however they may have been mixed up by morally disposed but stupid people, art and morals have really nothing to do with each other. The doctrine is based upon one of those half-truths which, viewed exclusively from one side, appears to be exceedingly plausible, but which, upon closer acquaintance and viewed as a whole, is altogether unsound, and as full of danger to art as it is to morals.

Its reference to morals we do not care to touch, but would rather leave that question to the professional guardianship of those who, so to speak, have taken out a licence to treat that side of the subject, and with whose trade monopoly we have no desire to inter-

fere. Its reference to art, however, and especially to poetry, is another matter, and one in which a large portion of the world, licensed and unlicensed, may fairly be supposed to take an interest. It is somewhat ominous that, in its relation to poetry, the doctrine has been already set up by some of its supporters, in extreme cases, not as an argument in the interests of art, so much as a shelter and attempted justification of artistic uncleanness. In so doing, the supporters of such a view may be said, in some sort, to have supplied an answer to their own arguments ; for if it be beyond the province of art, and inconsistent with her legitimate object and aim, that she should ever become the exponent of morality, it must surely be admitted that it is equally foreign to her nature to become the exponent of immorality. These are but the two segments of the same argument, and, knocking out the key, the two must fall together. That morals and art, however, broadly speaking, are each in possession of distinct kingdoms of their own, is a general statement of the case, that no one, we dare say, will care to dispute ; but that the two powers have given and taken from each other, or, in other words, that art has been largely indebted to morals, and that religion has largely availed itself of the assistance of art, is equally indisputable. The artistic instinct may be one, and the

moral and religious quite another ; but that third instinct, which, in the whole history of the human race, savage and civilised, has invaribly joined the two in one, suggests a *tertium quid* which cannot be left out of the argument, and which proves the existence of an instinct as strong as either. That mysterious longing for the manifestation of some higher power than we possess, which underlies the history of art and religion in every phase, and at every stage and step of its development, is always looking about it for some tangible and visible incarnation. Art, indeed, may be very well defined as the result of that instinct which propels a man towards the outward embodiment and expression of the highest thought of which his nature is capable ; and no human being, savage or civilised, has ever been able to shake himself altogether clear of the desire. The barbarian who carved his first idol was impelled by this joint instinct, and it would be clearly useless to attempt to separate the art motive from the religious motive in the force that impelled him. Mean and rudimentary as his work must necessarily have been, he was moved to the performance of it by the same instinct which suggested the statue of Zeus to Pheidias, or an *Ecce Homo* to Guido or Correggio. Poor and elementary as his conception of the Deity must also have been, he was, unconsciously and according to his lights,

working at the root of that tree of which Christianity itself is the crown and flower. The great work of Pheidias affords an exact illustration of the action of this joint instinct amongst a people ethnologically unique, and in a state of civilisation, as regards art, certainly unsurpassed. Strabo relates that the declared intention of the artist in that great work was to illustrate and give a visible embodiment to the mighty lines in the *Iliad*, in which Homer represents Olympus trembling at the nod of Zeus. The statue was not only considered the masterpiece of Greek art, but an actual representation of the deity, 'the Father of Gods and men;' and the epigram of Philip of Thessalonica, in the Greek anthology, which declares that before the production of so marvellous a work could become possible, God must have either come down to earth on purpose to show Himself to the artist, or Pheidias himself must have been taken up into heaven, seems clearly to indicate the belief that the inspiration sprang from the two combined and indivisible sources—religious and artistic. It would not be difficult to prove the existence and operation of this double instinct in the history of every nation, and in all the departments of work, aspiring to the name of art, whether in poetry, painting, sculpture, or architecture. The winged Assyrian bull, with its soulless and yet half-human face, and its

cruel iron talons, the fossil remnant of a long-forgotten faith—'the dead disbowelled mystery,' which has given Mr. Rossetti a theme for one of the most perfect poems of the century; the sphinxes of Egypt, those passionless creatures that seem to be lifted above the cares of a fleeting world, and to live in an atmosphere of everlasting repose—

Staring right on with calm eternal eyes;

Greek sculpture; Italian painting at its highest period; the architecture of the middle ages; all these are but the varied answer to the one ever-present instinct. It may be objected that many of these earlier works were the unworthy attempts of half-civilised peoples to realise their own gross conceptions of the Deity, and not to be called religious in the sense in which we use the word. But it is enough for our argument that on their moral side many of them were deifications, and that on their artistic side they were all, more or less, an answer to that unquenched and unquenchable cry in the breast of every intelligent human being, which impels him in the search to find what Mr. Tennyson calls 'that type of perfect in his mind.' And even in a religious point of view, when we consider the periods which produced them, it may be after all fairly open to question, whether some of those primitive and barbarous attempts to embody and express

religious feeling and religious faith were not quite as noble, quite as religious, and quite as intelligent as the stolid fetishism of a later and more pretentious cultus which falls down in a brainless acquiescence before the sacerdotal dogma it does not even pretend to understand.

It is this longing to embody his highest aspiration in which the morality of the artist consists; and the history, poetry, or art-work of a people only becomes of importance in proportion as it is informed and penetrated by this instinct. It is its profound moral significance which gives the secret charm to Hebrew history and Hebrew poetry, bestowing upon it that unique flavour which sets it above all others in human interest. It is the strange blind groping after the perfect type, after God and the Godlike in all its art-worship, which gives that deathless and unaccountable fascination to 'the glory that was Greece,' and which in its highest period makes the sublimities of Æschylus read like passages from Isaiah. In such cases art is no more independent of morals than morality is of art.

With those, however, who argue for the impassable line between ethics and æsthetics, on the ground that it is not desirable that art should be a mere teacher of morality, we perfectly agree, only that does not preclude the possibility of art becoming an admirable exponent of

morality without any obvious didactic intention. A man may come under moral influence without any design upon him to that end, and in fact one of the most direct means of getting him, morally speaking, to kick over the traces, is to buttonhole him over a sermon. It is not safe even to commend him for his moral excellence. 'Dub not my likings virtues,' says George Eliot—

> lest they get
> A drug-like taste, and breed a nausea;
> Honey's not sweet commended as cathartic.

It dashes the native power and natural lustre of a good deed to have the light of the moral lantern turned too fully upon it. It should rather be kept dry, and in the dark, like grain seed, in order to preserve its power of germination in perfect efficiency. An obvious exhibition of morality is apt to defeat its own end. In Richardson's *Pamela*, for example (that in many respects admirable work of art), it is difficult to say whether the occasional indecency of the book, or the obtrusive morality with which it is interlarded, is the more mischievous or reprehensible element of the two. It is doubtful enough whether any modest young woman could write to her friend a glowing description of how she was *not* seduced by the squire, but in the moral tag to such a story, the step for most of us has been taken between the doubtful

and the disgusting. Again, in Hogarth's pictures of the same era, in such a series, for example, as the 'Harlot's Progress,' no possible parade of moral purpose can ever hide the gross realism and the glut of uncleanness which characterise them as a whole. Preaching of such a kind was much better calculated to gratify a prurient curiosity than send any pitiful Magdalene back to the shelter of God. Saviour-less sin is an ugly thing at best, and there is neither reason nor morality in the exhibition of it. Putting the question of art aside, its moral method is unsound, and, except among the more extreme supporters of the Calvinistic school, happily all but obsolete. Such teaching—if there was any religion in it at all—was too exclusively based upon the purblind devil-worship of those with whom the good old orthodox damnation seemed the only safe road—moralists who mainly regarded religion as a deterrent, and upon whom 'the pity of it, Iago,' would have been uselessly thrown away. The simple word of the Master on the same subject, 'Neither do I condemn thee, go and sin no more,' reduces morality like this to ashes.

It has always been a somewhat dangerous expedient to use art for a directly moral purpose, or indeed to use it as an exponent of anything but itself. Even in the two arts which lie most closely akin—music and poetry—it is

not to be attempted except at some slight sacrifice, and violence done to one or the other. The marriage of music to immortal verse was after all the dream of a poet—the ideal union of that 'orb of song, the divine Milton'—a marriage made in heaven, rather than any alliance capable of being successfully consummated and ratified on earth. There are words in our poetical anthology which refuse to set themselves to music (except indeed to the native rhythm which belongs to all beautiful speech) by reason of their very loftiness and grandeur—passages so profound and impressive that, like the names of God, are hardly to be uttered in other attitude than that of worship, and not to be felt in their fulness except by ourselves alone. In the latter half of the sixteenth century—that great spring-tide of English poetry—'Marlowe's mighty line' only became possible through the poet's determination to discard what he called—

> The jigging veins of rhyming mother wits,
> And such conceits as clownage keeps in pay—

all the beggarly elements, that is to say, of the elder drama, the vulgar accessories, and jingling couplets with which his predecessors had so long tickled the ears of the groundlings. The deliberate adoption also of the new method by Shakspeare (who evidently profited by

Marlowe's example) proved beyond a doubt, that even the modified music of rhyme could be safely dispensed with, and was no longer necessary to the very loftiest poetical expression. Music, on the other hand, has also her sacred groves, and her rapturous moments into which words may not and cannot enter ; those sublime soliloquies, for example, of Beethoven, that master-magician, upon whose great sound-wave words perish and melt like snow that falls upon the sea. The soul of the hearer, under such a mighty spell as his, mounts into a region where the methods of language are superseded. He confers not with flesh and blood. A messenger has reached him with authentic tidings of invisible things, before whom the world and its wordy doctrine stands dumb. With him who saw the heavens open and the angels ascending and descending, things of sense and time are consumed and swallowed up in the eternal chasm, as through the open gates he hears the far-off echo of a song which sings to him—

> of what the world will be
> When the years have died away.

No, the marriage between music and words is not consummated, and, the genius of Wagner notwithstanding, never will be consummated on earth. There is a kind of

music to which words would only be a drag and an intrusion, while on the other hand there are words so sweet, so profound, and so full of a strange fascination for us, that their best possible accompaniment, and their most powerful exponents, will be found in solitude and silence. Herr Wagner may give us a new creature, the joint issue of music and the drama, but neither his theory nor his practice—wonderful as the latter unquestionably is—will ever advance music to a greater height, or poetry to a greater height, than each of these can achieve by itself alone.

If there be a danger then in asking the kindred arts of music and poetry to become the exponents of each other, the danger is greatly magnified when we come to ask the divine spirit of Poesy—

> The singing maid with pictures in her eyes--

to become the exponent of the proprieties, and a sort of moral maid of all work. It would be an unpardonable stupidity to insist that she should attune her heavenly voice to the screech of Minerva's owl, and to bind the ægis about her tender flesh and put her in a pulpit would be to strike her dumb. And yet without agreeing with Dryden and the elder authorities, that 'the chief design of poetry is to instruct,' it is not to be denied that the

best art *does* instruct, and that in the highest sense of the word. It is only when the didactic design is put in the front, and obtruded on us, that it becomes obnoxious, and indeed intolerable. To a certain extent this holds good, as we have said, even in moral teaching itself. Men must be taught as if you taught them not, whether the medium of instruction be a picture, a poem, or a sermon. The artist in either case who imagines that, being an artist, he can disregard the opinions of the rest of the world as to the morality or immorality in the choice of his subject, or thinks that he can succeed by addressing men as if they occupied a distinct moral platform from that upon which he himself stands, is grievously deceiving himself. Any such assumption, on the part of either artist or moralist, is based upon a professional fallacy; and indeed, in the case of the preacher, this tacit assumption is the real reason why the average sermon in every educated community becomes daily more ridiculous and intolerable, and more and more provocative of that refractory frame of mind which reaches a climax in Goethe's ejaculation, 'five minutes more of this, and I confess everything.' The question for both moralist and artist is not how to separate themselves from their fellow-men, but how to lose sight of any such distinction, how to combine and transfuse themselves into the great soul

and common mind of the world. It will not do for the artist to address men as his inferiors, but as equals. Even if they should be his inferiors, and deny his art, and laugh him to scorn, it will not serve him, like Byron in his day, and more recently, Mr. Browning in ours, to lose his temper at a public which refuses to appreciate his work. Far better is it to work on in silence, in the well-grounded assurance that the secret sanhedrim, which always judges righteously in the end, and which is always alive somewhere in the world, will one day do him justice. Rather than be tempted by such hostility to seek a separation from the world, he should descend lower yet to meet them, compelling his soul into the highways and byeways, and walking if need be with the publican and sinner, if by any means he can get his feet upon the common rock, and lay his hand at last on the common heart of humanity. By this means only can the artist draw all men to him, and by the light of his tardily acknowledged fitness compel the world at last to read the central purpose of his life, and to judge his work as a whole. In art as well as morals, the basis of all true power is in humility and self-oblivion, and nothing more completely defeats artistic effect than professional self-assertion. There is a stern independence in all healthy human nature which will not suffer itself to be patted on

the back, instructed as a younger, or humoured as an invalid. Where a sense of equality or fellow-feeling is lost, artistic and moral effect goes along with it. All idea of difference between artist and audience must be cancelled, all thought of superior personality put out of the way, before art can have its perfect elemental freedom. No human breath must stain the glass, through which art at its best can be apprehended. The medium through which we perceive and appreciate what is beautiful in art should be as nearly as possible the medium through which we apprehend the beautiful in nature. It should be atmospheric and invisible. The moment at which the attention is diverted from the thought to the utterer of the thought, from the thought to the vehicle of the thought, a false step has been taken. The presence of an obvious apparatus is fatal to artistic effect. In literature, for example, as soon as the writer reveals the trick of his school, or in any way shows the self-consciousness of the literary craftsman, his style is ruined. At that point a poison enters his pen, which affects injuriously everything he utters. Whatever is attempted, the true secret of the highest method of art expression is the result of professional self-forgetfulness. It is the perfect self-negation, the almost ghostly withdrawal of Shakspeare's personality, which loads his words with that

oracular significance the word of no other man possesses. It is, again, the exquisite simplicity of Homer, in which the literary performer is altogether lost sight of, set aside, sunk, and superseded in the thing performed, the unconscious 'garrulous God-innocence,'—as Mrs. Browning called it—of the simple story-teller, which gives him his ever fresh fascination. This secret power of self-surrender and self-disappearance is even strangely characteristic of the highest spiritual fact within man's cognizance. Although there has never been awanting an intense and even a morbid curiosity on the subject, what a complete withdrawal of everything like earthly personal basis, what an infinite height and depth of distance, what an impenetrable veil stands between us and the human Personality that laid in the earth the living seeds of that miracle of miracles—Christianity.

Most readers must have noticed the peculiar charm bestowed on all that Shakspeare has ever written, by the conspicuous absence of any apparent didactic purpose. In his profoundest moments he never buttonholes you. He never attempts to point the moral or improve the occasion, except where the dramatic fitness of the situation, or the character of the speaker, demands it; in such cases, for example, as Jaques and Polonius, who, of course, would be entirely out of keeping with their

character if they did not preach and moralise. It was the want of this deliberate moral finger-post in Shakspeare's work which made him the stumbling-block he was to the critics of the eighteenth century. Dr. Johnson was disgusted with his reckless indifference to the poetical and moral proprieties, in making the innocent Cordelia die on the breast of Lear, and quite approved of Nahum Tate's 'revival with alterations,' in which that wretched creature—who wrote a poem on syphilis, and rhymed the Psalms of David with the help of Dr. Brady—kept Cordelia alive, married her to Edgar, and so settled the point of poetical justice and outraged morality. Poor Nahum, from a cursory perusal of the Psalms he rhymed, had probably convinced himself that it was highly improper that the wicked should be allowed to spread himself like a green bay-tree, while the righteous went to the wall, and thought that he might as well readjust the little matter the gods had somehow overlooked, and so proceeded to do so to the satisfaction of the moralists of his time. A little further insight into the philosophy of the two great poets he, for the time being, was born to mutilate, might have taught him the working of that higher law, under which to represent virtue as a policy, and offer it any other inducement or reward than that which it offers itself, is to turn the truth of God into a lie.

Shakspeare's morality was of a kind which Johnson and his school could hardly understand, because it belonged to an order, not more honest perhaps, but infinitely higher and wider than their own. If Shakspeare's story and his art-method do not of themselves impress their moral, there are no instructions left. Through death and disaster the sun shines and the birds sing, and his eyes are motionless and silent as the eyes in a mask of marble. With a moral design as clear as air, he never tells you what that design is. Like his own Æneas, in 'Troilus and Cressida'—

> the secrets of nature
> Have not more gift of taciturnity.

He that hath ears to hear let him hear, as for the others, he does not care even to speak to them. Just as we see in nature and life itself, he uses facts sometimes in a way which seems to contradict the accepted moralities. One of his noblest creatures starts back from the very thought of dissolution with an undisguised shudder, while his most godless worldling goes to his death in a pleasant dream, in which he 'babbles o' green fields.' That he looked upon the art of the mere preacher with a wise contempt is capable of abundant proof. In Jacques he makes the preacher's gift the cynical conceit of a played-out *roué*;

while in Polonius he gathers up the preacher's wisdom in words that have never been surpassed, in order to fit them to the mouth of a meddling and contemptible busybody. Notwithstanding this well-marked peculiarity in Shakspeare, there are no writings which more deeply impress the reader with a profound moral intention. It would savour of special pleading to attempt to prove such a fact by mere reference to isolated passages, although there are enough of these to found such a school of moral philosophy as one would look for in vain from the work of any other man. The stronger proof lies in the broad moral tendency of his work as a whole, and the moral build of his matchless men and women, for whom he asks, not our admiration alone, but our respect. He knew, none better, that life was a mingled yarn, good and ill together, and that 'cakes and ale' in some shape or other had their roots in human nature. By reason of his measureless receptivity he took the good and evil up under that massive frontal arch of his, and held them there without disturbance or displacement until the hour came for using the material in his art, when, without any conscious theory about either art or morals, he instinctively used the darker tints of humanity in such a way as brought its higher and fairer aspects into full relief. In 'King Lear,' for example,

Goneril and Regan form but the dark background upon which the artist limns the white soul of Cordelia. In 'Othello,' again, he paints the unsullied fame and the too trusting simplicity of the open-hearted soldier on the still blacker canvas of Iago's villany. Everywhere the good and bad are used as contrasts, and in a sense exponents of each other—Lady Macbeth over against the blameless Duncan, the thought of whose innocent blood at length unseats her reason; Henry V., Shakspeare's ideal man of the world, is contrasted with Sir John and his good-for-nothing tatterdemalion crew; while in his most spiritual sphere we have Prospero and Miranda set against the hardly human group of Caliban, Stephano, and Trinculo. In all these we have the good and ill, the noble and ignoble, together, but we are never left one moment in doubt as to which side engages the artist's moral sympathies; while there are single characters in which the moral qualities more distinctly predominate, such as Prospero, Cordelia, Hermione, or the Fool in 'King Lear,' so utterly spotless, and even holy, both in conception and execution, that they might have been drawn, as was said of some of Fra Angelico's pictures of saints and angels, when the artist was on his knees. There is clearly one law controlling all that is truly beautiful either in the physical, moral, or artistic world. If beauty

do not naturally belong to the artistic work, if it is not interfused and made one with it in the original casting, it cannot afterwards be superadded. If Aphrodite herself have not the beauty of the living flower, the bloom cannot be laid on. Any such attempt in the case of physical beauty is a hindrance rather than a help, and in the region of æsthetics, whether moral or poetical, an artistic blunder.

M. Taine, who seems, by the way, to be as blind to Shakspeare's moral method as Dr. Johnson was, (only with infinitely less excuse,) has insisted upon a theory, which, if accepted by the poet, enables him to shift the entire moral responsibility of any perilous stuff he may have written, clean off his own conscience on to that of his age, and the social circumstances by which he is surrounded ; although, curiously enough, the critic forgets to apply his favourite test to Shakspeare's own case, and exhausts his ingenuity to prove our great dramatist's immorality, ignoring the fact that Shakspeare was not only cleanly above his age, but that in one of his undoubtedly autobiographical sonnets he bitterly complains of the ill-fortune that threw him on a public whose manners were far below his moral standard, and in which he pitifully asks forgiveness for any shortcomings, arising out of associations with which his public life

necessarily brought him into contact. Surely such a confession as this might have helped the critic to discriminate between the licence characteristic of an era, and that personal and premeditated uncleanness which so frequently disfigures Dryden and the Restoration group. Moreover, M. Taine's theory of environment affects only one side of the truth, and is therefore valueless as a test. To speak of an age as a separate entity controlling the units who constitute that entity, is to a certain extent a fallacy. It is just such a theory as the criticism of Olivia's Clown in the 'Twelfth Night,' would dispose of as 'the cheveril glove to a good wit; how quickly the wrong side may be turned outward!' For, if there be any truth in the theory at all, the inverse proposition is quite as true—viz. that the leading minds of any age give tone to, and in a sense control, the social aggregate of which they themselves are the most influential units. To insist on either proposition as representing the whole truth would be to dogmatise on a half truth. What we call the spirit of the age is not to be caught in a trap which can be turned so easily inside out, nor can it be so readily formulated or manufactured into a critical tape-line by which every case may be exactly measured, least of all the case of genius. It might indeed be said with far more show of truth, that the law of environment con-

trols all mental phenomena below the standard of genius, but at that point ceases to have any influence, and in the case of great genius even provokes a contrary current. Ordinary mental power is fenced round by that chain of outward circumstance which genius breaks ; there are set bounds for the rule, but none for the exception. The theory altogether is one of those complete little pocket oracles, which it has been too much the fashion of late to apply indiscriminately to literary and art questions, and which are held to settle everything out of hand. The doctrine, like a good many short-cuts to hard-and-fast conviction, has not that final importance which in some quarters has been rashly credited it. The dogma in art or religion (and in many other places where its presence is less suspected) which proposes to supersede the necessity for any further hard thinking, naturally recommends itself to the majority. Anything that invites a man to fold his brains up and put them away in a napkin is eagerly closed with in these days of mental strain and pressure. But fortunately, or unfortunately, things are not necessarily true because they save trouble and provide an armchair for intellectual inaction. M. Taine has supplied one of these patent processes eagerly accepted by the crowd, and which has been applied in a manner and with a completeness its original pro-

pounder did not perhaps think of. In a time like ours, when, for the education of men, all periods, and the literatures of all ages, are equally laid under contribution, the theory of environment ceases to have any tangible meaning, and genius in such circum tances is moulded by its own predilections. Such a theory may have a limited application in a literary clique, but in the great broad world its effect becomes quickly invisible. It falls into the vast ocean of modern life and merely makes

> a circle in the water,
> Which never ceaseth to enlarge itself
> Till by broad spreading it disperse to nought.

If there were any really controlling principle in it, one would expect to find a striking resemblance between the poets of the same period, and this is never observable except in poetry of the poorest and most conventional description. Between the poets of our own nineteenth century, discarding the mere imitators, we find no such family likeness ; on the contrary, we are rather astonished at the extraordinary variety of character and quality of gift we so often see in the same family. There is nothing in common between the scowling cynicism of Byron and the placid serenity of Wordsworth ; nothing between the matter-of-fact realism of Crabbe and the idealistic tenuity of Coleridge ; nothing between the open-hearted manli-

ness of Scott and the sugar-water imitation sentiment of Tom Moore; nothing in common between the somewhat solid pudding of Southey's muse and the phantasmal spirituality of Shelley.

Among our living poets too, Mr. Tennyson in his translucent depth and unapproached harmony stands clear of all but his nameless imitators, while Mr. Browning, with his suggestive involution, and his richly syncopated music and meaning, would have been unique in any age. Could anyone conceive a greater unlikeness, both as regards matter and manner, than between the genius of Mr. Rossetti and that of Sir Henry Taylor? Again, what is there in common between the intellectual lucidity of Mr. Arnold and the erotic mysticism of Mr. Swinburne? Even amongst our female poets of the century, where one would naturally suppose there is less room for contrast, what is there in common between the masculine dry light of George Elliot's poetical gift and the Saphic spontaneity and sometimes almost raw emotion of Mrs. Browning?

Such contrary currents as these in the same period are surely enough to stagger the most devout believer in the iron law of environment. This diversity of gift and moral purpose is by no means confined to the poets of the present age. The greatest single figure in authenticated

English history, as scholar, statesman, and poet, a greater *personage* than Shakspeare, and beyond question our greatest poet next to him, presents us with the most remarkable example. Milton is almost the lonely figure in an age whose morality is happily unparalleled in the history of his country. What sympathy, moral or artistic, what likeness either in the conception or execution of his work, was there between him and the dissolute rhymesters and dramatists of his time? Looking back upon his life and its moral environment, we seem to see a colossal statue of Apollo, his eyes lifted up to the empyrean as he watches the arrow-flight of his immortal song; while round about his feet, all but unconscious of the godlike presence, hand in hand with their painted and patched bacchantes, dance the wine-stained satyrs of that never-to-be forgotten court.

Turning aside, however, from the moral action and counteraction of an age and its greatest artists, it is somewhat extraordinary to find that it has been left to the nineteenth century to compound the dogma that art to be worthy of the name must be cut off from all moral significance, and that the artist, especially the poet, before he begins his work, must carefully lay aside his moral consciousness, as if that were some kind of detached movement of his being he could take up or lay down at will.

The doctrine was tolerable as long as it went no further than that youthful enthusiasm of beauty for beauty's sake, which young Hallam, for example, at the age of twenty, insisted upon when reviewing Mr. Tennyson's first volume in 1831. But when it is argued to the exclusion and expulsion of all moral sense, it is a very different thing; and that Mr. Tennyson gives his countenance to any such doctrine is sufficiently disproved by all his highest and best work. In such poems as the 'Palace of Art,' 'The Two Voices,' 'The Vision of Sin,' and 'In Memoriam,' in which a profound moral sense bulks most largely, his imagination finds its greatest scope, and in the particular sphere to which these poems belong, the artist reaches a higher point than has ever yet been chronicled in the same direction in the entire history of English poetry. 'The Palace of Art,' indeed, is a poetical and philosophical treatise bearing upon the very subject under discussion; and in which the question is plainly answered—whether or not it be possible that a human soul can lay aside its ethical instinct, and live happily, exclusively for the gratification of its æsthetic sense, whether or not a man can successfully detach and lay aside his moral nature, and find the aims and objects of existence served and satisfied in the worship of beauty for beauty's sake? It is no new question, and many a

soul besides the one in Mr. Tennyson's poem has undergone a similar test, and returned from the battle with a hard-won experience and in a more or less vanquished condition. Nor is it new as a theme for poetical treatment. It is the central idea in Goethe's 'Faust,' in which the trampled moral nature of the hero has its revenge upon him, and reasserts itself so completely that the devil at last is duped of his dupe, and has to take his departure without him. The theme, indeed, is common to many great works representing that struggle with self and sin through which in some shape or other every soul must pass. The work, however, in which we find the most striking prototype of Mr. Tennyson's poem is the Book of Ecclesiastes. The 'Preacher' in that moral monologue, and the 'Soul' in the laureate's poem—both of them dramatic personations—proceed on the same lines. 'I made me great works,' says the hero of the Hebrew drama; 'I builded me houses; I made gardens and orchards; I gathered me silver and gold, and the peculiar treasure of kings:' while the 'Soul' in the 'Palace of Art,' in varied phrase to the same effect, begins—

> I built my soul a lordly pleasure house,
> Wherein at ease for aye to dwell.

The Hebrew philosopher says to his heart, 'Go to

now, I will prove thee with mirth, therefore enjoy pleasure;' while the modern poet, in what sounds almost like a paraphrase of the same words, says—

> O Soul, make merry and carouse,
> Dear Soul, for all is well;

and so the two set out upon that quest which has ever had but one end—vanity and vexation of spirit.

It is interesting to note the points of difference, as well as resemblance, in the dramatic treatment of the same idea, by writers so widely asunder in point of time as well as environment. Each story represents its hero at the commencement as one who has already attained great worldly eminence. Both are men of position and power, of unbounded means, and great culture; men who, even exposed to the danger of such an experiment, may be stained, but not retained by evil as a habit, caught but not held by the senses, as the sequel in each case proves. The eye takes in at a glance the structural beauty of the modern poem, its clear definition, and its gorgeous imagery, while the ear is held by the fascination of its deep resounding harmony; and though the subject is of necessity profound and mysterious, as all spiritual conflicts must be, there is no tinge of that obscurity, and repetition, which has made the work of the Hebrew

author such a puzzle to the annotators. But the wider difference between the two will be found to lie in the moral standard accepted by the respective authors. The hero of Ecclesiastes seems to undergo a series of indulgences, with moral pauses between, in which the ever-recurring burden of *Vanitas vanitatum* is introduced, not as a *miserere*, as we are accustomed to find it under similar conditions in the Psalms, but rather with a kind of moral flourish of trumpets. The alternation of good and evil, preacher and sinner, by turns, no doubt suggested the attempt on the part of some of its early commentators to divide the poem into strophe and antistrophe, but it certainly lowers its moral tone. The hero retires from each successive trial a wiser rather than a better man, and comes back to the burden of his song, not so much with contrition as vexation of spirit, discontent rather than sorrow. The discovery of failure and the conviction of sin do not much disturb the placid scepticism of the Hebrew, and instead of repentance, or even regret, we have only dejection, disappointment, and satiety, with now and then a half-pitiful, half-sardonic grin at the utter insignificance of man's life. Even when he reaches the sad conviction that the same event happens alike to fool and wise, and that death is the hopeless and final end of all, in which a man has no pre-eminence over

a brute, he goes on making his admirable proverbs as if nothing had happened. One cannot help suspecting that he knew all through that the experiment he was making was an ungodly one, and that he was attempting to juggle his conscience into the belief that wisdom gained by a knowledge of evil was a permitted path for princes. Such experiences were probably looked upon by him in the light of contributions to what Goethe called the 'pyramid of his existence.' One is hardly surprised to learn that the question of the canonicity of the book has afforded such endless matter for discussion, or that by tradition it was placed amongst those works that were not to be read by anyone under thirty.

As late as the Christian era, heretics, so-called, have attempted to reject it on account of its dangerous teaching. Its many and peculiar excellences, however, are beyond question. It is one of those books which will continue to stand upon the broader canonicity of its own merits long after the question of canonicity has ceased to be discussed. Its keen insight into the ways and working of the world of man, and the incisive language in which its verdicts are embodied—although its direct relation to Christianity may be difficult to see—will always make it a favourite with men of the world.

Turning to the modern poem, what difference do we

find there on the discovery of failure and sin! The moment the truth flashed in upon the Soul in the 'Palace of Art' that her life had been an acted lie—

> she fell,
> Like Herod when the shout was in his ears
> Struck through with pangs of Hell!

No time with her for moral reflection on the vanities or insignificances of life; the new significance of it has struck her dumb; and when at last speech comes, there is no breath left for a proverb—she cried aloud—

> I am on fire within:
> What is it that will take away my sin
> And save me lest I die?

To compare language like this to the proverbial philosophy of the moral experimenter of Ecclesiastes, would be to compare the moral method of the jailor of Philippi with that of the Duc de la Rochefoucault.

Mr. Tennyson, then, utters no uncertain sound upon the subject of beauty for beauty's sake, when that theory involves the exclusion from art of all action or correspondence with the moral instinct, and sets its worshipper on some fancied intellectual height which cuts him off from the moral sympathy of his fellow-men. His verdict is contained in a short prologue to the poem, which, like many prefaces, was perhaps an epilogue in the order

of the poet's mind, and from which we quote four lines, containing, for us, the essence of the argument, and what the author of Ecclesiastes would call the conclusion of the whole matter. The verdict is this—

> That Beauty, Good, and Knowledge are three sisters,
> That dote upon each other, friends to man,
> Living together under the same roof,
> And never can be sundered without tears.

Where the non-moral argument in poetical art is stretched, as it has been, so as to cover the immoral and justify positive uncleanness, we do not follow it. A modern singer of no small power, and possessing a lyrical gift perhaps unsurpassed amongst living poets, has lent his eloquent advocacy to this extreme view, and has solemnly assured us that the 'Lesbian music, which spends itself on the record of fleshly fever and amorous malady, has a value beyond price and beyond thought.' It should be remembered, however, that Mr. Swinburne, besides being himself the chief singer in the Lesbian choir, may be said to hold a watching brief in the interest of those who accept this view of the question, so that large deductions may be made for anything he has to say upon it. Moreover, upon this subject, the line may be safely drawn at Mr. Swinburne, just because unchecked license in the direction he argues, more quickly and surely defeats itself than

anything that can be said to restrain it. Mr. Swinburne himself seems to be drifting towards this conclusion, for although he may still support the Lesbian art creed in theory, he is wisely leaving it behind him in practice. It would indeed have been a pity if the poet's genius had remained permanently under the erotic spell that inspired some of his earlier efforts. The Circean myth itself teaches us, (for art will still be moral,) that there is no surer avenger of sense them sense. The Nemesis that overtakes uncleanness in literature is inexorable. Nothing more quickly reduces the power of the artist, or takes him out of that atmosphere of repose in which alone the highest work is possible. Life gets soured in the repeated and hopeless defence of the indefensible. Thought becomes thin and querulous. The finer balance is lost, and power is frittered away on distracting and profitless animosities, until at last the victim becomes incapable of artistic work that does not carry upon it the plain marks either of dotage or delirium.

Man's highest and purest culture reaches him through the gates of his imagination, and it is of consequence that only those things which are lovely and of good report should enter in. The art which does not elevate, ennoble, and refine the thing it touches, but tends rather to degrade it, has no right of entrance there ; and when it forces a

way in the disguise of poetry, it is at best a traitor to the household. There is little chance, however, that the Lesbian school of poetry, which makes it a boast that it does not write for mothers or children, will ever gain a solid footing on English ground. Most men are disinclined at the outset to accept a poetical theory based upon productions that must be read by stealth. The reverence for mothers and children, too, has still a pretty firm hold of the earth, and does not seem likely to be uprooted and replaced by anything else just yet. An instinct rooted in human nature, and hallowed by its most sacred associations, and which—if their highest works may be called in as evidence—the greatest artists of the greatest art age delighted to honour, is not likely to be seriously affected by the Lesbian school of poetry or any other ; and in all probability mothers and little children will still continue to form no inconsiderable part of that 'poetry of earth which never dies.' There is happily, too, a strong prejudice abroad, both amongst fathers and mothers, that when all is said and done, the poetical laurel does somehow look

> greener on the brows
> Of him that utters nothing base.

# THE CORRELATION OF THE RELIGIOUS AND POETICAL INSTINCTS

## *THE CORRELATION OF THE RELIGIOUS AND POETICAL INSTINCTS.*

NAPOLEON FIRST used to declare, with the sententious profundity he was so fond of affecting, that 'the world was governed by imagination,' although the way in which he carried out this article of his faith into practice, leaves us in doubt, whether or not he had ever realised to himself the full significance of the proverb. In some of his more bombastic bulletins, and in those numerous and characteristic passages in his life, from which we may select, as a representative example, his behaviour and conversation in the pyramids during the Egyptian expedition, he certainly tested the gullibility of his kind, by pushing the imaginative theory to the borders of the ridiculous, and proved himself a perfect master of that solemn cajolery, happily confined to the baser sort of platform rhetoric. Such passages in his career lead us to suspect that he only saw the surface of the truth contained in his favourite proverb. A certain amount of dogmatic shallowness is absolutely necessary to the successful career of the pic-

turesque *poseur*, and just a little more insight into the imaginative faculty than Napoleon possessed, would have made that career impossible, and would possibly have made him ashamed of the very tricks to which he frequently owed his success.

Imagination governed the world in a far profounder sense than ever he conceived. It governed the world of things that governed him, and while he vainly thought he was ruling through its magic, the deceiver was himself deceived.

So completely has the imaginative element influenced all human thought and all human action, that it would be a much easier task to point out where it is, than where it is not. From beginning to end it permeates all. Even in the solid region of history, one has only to go far enough back in order to reach a period at which the material is no longer material in the literal sense of the word, but rather 'of imagination all compact.' Tracing back history is like tracing back a stream. Follow far enough, and you will find it begins in the clouds. Much of our early history accepts even the *modus* of the imaginative faculty and exists in the form of verse, containing the merest mouthful of historical bread to limitless poetical sack.

Ballads are the nursery rhymes of infant history. It

seems to be a fact to which there is hardly any exception, that the earliest history of all countries has taken a poetical form, and that too, in the majority of cases, the most poetical of poetical forms, the lyrical. Written not to be read, but to be chanted, and not only to be sung, but also to be danced to. Language has been happily called 'fossil poetry,' and when we apply the philological hammer to the word 'Ballad,' it turns out—like many others of its kind—to be at least, a very interesting piece of fossil history. Its derivation from the Italian 'Ballare,' taken along with the words 'ball' and 'ballet' from the same root, leads us to the inevitable conclusion, that in early times, the original composer must have had in his mind's eye the rhythmical movement of the bodily feet, as well as the feet poetical. In the most rudimentary and primitive conditions of society, the poetical and imaginative leaven is everywhere apparent, and the instinct—rough-hew it how we will—is frequently found at the root of the very first promptings of religion. Sir John Lubbock, in his 'Origin of Civilisation,' declares that night-mare induced by over-eating gives to the disordered imagination of the savage nearly all the religion he possesses. Nor in more advanced stages of civilisation, does imagination exercise a less important function. Mr. Max Müller has shown us in his translations of the Hymns of the

Vedas, that the sacred songs of the Brahmins were saturated, or rather inflated with imagination. In the Persian Hymns of the Zendavesta the same thing is observable. Whilst in each successive evolution of the dominant religion of modern times, from Hebrew lawgiver to Hebrew poet, from poet to prophet, from prophecy to gospel, onward to the latest refinements of our modern pantheon, the presence and the pressure of imagination is everywhere apparent. From the dream-begotten creed of Sir John's gorged savage, onward to that latest poetical 'recast' of religion which vaporizes the personality of God into 'a tendency that makes for righteousness,' imagination leavens the whole lump.

Rudimentary religion quite as notably as rudimentary history is inseparably associated with poetry. The hymns of the Vedas are in the oldest form of the oldest known language, so old indeed that they might have come to us from another world, for there is no record of the condition of the society in which they were produced, and no explanation of them except what can be derived from their own form and matter, and their own internal light, is even possible. The earliest known translation into Anglo-Saxon of any part of the Scriptures is a poetical version, that of Cædmon—in the seventh century, of the story of Creation and the Exodus. The ballad itself was

originally a religious song of praise, and even at a later stage of its history, when it became a little more mixed in character, the clergy continued to use it. Warton tells us that the clerical and lay minstrels exercised the art in common, and were frequently to be found amongst the paid singers at the same entertainment, and in fact language makes another fossil revelation here, for the words 'minister' and 'minstrel' are from the same root.

The clergy, with their usual acuteness in estimating the uses of anything calculated to keep the power in their own hands, made strong efforts to keep the ballad under their control, and from all accounts they must have found the art of the minstrel a useful and influential one.

In Pierce Plowman's Visions, it is said of a friar, that he was much better acquainted with his 'Rimes of Robin Hood' and 'Randal of Chester' than with his Paternoster, and a good many of them would probably have endorsed old Fletcher of Saltoun's proverb, with the difference of a word, 'if a man were only permitted to make the ballads, he need not trouble himself about who should make the *creed* of the nation.' That the monks themselves were the authors of many of these metrical homilies, and legends of the saints, which they recited, and taught the lay minstrel to recite, there can be little doubt. In those days before books were, they must have found the ballad

no mean educational instrument. The printing press, as was to be expected, shelved alike the minstrel and the monk.

In these modern days we turn the old ballad in our hands with that affectionate antiquarian interest one takes in a prehistoric spear-head, richly eloquent of the buried past, but in the hands of the original user it was a subtle intellectual weapon, and though we may look upon it as the rather barbarous implement of a kind of stone period in literature, it no doubt served the purposes of its day, and served them well. In an educational point of view it filled the double office of poet and teacher, and taking into account the cultus of the age, the apparatus was well suited to its end. There must have been a force and directness about such teaching that kept anything like sham at arm's length, and had, at all events, none of that mechanical cram which makes the society of a later civilisation so fertile in mediocrities and artificialities, and so wretchedly barren in all that is picturesque in character. Nor was the early ballad a less efficient instrument in education or less powerfully formative of character, because its lessons awoke the heart as well as the head, and were, so to speak, poured in warm, not only training and furnishing the memory, but appealing to the poetical instincts, and sometimes to those religious

intuitions, which so large a section of our present day philosophers declare must be carefully rooted out of modern education.

In our day the relation subsisting between the poetical and religious instincts is not less intimate. Only very recently, one of the most acute of modern critics treats the subjects of English Poetry and Religion in the same chapter, and asserts that it is next to impossible to speak of them separately. 'The more I reflect,' says M. Taine, 'on the conformation of the English mind, on the pre-eminence of the moral being, and the necessity for regarding nature through the eyes of the moral being from first to last, the more clearly do I arrive at an understanding of the strong and innumerable roots of that serious poem which is here (in England) called religion.' Nor could it well be otherwise with a people whose moral modes of thinking have been so largely grafted upon the Hebrew Scriptures, those ever-flowing rivers of consolation that have quenched the thirst of so many millions of earth's pilgrims, and in which the perfect and harmonious fusion of the two instincts, religious and poetical, finds so complete an illustration. With what grander poetry could the religious instinct ally itself than the exultant raptures of Isaiah? Where can finer fellow-feeling for humanity be found than in the penitential pathos of the

sweet singer of Israel, with that ever fresh-hearted faith in the final issue, which so strongly characterises the deepest and darkest of its sorrows? Our indebtedness to Hebrew poetry withdrawn, it would be impossible to form any adequate conception of what civilisation would have been. There is no corner of modern life it has not penetrated. Not only has it deeply coloured our own best literature—given endless occasion to our greatest artists—wedded and welded itself to our noblest music—but in every-day life its constantly recurring idioms, its little touches of nature that make the whole world kin, are ever turning up, on the lips of those who do not even know sometimes from whence they draw their riches, so rooted is the habit.

It seems impossible to make these writings of the younger world in any sense antiquated. It is only the products of modern civilisation that run that risk. The further we get from them the more grandly they stand out. And in this very nineteenth century, there is no sharper rebuke to that maudlin piety without power which oppresses our religious literature, than one can find on almost every page of the Psalms. What a glorious springtide in the world's life must that have been for which these anthems were written. In trying to realise to the imagination the worshippers of those days, who in

congregated thousands praised the Lord with a shout—with 'the sound of the trumpet,' with 'the psaltery and harp,' with 'the timbrel and dance,' 'stringed instruments and organs,' till the rolling volume of joyous sound became as the noise of many waters, one calls up a picture whose concrete glad directness contrasts strangely enough with the faded theological abstractions of much of our modern worship.

The later degeneracies and repugnancies of Christianity, dividing not the nation only but every little community into distracted factions, have made our modern faith as fertile in its mortifications as its satisfactions, and has all but dried up that fountain of joy which found such rapturous expression in earlier times, and which characterised more or less the religious services of all Eastern countries. 'I think,' says a great poet—

> This is the authentic sign and seal
> Of Godship, that it ever waxes glad.

If this be true, the godlike quality is strangely absent from the adoration of the modern Protestant. Worship, for the greater part, seems to have sunk into a respectable ceremonial, from which if the soul has not altogether fled, any pulse of gladness, at all events, can hardly be detected.

Without seeming to question for a moment or undervalue the moral compensations of adversity, there is certainly no modern equivalent of that joyousness which was so pre-eminent a feature in Hebrew worship and which the Psalmist so eloquently and repeatedly enjoins. One can hardly accept this haggard result of modern theology as in any sense the out-come of the gospel (*God-spell*), and there is room, it is to be hoped, within the wide walls of Christianity to speak plainly on such things, without running the risk of earning the epithet 'heterodox' except from a few moral hypochondriacs.

But whether there is or not, we have a strong suspicion that one glad and grateful hour, spent in a trustful and joyous sense of the goodness of the All-giver, is perhaps a more acceptable service in His sight, than whole Sundayfuls of that funereal propriety some of us have been taught to call religion. Whatever the Reformation has accomplished—and no doubt it has accomplished much—it has certainly permitted, if it has not sanctioned, the development in our country of some forms of so called Christianity, the moral results of which, could they honestly be scheduled, would incontestably prove that they have done more to counteract than stimulate the religious instinct. Whatever else it has done, it has grievously wounded one of the most glorious potentiali-

ties of human nature—the capacity for joy—without which, we need no Psalmist to teach us, the highest worship is impossible. Much as we owe to the Hebrew poets, we might in this direction owe them something more with advantage to ourselves. Side by side with the joyous worshipper of the temple, the drowsy indifference of your solemnly respectable sermon-worn devotee, goes far to convince us—the author of Ecclesiastes notwithstanding—that in some respects at least, 'the former days *were* better than these.'

A very short excursion into the broad and breezy fields of comparative theology, is sufficient to convince us of the vastness of that kingdom which the religious and poetical instinct may be said to hold in common, and enables anyone to discover for himself—and a pleasing discovery it is—that many of those religions he has been probably taught to look upon with suspicion, if not with horror, contain much that is only very little removed from his own ; much that has grown out of the poetical instincts common to his kind, and that after all, the most advanced religionist—call him by whatever name you will—is only one of that huge caravan of humanity for ever travelling from the cradle to the grave, striving according to his best lights, to escape much the same dangers, to gratify much the same aspirations, and seeking

an interest in that pilgrimage of the hereafter, from the Power which he believes has controlled and sanctioned that of the present. The close similarity in some of those root beliefs, of religions that have grown up widely apart, and perfectly unknown to each other, exhibits the extraordinary uniformity both as regards instinct and action, that characterises the development of religious intuitions, when fairly left to themselves, proving, apart from all ecclesiastical interference, the existence of an independent faculty—the faculty of apprehending what cannot be made known to the mere senses, the faculty of reaching a verdict and a conviction upon evidence that is unseen, what Mr. Tennyson calls the power of 'believing what we cannot prove,' and which faculty, when treated with the philosophical respect it deserves, will, it is to be hoped, help to clear a space of common ground upon which men of widely different cultus may yet agree to meet and shake hands, without wasting life and energy in the splitting of theological hairs, and in fighting out questions that are not worth the candle. That there are men who do not admit the existence of such a faculty, and who would laugh at the idea of anything like an attempt at scientific classification of evidence on such a subject, does not require to be pointed out—men with whom the experience of the senses is final, and who will not admit the existence

of phenomena that do not lie within their own horizon, and are not capable of experimental proof.

Doubtless the scientific test has purged the world of much absurdity that has too long sheltered itself under the name of religion. One can quite understand it when it condemns the unreasonableness which mixes up symbol with fact in the stories of a younger world, and insists on reading an account of the creation, written thousands of years ago, through the eyes of the 19th century, without making any allowance for the mental parallax. But on the other hand if not only these stories, but all the other book-religion in the world could be made a *tabula rasa* to-morrow, we would have still left on our hands the gigantic fact of the religious instinct. What has to be done with it? If science could get rid of God himself, it does not at all follow that human nature could get rid of this enormous potentiality—this wheel within the brain which must grind something or grind itself. The Sphinx must have its answer or it will devour you. So long as man is made on the existing model, he may make up his mind to ignore the subject, to vote it a nuisance, and attempt to dismiss it from his thoughts, but that will not prevent the instinct from finding him out now and then. It may lie within the province of the Creator to sever the connection, the creature cannot do

it. No one can so perfectly guard himself on all sides against the inroads of this instinct, but that the idea of the great unseen power acting above and beyond us, must enter and overawe sometimes. Just when he fancies he has successfully laid the ghost, and made everything secure, the merest hint brings all back again :—

> A sunset touch,
> A fancy from a flower bell, some one's death,
> A chorus ending from Euripides—
> And that's enough for twenty hopes and fears,
> As old and new at once as nature's self,
> To rap, and knock, and enter in his soul,
> Take hands and dance there, a fantastic ring
> Round the ancient idol on his base again
> The grand Perhaps !

The world's too plentiful trivialities may crust over and conceal for a time the deeper life, but there are junctures in most lives, where, if nothing else succeed, the great solvents of Love and Death find out the way, and lay all open. The wall that does not crumble into dust before these trumpets of God, is not built with hands. A man may refuse to acknowledge the particular object of worship of any set of his fellow-men, but in most cases it is only to substitute another. It is quite consistent with human nature, and especially scientific human nature, to be up to the ears in its own superstition, and yet laugh heartily at that of its next-door neighbour. He may

exercise his free will about what he shall bow down to, but bow down he must. The instinct holds him fast. He may take down the name of God from the altar of his new pantheon, and set up instead of it the name of Nature, Law, Molecular Force, Evolution. According to his school or fancy, he chooses one or other of these fashionable substitutes for Almightiness, but it is only to write it with a large capital and then fall down and worship it.

This unconscious action of the imaginative and religious faculty, ruling a man, as it were behind his mind's back, is frequently to be met with among men who affect to be totally indifferent to, and void of the poetic instinct. We need hardly say that in most cases it is an assumed indifference, and judging from the emphatic way those who boast of the defect sometimes call attention to it, they have evidently convinced themselves that it goes in some undefined way to prove their solidity and intellectual completeness. Knowing that there are people born now and then with an organ short, as in the case of colour-blindness, or that deeper affliction the incapacity to distinguish music from mere noise, it might be uncharitable to say, that in this case it is always and altogether affectation. In some instances it is no doubt the honest declaration of downright sterile

defect, although the kindly providence that tempers the wind to the shorn lamb, may mercifully disguise the humiliation of such a confession from the subject of it. And yet the confession too is not without a widely sympathetic value of a kind, reaching back as it does, and claiming kinship as it were, with those rudimentary forms of animal life which illustrate that most humble and curious of vital conditions—life without organs. But the confesser of such an infirmity may, possibly enough, refuse to see it in this light.

No doubt there are men who honestly fail to realise the utility of these higher intuitions, and to whose ever-reiterated *cui bono*? you can answer nothing which they can possibly understand. If you turn round on such arguers, and tell them that you too admire the utilities, and poetry for its utility, and that in your humble estimation, poetry fulfils some of the highest requirements of men's nature ; or, in the words of Victor Hugo, that 'the beautiful is as useful as the useful, perhaps more so,' they will possibly stare at you as if you were a madman. But the sincerely defective in such matters are a mere handful beside the pseudo-scientific mob that at the present time affects such an indifference, from the fancied superiority it gives them, and it is no uncommon thing, in these severely scientific times, to meet men who

imagine they bring nothing to the solution of life's problems but the clear dry light of an unbiassed intellect, while one can very plainly see, that under a vain exterior of reason, they are all the time the unconscious tools of their own emotions. The philosophy which affects to exclude from its calculations the imponderable forces of the imagination, is, as far as its humanity goes, blind on one side, and will never be able to give an unprejudiced account of anything in which humanity is concerned.

Many of those religious traditions which no sane man pretends to credit with anything like scientific accuracy, such as the paradisiacal traditions of Eden—an equivalent of which is to be found, in some shape or other, in almost every religion—possess a significance, both moral and ethnological, which science takes far too little account of. The influence of such traditions will never die. 'The garden,' sings pathetically, a living poet—

> The garden, O the garden, must it go,
> Source of our hope, and our most dear regret?
> The ancient story, must it no more show
> How man may win it yet?

But there is no fear that the garden will go. Had Milton never sung his immortal epic 'Of man's first

disobedience and the fruit of that forbidden tree,' the story would have been equally safe. It is easy to pick holes in the science of these old stories, a thing they were never intended to teach—but he that would overturn the lessons that lie deeper than science—the lessons they were intended to teach—has a very different task before him. These are beyond his reach, and are guarded as of old by a sword of fire. They have a never-ending applicability, and indeed the precautionary moral contained in that wholesome old story of the garden, and the tree of knowledge, was perhaps never more urgently wanted than in the present time. Unhappily for us, the Mephistopheles who played the villain with such *éclat* in that magnificent old drama is still alive and well, offering his apples at the old price, and to all appearances doing a very fair stroke of business. We can picture him standing by, and listening until, in the terrible realism of Burns, 'his auld damned elbow yeuks wi' joy,' as he hears those eloquent agents of his, holding up knowledge as an end rather than a means, and pushing the sale of it as something that would effectually patch up all the hungry crevices of poor old leaky human nature; for well he knows, in the face of all our boasted enlightenment, with its growing materialism, and its host of scientific sceptics, that the tree of knowledge bears

fruit as rotten as ever, for him who thinks he is the wiser for the eating of it.

These early myths that have fed the imagination of an infant race, are far more firmly rooted, and are of far greater importance than those weak iconoclasts who have laboured to explode them, have any conception of. That the child is father of the man is as true of the race as of the individual. The religious instinct which holds these early myths as a sacred inheritance, like the ardour with which the literary instinct of a civilised people clings to its rudimentary poetry, is only the expression of a somewhat similar feeling in the mass, to that which in the single instance prompts a man to cherish with such fondness the stories and experiences of his youth. No man can explain why the stories he heard when he was young, or the adventures of that time, should retain such a hold on him, and so impress him above all others. Why they should stand out clear and vivid, whilst the story he heard the week before last has gone clean out of his head. All the likes and dislikes, the trials and the triumphs of that time, have a strange value for him; nay, the very errors—for error itself where it has been the youthful overflow of a warm and trusting nature, turns to very gold in the hands of a calmer and riper experience. All his over-eager aspirations, all his over-ardent philosophies, which

he can now look back upon with a smile, have yet a power upon him not to be shaken off, an enchantment never to be forgotten, and which no possible science can ever help him to explain. The poets are all at one in describing the irresistible fascination of the time :—

> Verse, a breeze mid blossoms straying,
> Where Hope clung, feeding like a bee,
> Both were mine, Life went a-maying
> With Nature, Hope, and Poesy.
> When I was young !

With all its laughters and its tears, its sorrows and successes, its clouds and sunshine, it is youth after all that contributes the memories that make the man, in a far profounder sense than do any of life's later experiences. He who first declared Mnemosyne to be the mother of the Muses was the medium of a genuine inspiration. Genius itself, to a certain degree, is a thing of memory, and greatly consists of the power to summon back at will the force of the first impression. These early memories are the deepest cut and the most abiding, and are never far from any one of us. At the slightest hint of association, they come back upon us like a flood. Life is full of their ethereal finger-pointings. The hush of the wind, the smell of clover, the hum of a bee, and the waters are over our head, making the dullest man for the moment

poetical, and the silentest man loquacious, for the subject warms the heart like wine. It is an everflowing fountain of emotion, a charmed landscape lying far away in the bosom of the hills, and with such a light upon it, that no man with blood in his veins has ever been able to look back upon its hallowed outline but with a longing and an infinite regret.

> Tears, idle tears, I know not what they mean,
> Tears from the depth of some divine despair,
> Rise in the heart and gather in the eyes,
> When looking on the happy autumn fields,
> And thinking of the days that are no more.

This liability to be moved and influenced, and formed by life's earliest impressions, lying in a far distant past, is as strongly characteristic of the life of a people as it is of the life of a man. The instinct of the many is just the multiplied intuition of the one, and no science and no philosophy will ever be able to untwine from the heart of mankind the stories it heard first, or succeed in uprooting or even weakening the hold of those traditionary conceptions, historically associated with the religious growth of early races. They have a value far beyond, and entirely apart from their merely scientific accuracy, and are much more likely to grow venerable as the years roll on. Civilisation does not bury its prehistoric records, but takes delight in the labour that unearths them; does not

disperse and weaken, but with loving hands accumulates, strengthens, and completes them.

> The past will always win
> A glory from its being far,
> And orb into the perfect star
> We saw not when we moved therein.

The philosopher who on the strength of a little rudimentary knowledge in science proceeds to shatter all to pieces, and who crows over his exploits in a way that would almost have you believe that the creature has at length found out the Achilles' heel of his Creator, is somehow not so popular as he used to be. No doubt he has had his uses, and has been to a certain extent entertaining, but he is getting dreadfully prosy and commonplace. In the beginning of the century while he was yet young and counted his hostile theories to accepted views by hundreds (geology had upwards of eighty itself), he was considered attractive, more particularly by that never-sufficiently-noticed section of society—recruited for the most part from the lower intellectual strata—which is always ready to give a favourable hearing to anything that proposes to overturn accepted authority, not so much because such authority is wrong, as that it is accepted. But even these have mostly fallen away from him. He has paid the penalty of a fame too quickly achieved, a

character forced into raw and cartilaginous maturity, having no lime of endurance in its bones. The greater part of his demolishing theories have either succumbed to later scientific discoveries or have been voted without discussion, to be read that day six months, and in this way have quietly gone the way of waste paper. The radical defect of these theories and their propagators was that they were too blindly radical. They could see no good whatever in religious things as they existed. They could accept no point of view but that which left all others out of sight, and their own facts were the only ones of any account in the argument. But there are symptoms at length of the religious instinct itself receiving a scientific treatment from a high quarter and with something like the respectful consideration the subject demands. The dawn is breaking. Science itself is beginning to suspect that those higher intuitions of the soul are after all not less substantial and scientific because you cannot catch them, catalogue them, and put them in a box, no, not even with satisfaction to all, in the ecclesiastical box we call a creed. The spiritual fact is not less actual because it is not to be handled, or measured by the scientific test. There are things even in the material world that are not to be examined or explained, nay, like the stars, not even to be seen by any light but what they themselves supply. You

have only to bring the lamp of daylight to see them by, in order not to see them at all, but no one on that account has any doubt of their substantial existence. It is the same with the higher intuitions. If they cannot prove themselves in some way, no possible science is of any avail. Bring the light of the modern scientific lamp to bear on them, and like the stars before daylight they retire. They will not submit to the indignity. It is a reversion of the highest order of nature. It is the body testing the soul. The letter judging the spirit. These intuitions, not to be accounted for by the senses, are facts nevertheless, stern, scientific facts, possessing an importance immeasurably greater than the so-called scientific facts that can be classified and recorded by the senses, and judged by their results are certainly amongst the most important facts in the history of humanity. Moreover they are the only facts that endure, all else is but shifting sand. Beside these the world of material fact is a very Proteus, never, as we know, for two moments together in the same condition. It is in a state of continual flux. Perpetual change is the only changeless law about it, and what science dignifies and deifies by the name of Law is based on a necessarily incomplete record of transient phenomena. The facts of the senses are only the garments for the time being, of the deeper and more enduring law which will stand still when the heavens pass away. The phenomena of nature

are but the mists that break themselves across those quiet immovable and heaven-reaching hills the phenomena of the soul.

But if the tendency of science as at present existing be to underrate the importance of the religious instinct, the counteracting influence, if not the remedy for such a tendency, may be hopefully expected from that increasing impetus and cultivation of the poetic and imaginative faculty which so invariably keeps step with the progress of education and civilisation. And there is this advantage on the poetical side of the conflict, that its intuitions command respect in quarters where the very same instincts put forward on religious grounds would be laughed at. The witticism held sufficient to set the table in a roar at the expense perhaps of the oracle of a parish pulpit, somehow loses point when directed against Milton or Shakspeare, although the moral taught and the root intuition from which the teaching springs, are in every other respect identical. You may laugh at the one without danger, nay society will even grant you a kind of cheap diploma for smartness if it is done with any sort of cultivated address. But have a care of the other. You must not risk your æsthetic reputation by seeming to question even in a joke, what the capable criticism of a country has finally agreed to accept as its true poetry.

In some quarters the two subjects seem to be approaching each other more nearly. Cardinal Manning in one of his eloquent addresses declares, that 'thirty years ago, anyone who introduced religion into conversation caused a silence, he was a methodist, or a madman, or both.' 'Nowadays,' he says, 'there is hardly a private house in which it is not uppermost, or any occasion on which it is not introduced.' 'I will not say,' he continues, 'that art, literature, and poetry are become religious, but I may say, that religious art, religious literature, and religious poetry, still more than all these in their highest Catholic forms, are to be found throughout England.' Cardinal Manning was of course speaking of his own church, and it may be consequently suspected that the will may have been, to some extent, the father to such a statement. There is certainly no appearance of any such revival in the art of literature or poetry of large sections of Protestant Christianity. On the contrary there seems to be a revival of materialism, and under that modern symbol of power, the scalpel of the man of science, the life-blood and the poetry of religion seem to be oozing away, and threaten to leave behind them such a *caput mortuum* as piety itself will cast the gorge at, and over which not even a theologian will care to fight. The verdicts of society, however, must be taken for what they are worth, and revivals either one way

or another are not much to be depended upon. For the most part they seem to be epidemics, whose local causes are hopelessly obscure, and rather indicate a passing spasm in society than any radical or abiding change. Apart from all such influences, the two instincts, poetical and religious, wherever they are allowed perfect freedom from outward restraint, social, scientific, or ecclesiastical, must ever come together, and it will always be impossible to draw a categorical line that shall divide them. Do what you can, they will underlie and overlap each other. What, indeed, is much of our most cherished theology but only our highest poetry formulated? What again is much of our best poetry but our profoundest convictions in a different form, a creed touched by the alchemy of an imagination that sets free its component gases? Even when there is no such moral intention the most secular of our poets, if ever he reach that point of inspiration where words become winged, is sure to cross the line and wander away into the congenial atmosphere of religion before he knows it. And even in the case of poets in whose blood the hatred of anything like systematic theology has rankled like the bite of the Naples spider, in their higher flights they are continually trespassing on the holier ground, unconsciously ratifying the profoundest spiritual truths, and ministering to the

very forces they themselves affect to hold light. This is notably observable in Byron, although perhaps more conspicuous in Shelley than in any other modern poet. Under a strangely persistent denial of Christianity, and indeed of God, he nevertheless, in his inspired moments became the unconscious interpreter of the higher nature, and to a certain degree became reverential and devout in spite of himself. It is not possible in fact to *soar* except in one direction. The etymology of the word might teach us that. It is not to be denied, however, that too many of our great poets, fevered by that kind of dithyrambic madness which so easily besets the *genus irritabile vatum*, have frequently made attempts to curse what a higher power than theirs has seen fit to bless. And yet how often, when the spell of his supernatural gift is upon him, has the poet found it impossible—like the prophet in a similar frame of mind long ago—to say anything but what the *Lord had put in his mouth.* Shelley is for ever getting into this strange predicament; Shelley in the hands of the soul of Shelley, was overmastered. When the winds of God struck that harp, the earthly possessor of it was little better than one of the audience. It would indeed be difficult even in one's imagination to compound any mortal mixture of earth's mould less materialistic than Shelley. On the contrary

he seems to illustrate more than any man that ever lived the last point of material possibility, the minimum quantity of earth compatible with life : one step further and matter would have exhaled, and resolved itself into ether. His genius so completely 'o'er informed the tenement of clay' that there is a distinctly appreciable want of earthly basis upon which to steady it. His Pegasus, over bred on the ethereal side, was deficient in bone, and had not body and ballast enough to carry the enormous wing of its imagination. He tells us himself that he had tried to be a materialist once, but very quickly abandoned it for the opposite heights of idealism. His atheism was not thorough-going. It was rather a shriek—and sometimes rather a discordant shriek—against state-craft, and sacerdotalism, an echo of the French revolution cry against kings and priests, than against authority or religion in the abstract. The sincerest part of Shelley's unbelief, like that of a great many other people, was prompted by a feeling more or less common to all strong natures—and imitated by a good many ones, who think themselves strong—a feeling of impatience under, and antipathy to, the offensive dogmatism that insists upon its own cut and dry conceptions of the Deity; not in many cases that those who so insist have more deeply considered the matter, but often for no

better reason than that their opinions happen for the time being to be approved, and sanctioned, and protected, by that cheapest of trade marks, 'orthodox theology.' There is no real proof in Shelley's works that he had any sympathy with, or had any title to a place in that category of fools, which another great poet has so aptly classified, once and for ever, as having said in their hearts there is no God. His boasted atheism was a piece of insanity in which his deeper feeling and his better reason had no part, and is capable of endless confutation from his own best utterances. His was an atheism that was condemned out of its own mouth. The reiterated reference to the supernatural, and to that spirit above and beyond earthly things, was one of the most conspicuous characteristics of his genius. There is very much in Shelley's best poetry to justify Mr. Browning's vaticination, that had he lived he would have gone over not only to the theists but to the Christians, and it gives an air of predicability to that seemingly hazardous prophecy, which one does not see so well at first sight, but which a little closer study brings into better focus. Worship, in some form or other, was for him a spiritual necessity; Voltaire's proverb, '*Si Dieu n'existait pas, il faudrait l'inventer*,' had never a better illustration. He ignored the Creator, but still would magnify his wonder-

ful works. He denied the very Deity in whose praise he was for ever unconsciously singing a *Gloria in excelsis.* The philosophy, however, which denies God on one hand, deifies Nature on the other—what ever *ism* it may range itself under, is a mere shuffler of words. When it comes to that, it is not so much a question of the existence somewhere of an Almighty power, but rather a petty quarrel as to what name it shall go by. What difference does it make to the everlasting fact in a purely theistical point of view, whether a poet should speak of God as 'the mighty one who upholdeth all things and inhabiteth eternity,' or whether like Shelley he choose to apostrophise him as the great—

> Spirit of Nature!
> Soul of those mighty spheres,
> Whose changeless paths through Heaven's deep silence lie.

The reverential feeling of such words, and the worship, consciously or unconsciously contained in them, is one and the same thing. And upon close study, with little exception, there is hardly anything discoverable on the supposed atheistic side of Shelley's poetry of a more objectionable nature, than the existence of some such passages as might have provoked the puerile criticism which found fault with Wordsworth as pantheistic. If the unbelief of Shelley had been real and not a mere masquerade in which a foolish boy tried to frighten old women by signing himself

'Percy B Shelley, Atheist!' with the evident intention of enjoying the horror of the thing, it would have had a far more real presence in all his highest works, whereas it does little more than enable him to contradict himself. Where he is true to his highest genius, he is false to his creed, and *vice versâ*. And on similar grounds the result must ever be the same. What man, but above all what poet, can have anything to do with the higher aspirations of humanity cut away from the existence of God, and a belief in a hereafter? What advantageth to him, in such a case, all the immortal longings he prates about? If his creed be the true one it should rather teach him silence and the contentment of the brute, *eat and drink, for to-morrow we die.* But Shelley could never seriously endorse any such creed, and all the obtrusive reiteration with which he announced himself an atheist, only succeeded in strengthening the suspicion that the announcement was not wholly sound. The spasmodic attempts to keep his poetry square with such a creed were hysterical and intermittent and the result of no deep-seated conviction. It was in keeping with the traditions of his school to affect erratic views both in politics and religion, and unfortunately the more such views ran counter to common sense—shocked men and horrified women—the more gratification he seemed to get out of them.

While by no means sympathizing with the coarse and malignant criticism which condemned him without the power, or at all events without taking the trouble to understand him, it is yet a matter of undeniable regret, that neither he nor Byron could altogether conceal a certain weak satisfaction in their diabolical fame.

Although, however, the poetic instinct—as we have already said—from its very nature, may, more than any other power, be safely depended upon to counteract the encroachments of scientific realism, it need not be forgotten that poetry itself—or at least what is frequently called poetry—is as apt to become as mechanical as science, or as conventional as religion has sometimes become. Although the true antithesis, as Coleridge once pointed out, is not between poetry and prose, but between poetry and science, it should yet be borne in mind that poetry itself can sink sometimes—as far as its highest functions are concerned—into mere lifeless technicality. A very great deal of the poetry of the eighteenth century may be quoted in support of this. Poetry perhaps never at any time so nearly succeeded in living without a soul as it did before the modern romantic school breathed into its nostrils the breath of a new life. Beyond doubt the life of the eighteenth century possesses a charm for us moderns, in many ways not to be surpassed. In many senses it stands

by itself and can never again be repeated. Nevertheless it seems to us altogether out of the way, and argues an absolute want of poetical insight, to compare the art exercised by Johnson and Pope with that of Milton and Shakspeare, or of Wordsworth and Tennyson. It is not at all a question of degree, they are totally different in kind. The eighteenth century stopped creating in order to cogitate and criticise. In perusing much of its literature one feels that the prophet has taken his departure, and in his place we have only the heavy theologian and the plodding man of letters. As far as the emotions are concerned the period represented a kind of semi-torpid transition between the old and the new in English poetry. Their sentiment, what was of it, like their pseudo-pastoral and mock-idyllic verse, was cut to the conventional pattern. Its poetry was in a certain sense unique. It was in the first place—and this more than the poetry of any other period—eminently critical : it was finished to a fault, it was intellectual, didactic, philosophical, metaphysical, in fact everything but poetical. Much of what it produced stood towards true poetry nearly in the same relation as the doctrinal hymn does to true religion. The nature of the thing forbids a poetical treatment in the highest sense. It interests the intellect but forgets the heart : it hardly needs, and certainly does not warm, the imagination. Its most perfect

poetry and its highest religion was a kind of sublimated worship of common sense of which Bolingbroke and Leibnitz were the lawgivers and Pope the prophet. And if the pantheon were somewhat narrow, and shut out the sky more perhaps than was needful, and if across its altars hard words were apt sometimes to jar with the music of the temple, it would nevertheless be difficult to conceive a prophet—all the circumstances considered—more admirably fitted for the office. The highest proof of Pope's genius lies in the fact of his achievements, when the poverty of his available implements and the paltriness of his environment are considered. A presiding deity was not so much wanted as a master of ceremonies, for the literature of the time was as artificial as its society. It bulks largely in our eyes because we are as yet near it, and mediocrity is voluminous. But as it retires in time to its true focal distance, the result and especially the poetical result of the eighteenth century will become more and more inconsiderable. Pope, Goldsmith, and a few others who approach them most nearly, will be the only prominent peaks breaking the uniform level. When criticism looks back upon the century from a sufficient distance, it can hardly be doubted but that the greater part of the poetry of Johnson, Parnell, Swift, Prior, Akenside, Churchill, Chatterton, Bloomfield,

and many others who find a place in 'Johnson's Lives,' will steadily become more and more unread, and more and more unreadable. In much of the poetry of the time, even in the best of it, one cannot get rid of a feeling of artificiality. You begin to suspect the process, and to ask yourself, if this be the real Pythian ecstasy or only what the doctors would call a sympathetic attack? Have many of these writers really chewed the leaves of the plant sacred to Apollo, or are they only the second-hand ruminators of stuff from which the juices of inspiration have already been well extracted? Is much of what they offer us, the veritable tap of Castaly, or only some modern concoction in a bottle? In too many cases you have no doubt at all, for behind their flowing periods you distinctly hear the action of the pump. They have little of the art that conceals art, in their genius. The screen is too thin to hide the machinery. Their pieces, as the French would say, 'are sewed together with white thread, one can see the stitches.' Effort is visible everywhere. They are always on stilts, and the effort for the most part is made in favour of the hearer, and seldom leads up to any high ideal of their own. The 'person of quality' seems oppressively present. Most of their morality is artificial and sickly and unsound, like that of Sterne, and is too frequently obtruded for effect. One feels the humility of

instruction in so much of it, and the authoritative superintendence of the consciously superior person, that you cannot shake yourself free of a certain vague sense that you are being patted on the back, and, without your leave being asked, are somehow being made the victim of a system of applied morality. You get sick of its ponderous and pretentious mediocrity, and would like to drive a fist through its paste-board morality, just to see if indeed there be any real manhood at the back of it. This suspicion of unsoundness, this 'dram of base,' contaminates the whole social fabric of the period. Its politics were if possible more rotten than its morals, and it is difficult to read any history of its corrupt factions without irritation and disgust. Artifice infects more or less every variety of its poetry. It falsifies their drawing as well as their colour, and taints their style as deeply as their morals. One detects the unsoundness even where morality does not obtrude itself, as in their descriptive poetry. Most of their descriptions of nature are not the pictures of men who have any keen personal relish of country life, but only the conventional Grub Street production, made after the regulation recipe for the treatment of such subjects. Take even a description of country scenery from Pope's Pastorals, and place it side by side with a similar subject from Shakspeare or from Keats, or Coleridge, or Shelley,

or Mr. Browning, and you see the difference at once. It is like comparing a chromo-lithograph with a sketch from nature of Constable or David Cox. The one kind of work is done at the bidding of a great gift, and with a fervent love of what it works upon ; the other is done to order, a mechanical effort at second hand : well done, we admit, but entirely different in kind. There was seldom any divine necessity laid upon a poet of the eighteenth century to utter the things he did. One can hardly detect any of the flavour of that faculty which according to our modern theory

> Sings because it must,
> And pipes but as the linnet sings.

The linnet of the eighteenth century was in many cases only one of those costly mechanical automatons that jumps out of a box, sings you an t'were a nightingale, and jumps in again, very beautiful, very wonderful, but still wound up with a key ;

> The workman made it ; therefore it is not God,

as the prophet Hosea said of the golden calf of Samaria.

One of the American humourists, speaking of the Elizabethan period, says that genius in that age was epidemic, and might have broken out in any man's family like small-pox or measles. There was certainly no fear of any such catastrophe in the eighteenth century.

Poetry then was not so much an endowment, as merely the accomplishment of any man of letters who chose verse as his vehicle : a fashionable person who affected 'quality,' was very point-device in his accoutrements, and very commonly in debt. He concocted laborious odes to the virtues all round, and apostrophised the abstract divinities generally, in the approved form his age expected of him. And really there was little soul for higher work, and little audience for it if higher had been forthcoming. Taken altogether the whole thing was perhaps good enough for that paradise of *petits-maîtres*, which brought up the rear of that division of our literary history we have dignified with the name of the classic period. We are quite aware that exception may be taken, in particular cases, to any such broad criticism of eighteenth century literature. The exceptions, however, are few, and do not materially affect the rule. Its poetical literature has been hoisted up to too high a place in the general Walhalla : it has occupied, and still occupies, a position from which time, that tries all, will quietly take it down.

Although this fact must have been borne in upon the convictions of many a student of the period, they have not sufficiently had the courage of their opinions openly to say so. Literary hypocrisy is as common a variety of the hateful vice, as that form of it which is usually asso-

ciated with holier things. It is wonderful how long a man, honest in every other respect, will shrink from the plain dictates of his conscience and convictions on literary matters, out of deference to some supposed authority, or other social restriction, and will even suffer himself to be led about, and seemingly approve, if not applaud, opinions which he knows in his secret judgment he condemns. And yet such hypocrisy has sometimes tainted the literary criticism of a whole nation. The eighteenth century has benefited largely by this moral cowardice, going hand in hand, as it almost invariably does, with that intellectual inaction, amounting to positive dishonesty, which accepts its creed in such matters without having ever seriously examined whether it is true or not. But in making any general estimate of the time, we must make at least one conspicuous exception. No man can judge Burns in the ruck of the eighteenth century. Except in name he did not really belong to it. He was in the period not of it, and was about the last man in the world who could possibly have accepted its conventional standards for the true ones, its embroidered hollowness for honest character, its empty gallantry for love, or even any amount of its most elegant dissipation for genuine happiness. His intense personal sincerity cried out for 'ground more relative than this' and lifted him a clean

head and shoulders above all that surrounded him. His genius came down upon the theological veneer of his time, and the Della-Cruscan filigree of its poetry like the hammer of Thor, and it was his pen above all others, that first and fairly marked the line of cleavage, between the effete classicism of the past century, and the fresh romanticism of the present. It was no great wonder his age did not appreciate him: they had nothing in common. It has always been much the same. The pioneers of any real renaissance have been usually misunderstood, and unless the purse of some sympathetic Lorenzo were at hand, for the most part starved. Burns was a stumbling-block to the complacent religiosity of his time, and to its machine-made wisdom, foolishness. It had none of his sweet simple direct humanity, none of his single-hearted passion, none of the deep sensitive fervour of his moral sentiment. On the contrary it was the want of any strong personal convictions, and the general thinness of its moral substance, that made most of the poetry of the eighteenth century so superficial and poor and bloodless. It had drifted away from nature, the only real sustaining source of inspiration, and taken up its abode in books and beautiful stock phrases, and had recourse to these instead of nature for its support and continuance. It thought more of its audience than its

subject, and gave itself up, as Wilkes said of Pitt, ' to the studying of words, and the rounding of sentences.' It tried to conceal the poverty of its inspiration by bringing all the pretty things to the front. It was exactly in the condition of the religion, which neglecting all the higher sources of its faith, seeks to renew, refresh, and recruit itself at the broken cisterns of ceremony, and doctrinal orthodoxy. The spirit was shoved out of sight and superseded by the letter. Neither the religious nor the poetic instinct will long survive such treatment. The study of words is not only a very charming, but an indispensable study in its place, and books beyond question are invaluable, but after all they are only the conduit pipes, not the fountains, of inspiration. Neither in the one case nor in the other does any man ever see the real significance of the thing until he gets behind the lighted candles, the ritual and the printed forms, and reaches the thing itself, the actual fountain head from which these instincts are fed and nourished. If a man cannot in a great measure help himself to his religious convictions, neither the church nor the priest can do anything for him. Let him not attempt to cheat his Maker by creeping into the creed of another man's soul, merely because he has failed to find wherewithal to cover his own. And so in poetry let no man, however much he

may enjoy it, accept that second-hand heaven of written song, in lieu of that first and last and everlasting heaven, of which all poetry is but the passing record. And there is this also in common between the two, that the book-poetry, like the book-religion, which satisfies us, and lulls us to sleep on a bed of roses, is far less likely to be the highest of its kind, than that which shakes us up and awakens the soul to new sense of its possibilities and necessities ; that which in religion knocks the theological scaffolding from below your feet, and drives you back upon God and no other, and that which in poetry sends you out to the hills alone, to discover for yourself the sources from which all true poetry flows, and convinces you hat poetry, like the kingdom of heaven, is within you.

# CULTURE AND MODERN POETRY

## *CULTURE AND MODERN POETRY.*

It must have frequently occurred to the readers of modern poetry, that the ancient and time-worn dictum, assuring us that a poet is born, not made, must in our day have lost, if not some of its force, then certainly some of its fitness. To this conclusion we must come if the word *poet* has not changed its signification. The original genius ('his soul is with the saints we trust') who first propounded the *poeta nascitur* dogma, had his eye no doubt upon certain of the stiffnecked and rebellious, who clung to the condemned creed, that, given a fair average quantity and quality of mental fibre, a poet might after all, and with some little trouble, be made. Dr. Johnson held that a given amount of ability may be turned in any direction, 'even as a man,' he argued, 'may walk this way or that.' 'And so he can,' answered in our day Archbishop Whately, 'because walking is the action for which his legs are fitted; but though he may use his eyes for looking at this object or that, he cannot hear with his eyes, or see with his ears. And the eyes and ears are not

more different than, for instance, the poetical faculty and the mathematical.'

Notwithstanding the completeness of this answer, there is room for grave suspicion that the Doctor's theory has still, not only its believers, but its school and its disciples. If we are to judge by the living facts around us, and seek a conclusion through the philosophy that teaches by examples, that conclusion must inevitably be —either, that we have still amongst us crowds of heretics who abide by the belief in the manufactured article, or that the poetic faculty is a very much more common production than it used to be. Nor is the alternative very puzzling. Anyone who takes the trouble of looking into the titles of the several claimants of the laurel as they rise, must get himself more and more convinced that the poet made is rampant, and that the real possessor of what Mrs. Browning called 'the sorrowful great gift'—the poet born of the old dogma—is as rare as he has ever been, and in fact, there are not a few who do not hesitate to declare he is as dead as the Dodo.

Many of those in the present day who approach nearest to the old standard of the poet born have, in addition, so much about them of the poet made, that the proverb no longer fits, and, we may add, have so much about them of what is so elaborately made, that one is tempted to

believe some of them might have been greater men at less pains.

Macaulay declared that 'as civilisation advances, poetry almost necessarily declines.' Without denying that the assertion at first sight has an appearance of plausibility, we are inclined, on closer examination, to set it down as one of those half-truths which the brilliant essayist's partiality for a telling antithesis frequently led him into : just one of those picturesque announcements, which Mr. Spedding—speaking of Macaulay's extravagant strictures on Lord Bacon—characterises as proceeding from 'the love of rhetorical effect in a mind rhetorically disposed.' If indeed we are to suppose civilisation in Macaulay's phrase to be in this case synonymous with education, as it is loosely understood, then the statement does contain a certain amount of truth. But if we mean by education what it should be rather than what it is—a drawing out of a man's emotional nature, as well as his merely mental qualities, then the statement not only contains in it nothing that is true, but something that is pretty nearly pernicious. If even we could be brought to admit the possibility of poetical decline from such a cause, we would not the less strenuously deny the *necessity* of any such decline. Certainly nothing will contribute more surely to the decline of poetry than the civilisation which

forgets to educate those very faculties and parts of a man's nature by the exercise of which alone poetry can either be produced or appreciated. And if, in addition to the neglect of these faculties, we give an exaggerated importance to the education of the faculties which naturally counteract them, we at length reach tangible grounds and get something more than a glimpse of the civilisation in which poetry necessarily declines. Under like conditions, would it be a matter of surprise that Logic, Metaphysics, Science, or any of the mathematical or mechanical arts should also decline? Physiologists have long ago agreed that the inordinate exercise of one set of muscles invariably results in the impoverishment of the corresponding set, and it is quite as possible in the mind as in the body, by excessive exercise, to strengthen one set of faculties to the permanent weakness and injury of the others. Nor can it be denied that the prevailing partiality for scientific and mechanical pursuits, by keeping imagination out in the cold, has had the effect of making our more recent advances rather a one-legged progress.

By exclusive attention to the education of the emotional side of a man's nature, you will no doubt succeed in creating such a milksop as shall hardly supply fibre enough for the hero of a penny novel; but, on the other hand, by an equally exclusive cultivation of the rationalistic

side, you will develop something quite as weak, and as dangerous, and a good deal more intolerable. To look strongly at anything with one eye, it is natural to close the other, and so with reason's eye riveted, one need not be surprised to find the eye of imagination shut.

In the civilisation whose progress is thoroughly sound, the education of the head and of the heart should go abreast, and the assumed advancement in which poetry declines is more than likely to be the civilisation of an age that sacrifices its emotions to its reason. If this be true, we must be prepared to see a good many other things decline. First after poetry, perhaps religion, and after that the possibility of political cohesion. If we read history carefully enough, we shall find in most cases, that this lopsided civilisation, under some very high-sounding aliases, 'Perfectibility of Human Nature,' 'Age of Reason,' and so forth, has a trick of moving in a circle, and playing itself out. By-and-by the neglected half of human nature has its revenge. The fatal flaw in this emotionless culture is that it contains no sort of human amalgam strong enough to bind society together. The individual forces composing it are what Lord Palmerston would have called 'a fortuitous concourse of atoms,' and possess no element of political adherence. The forgotten thing that under the name of Emotion was allowed to fall asleep as quiet

as a lamb—the busy worshippers of Reason taking no note of the fact—awakens one day with a changed name and a changed nature. It is now a lion. Spurned Emotion has grown to Rage, an easy transition. Renewed by his sleep, the lion rises up and scowls around him, rushes into society with his tail in the air, inaugurates a Reign of Terror, and reasserts the sovereignty of the brute. When the mad fit has gone, and the long arrears to the heart have been paid for in blood, cash down, society sits down again clothed and in its right mind. The Sisyphus of civilisation finds himself again at the foot of the hill, glad to accept a philosophy that, if less high-sounding and pretentious, is at least a good deal more human.

That in the progress of the civilisation worth the name, the arts should, and actually do extend their influence and empire, hardly requires to be argued. It is rather a matter of historical demonstration than a matter of opinion, and the immensely wider field and increased appreciation of the particular art of poetry might be amply illustrated by simple reference to fact. We do not mean to assert, however, that the publication of any number of editions of the best poets, with an almost universally reading public, necessarily involves the more frequent recurrence in society of the poet born. The times and seasons of genius are as inscrutable as the thing itself. It is one of

those things (for there are a few of them yet left) that has not as yet been altogether circumvented by the rationalist. The natural law—as he would probably call it—that evolves its higher immortals, that drops down here and there, over three or four centuries, its Raphaels, Shakspeares, and Beethovens, is one of those that has not been quite accounted for by that science of Averages which promises to make everything so easy by-and-by. We can see no good reason, however, for concluding that in such an improved condition of society as this advanced civilisation brings about, the poetical gift amounting to genius should occur less frequently, although it may be easy to conceive that it may be born under the unlucky star of having its lot cast in a mechanical civilisation unfavourable to its development. It must be admitted also that the same artificial education that stimulates mediocrity so wonderfully, seems sometimes, not only to obscure but even to interfere with and impede, the more original gift. And yet these unfavourable influences once overcome, civilisation stands no longer in the way, but rather pays tribute. We need not look for the removal of these obstacles, nor is civilisation altogether to blame for them. It must legislate in the interests of the majority, not the minority—the rule, not the exception—and even if it were advisable, it would yet remain impossible to make

educational provision, to fit at all points such exceptional cases as genius presents. The ideal *milieu* that would do justice to every variety and degree of natural gift, and injustice to none, is as far off as ever, and will probably remain what it ever has been, a world-without-end desideratum. But what if these very obstacles of genius, the earthly incompatibilities, the uncongeniality of atmosphere, which always have been, and from the nature of things must continue to be, its never-ending complaints—what if these are only the providential and appointed spurs in the side of genius, intended to take the place of the more ordinary educational stimulants that serve the purpose of mediocrity? It might be fairly argued from the lives of great men, that there is a given amount of genius at which education becomes almost impossible, and which, in fact, defies education in the ordinary sense of the word. There seems to be a degree reached in the brain barometer, at which faculty undergoes a chemical change and slips through the fingers of the educational manipulator in an imponderable ether. Let the earth rejoice that this abnormal gift usually brings with it the gift to educate itself. Sir Humphry Davy, in a letter to his mother, making reference to the way in which his schoolmaster neglected him when he was a child, declares he was fortunate in such neglect, and adds, 'I perhaps owe to this circumstance the little talents I

have, and their peculiar application.' Sir Walter Scott, who cut but a poor figure at school, says that 'the best part of every man's education is that which he gives himself.' William Blake goes a good deal further, and boldly says—

> Thank God, I never was sent to school
> To be flogged into following the style of a fool.

Leslie, again, declares it was Fuseli's 'wise neglect' of young Landseer that helped to make him what he afterwards became. Turner's father put him to school to learn drawing, and in a short time his teacher, a most competent man, brought the pupil back, fairly beaten, and told his father it was no use, the case was hopeless. Many such anecdotes from the lives of great artists might be added to these, but perhaps poetry's more nearly related sister art of music supplies us with the most striking illustrations. On that auspicious morning, which must ever be held in grateful remembrance by all lovers of music, when the Duke of Saxe-Weissenfels caught a little boy surreptitiously amusing himself on his chapel-organ, ordered him up before him, and settled his career from that day forward, by then and there finding him guilty of genius, no one was more astonished at the verdict than the said boy's own father, who could throw very little light on how young Händel came by his

accomplishment, and none at all on how he came by his genius—a thing he had never even been suspected of. Again, Schubert's instructor complained that he was always making the mortifying discovery that he could tell his pupil nothing but what he knew beforehand. When young Nicolo Paganini—a mere boy—was sent to Parma to study under Alessandro Rolla, the great musician, on hearing him play, told him to go home, he could teach him nothing. Moschelles told the parents of young Mendelssohn the same thing, and when that excellent couple had at length prevailed on him to give their son lessons, he knew and openly confessed the thing was a mere form. In the recently-published Life of Moschelles we find an entry in his diary dated November 22nd, 1824 (Mendelssohn being then fourteen), to the following effect: 'This afternoon I gave Felix Mendelssohn his first lesson without losing sight for a single moment of the fact, that I was sitting next a master, not a pupil.' Mozart, again, was the despair of his instructors. And what indeed could anyone be expected to teach a boy who could write tunes at four years old, and was a master himself, and the astonishment of masters, at an age, in ordinary cases, before education can be said to have properly begun! Then again, Beethoven, how he laughed at the idea of even Haydn

having taught him anything. He was a standing puzzle to the professors, and to the end of his life used to enjoy their helpless perplexities, and would chuckle over the difficulties they could not explain by reference to any authoritative thorough-bass book. Cases like these set all ordinary method at defiance.

The difficulty of bringing musical genius under any systematic educational training is even aggravated in the poet's case. If the gift indeed be small enough education is everything, and in such a case it will teach the poet to be a more elegant *rimeur* of the *vers de société* stamp, and the musician an endless producer of what are called *morceaux de salon*, but one naturally does not look for anything corresponding to the 'Samson Agonistes' or the Sonata 'Pathétique' from such quarters. The artificial soil that hurries into fruit the smaller faculty may not always be the most suited for the development of the deeper-rooted gift. On the contrary, we suspect that the civilisation that levels up the lower endowment, sometimes involves a corresponding liability to level down the higher. Again, in a condition of society so almost universally informed, if not cultivated, the recognition of anything short of towering genius is hardly to be expected. Who could bring himself to believe, for example, that if three-fourths of the poets eulogized in

Johnson's 'Lives,' or gathered together in Chalmers' Collection, were walking in the flesh amongst us now, it would make any appreciable difference! Not that any one begrudges them the niche they have earned, only were it to be earned again, and upon the same work, who can reasonably doubt but that an immense preponderance of them would pass on to their graves unnoticed?

Critical discernment, and discrimination between gift and gift, seems to increase in difficulty with the progress of civilisation. In an age when education was the privilege and luxury of the few, the greater gift made its mark readily, but when the advantages of culture become more generally distributed, it is not so readily recognised, and the man of talent—more especially the man of mimetic talent—is by the great majority not to be distinguished from the man of genius. In much of the criticism issuing from even authoritative quarters, one not unfrequently sees the work of the merely dexterous performer passing off for the outcome of inspiration. In the interests of art it would pay well if every critic were gagged who did not know the difference. Not to hint for one moment that a perfect knowledge and use of the instruments of his art can be dispensed with, even by genius itself, we still hold that it is mainly to this educated rattle of the tools without the gift, that we are

indebted for the abundance of modern poetry so called. Perhaps it is one of the inevitable hostages we must pay to universal civilisation, but it is surely worth an effort to keep the two products apart. The difference of value is discriminated by all in the more ordinary affairs of life. An illustration may be taken from an art which everyone practises more or less, the art of speech. A man may talk the purest rubbish in the purest English, perfect in style, faultless in grammar. What is called his 'delivery' may be perfect, while the thing itself delivered is utterly worthless; dear at the breath it cost to deliver it, dearer still at the effort to listen. Now this of course is mere platitude. Nobody disputes it, because there is almost nobody but what has to endure it now and then. But it does not strike us all so forcibly that there is an analogous case to this in all the other and higher arts. The analogy in music, for instance, is not so commonly perceived. Change the medium of expression from words to sound, and some will even deny that such analogy exists. Amongst so-called musicians themselves, nevertheless, nothing is more common than for a man to convince himself that he is giving the world music, when he is only giving them grammatical noise under cover of musical speech. In his sphere he is neither more nor less than an idealess chatterer of correctly worded nonsense.

Many who can clearly discern this in the case of speech, seem to fall short of the perception that in music —which is only after all a subtler form of speech—it is equally necessary to have something to say worth saying, before the thing said can have any value. The analogy holds good with all the arts—for all are but different modes of conveying thought and feeling. It is not alone sufficient that a musician should know thorough-bass and counterpoint, or a painter the laws of perspective and chiaroscuro,—or, in short, that any artist, whatever that art may be, should have a perfect knowledge of his subject, and a perfect mastery of its minutest appliances. Unless there goes along with these the ability to use them in the conveyance of original thought, his execution may be admirable, he may be the most skilful of artificers, if you will, but an artist never. Lord Bacon says of studies, 'They teach not their own use: but *that* is a wisdom without them and above them.' This is the part of every artist's education no man can give him, and is not to be confounded with technical dexterity. This last contribution to his efficiency and the one that lifts him out of mediocrity cannot be attached by any amount of educational fitting and screwing. It is the gift specially contributed by his Maker—that impalpable gift beyond the reach of criticism or definition, and in the artist's case his

greatness will mainly depend on his clear perception of what that gift consists, and the devout loyalty with which he is prepared to live for it.

The commonness of the extrinsical, and what may be called the ingrafted talent, as compared to that which is intrinsical and indigenous, is sufficient to account for the greater bulk and abundance of its products. In poetry we have a hundred volumes coming from this ingrafted talent, for one that issues from natural gift: work which may be considered the result of a cultivated taste and a fair education, and in many cases accompanied with great technical adroitness. Now it would be ungrateful not to acknowledge that many of these volumes are most interesting, and untrue to say they are perfectly devoid of natural gift. The work they represent may be, and sometimes is, more conscientiously creditable in a certain sense than the work of genius itself, and cultivation is as great a duty in their case as in the other. The commandment is as binding on the one talent as the ten, and if we had no higher motive than personal satisfaction, better cultivate ever so little a patch than none. Better that a man should grow mignonette on a window-sill than no flowers at all. But yet in the interests of art and art-criticism, it is essential that the two kinds of work—for the difference is one of quality as well as degree—should

be broadly distinguished and clearly discriminated. The ingrafted faculty for poetry, sustaining itself mainly from memory and the radiation of greater minds, and building out of its funded educational acquirements, however highly cultivated and however artistically it may clothe itself with words, will never take the place or work the miracles of that simpler and deeper endowment that derives its nurture more directly from its own heart, and bases its power upon the exercise of its own intrinsic capabilities. The products of the two are as widely different as their sources, and let no poet deceive himself, the difference is readily recognised, and keenly appreciated by the most unsophisticated apprehensions, and pronounced upon with unerring instinct, by thousands who know nothing of the wherefore of the difference, and who could not for the life of them give a reason for their preference. Such preference, however, let it be remembered, is not the less deeply rooted because it is arrived at by no conscious process. Nor, on the other hand, are the dislikes in such cases to be pooh-poohed simply because the explanation of it is not always at hand—

> Je ne vous aime pas, Hylas ;
> Je n'en saurais dire la cause.
> Je sais seulement une chose ;
> C'est que je ne vous aime pas—

and there is no help for it. No amount of agonised

excogitation, no amount of the most masterly manipulation of the implements of the art, will ever succeed in giving us the tiger-like spring of the original conception—the leap in the air as of an unsheathed sword—that characterises the genuine inspiration. Those conceptions of the poet that strike the deepest and live the longest do not come to him by any long-sustained and elaborate process; but finely sensitive to Nature's ordinary influences, at her slightest touch,

> Across his sea of mind,
> The thought comes streaming like a blazing ship
> Upon a mighty wind.

The true gift does not go out of its accustomed way for its effects; does not dive to the bottom of its own consciousness to bring up with infinite labour its brightest pearls. If the thought be there, the faintest breeze will give it wing. Boasting no mysterious power or process, it rather takes delight in clothing things familiar and palpable with 'golden exhalations of the dawn.' An over-critical fondness for the manner of the poet's speech may interfere with the vigour of it. The gift will not stand a too artificial treatment. A native plant taken from the hillside to the garden, notwithstanding the greatest care—as those who have tried it can tell—is apt to become enfeebled. Culture in this way becomes

sometimes a very questionable benefit to the poet. To the man of talent, and especially to the critic, it is of the last importance, but it is very possible for the poet to wear his culture in such a way as to impede and enfeeble him that wears it. The educated and literary poet—except when endowed with the very highest power—can never sufficiently forget and shake himself free of the critical element, and seldom attains that perfect, because unconscious, *ars celare artem*, which characterises the more robust and less elaborated gift. It may occur to many that the poetry of Mr. Browning may serve as an illustration here. But his case is not so much to the point as many others. His is rather a unique example. In him it is difficult to draw the line between information and inspiration ; one cannot well conceive of them apart. Take away his culture, or even reduce it to mediocrity, and you withdraw his essential element, and, in fact, put his genius in a receiver and pump the air away. Without elaborate and excessive culture the lever of Mr. Browning's genius would have found no fulcrum, and we question much if in a less cultured age he would have had temptation enough to have become a poet at all.

There are many and much more fitting illustrations than his case affords. The very highest genius is not altogether untouched by it. Who would not even gladly

accept a less completely informed Milton, instead of the one we have, bristling all over with a quickset of mythological briers, which ninety-nine out of a hundred of his admirers prefer leaping over to walking through, and which they do leap over? Cowley again, 'the poet of the brain,' as M. Taine so justly calls him, affords a less important, but yet a more striking case; in fact, he is one of the best examples we have of the purely literary poet. If we could take from his poetry those ingenious absurdities, and affected prettinesses, with which a lettered overniceness so plentifully strewed it; or if we could only have kept his poetry as sweetly simple as his prose, how much more readable it would have been. The genius of Burns itself—and Nature never sent anything out of her heart with a clearer distinctness than *that*—is not altogether untainted in this respect. If there ever was a poet born on purpose to illustrate the difference between the poetry of genius and the poetry of talent, between the poetry of impulse and the poetry of effort, between the poetry of inspiration and the poetry of gestation; in short, between the intrinsical and extrinsical gift—surely that poet was Burns. One can hardly open his works at random without finding some proof of what we say. His worship of the true fire, and his almost godlike revelry in the use of it, may be inversely estimated by his correspond-

ing contempt of the borrowed light. His perception of the infinite value of the one, and the pretentious hollowness of the other, were equally clear and strong; and in making allusion to their respective claims, he was not in the habit of mincing matters.

> What's a' your jargon o' your schools,
> Your Latin names for horns and stools;
> If honest Nature made you fools,
> What sairs your grammers?
> Ye'd better ta'en up spades and shools
> Or knappin-hammers.
>
> A set o' dull conceited hashes
> Confuse their brains in college classes!
> They gang in stirks, and come out asses,
> Plain truth to speak.
> And syne they think to climb Parnassus
> By dint o' Greek.
>
> Gie me ae spark o' Nature's fire!
> That's a' the learning I desire.
> Then though I trudge through dub and mire,
> At pleugh or cart,
> My muse, though hamely in attire,
> May touch the heart.

And yet—not to detract one moment from the infinite credit he had in the little culture he so manfully strove to give himself—who can read his letters without perceiving that even that little made him not a little pedantic sometimes? And in his poems, too, we have now and then a phrase such as 'the tenebrific scene,'

and a few others of that description, not many, but yet just enough to make every lover of true poetry inwardly thank God that the poet's culture went no further in that direction, and that he escaped the vice of 'fine writing' by a happy ignorance of it. Again, in Goethe it may be questioned whether the philosopher and man of science did not sometimes super-saturate the poet. Even in Shakspeare himself we are perhaps more indebted to his 'little Latin and less Greek' than we commonly suppose. Better for us it may be, after all, that like his own Holofernes, and Nathaniel in 'Love's Labour's Lost,' he did not manage to steal from the great feast of languages any more than the scraps. Had he been more perfectly equipped, we might have had more of his learning and less of his genius : the one we could have had as well from anyone else, the other from no one else.

Now if the poet born runs this risk, and even suffers by it, to some degree, notwithstanding the continually counteracting influence of his genius, we need not perhaps be so surprised to find that the smaller talent of the poet made is sometimes overpowered by it, or that in a highly-educated age the artificial modifications of the poetic faculty should be so common.

By far the most admissible ground lying between the poet born and the poet made is unquestionably occupied

by the purely critical and reflective writer of verse. Most admissible because he cultivates that little isthmus which may be said to stretch between the two, but which properly belongs to neither. What he produces is not so much poetry as a kind of sublimated prose; just such thoughts as may occur to any educated person, carefully chiselled into rhythmical form. The words of such writers are not winged, but are rather arrows skilfully feathered. Their productions have none of the marks of an overmastering inspiration. They possess their genius, but are never possessed by it: poets *minus* the passion, and consequently have none of the creative fire and lofty utterance that passion alone can give. We suspect that the most successful cultivators of this isthmus know better than to lay any claim to being the real inheritors of Apollo's laurel bough; and yet this half-way house between Poetry and Prose is often frequented by the highest genius. Coleridge, with a humility that should not be without its lesson—we had almost said its rebuke—for a good many versifiers of the present day, designated some of his poems 'rhymed prose.' But that intermediate retreat had far more frequent visitors than he. Wordsworth may be said to have rented permanent apartments there, for, keeping out of sight in the meantime his unsurpassed and unsurpassable inspirations, he certainly

wrote more rhymed prose than any other possessor of the real gift that ever lived. In fact, it is mainly to the influence of Wordsworth's rhymed prose that we owe the existence of this half-way school ; and although it has a numerous and influential following, and numbers among its productions a considerable part of what such writers as Clough and Mr. Matthew Arnold have produced, we are by no means clear that that influence has been an unmixed good. There is reason to suspect that a good deal of a kind of verse the world might have done very well without has been contributed by that modern modification of the faculty—so wonderfully prolific since Wordsworth's day—which fails to recognise with sufficient discrimination the line between rhymed prcse and poetry. In an eloquent passage in the 'Excursion' the author deplores the loss of those poets who, as he says, 'go to the grave unthought of'—

> men endowed with highest gifts,
> The vision and the faculty divine,
> Yet wanting the accomplishment of verse.

Our misfortune is just the opposite of all this. In too many cases we have the 'verse' without the vision.

In attempting to trace the historical fluctuations and modifications of poetry one cannot but remark the continual tendency of the art to fall into artificial and

conventional forms; a proneness to drift into positive schools with accepted models, and fixed and final laws, and which an extreme culture is apt to regard with something like superstition. It would seem that in the history of art, as well as in politics or theology, there exists a periodical necessity for revolution. Around it, as around these, gathers a tangle of tradition that now and then must be kicked off in the interests of further progress. Art has been as stubborn a conservator of this sort of *impedimenta* as theology; and just as the Church, as some suppose, has suffered the letter to overgrow the spirit, and now totters beneath a burden of exanimate dogma, which it ought to have allowed to fall in its proper time, like dead leaves that had already served their purpose—in like manner art has frequently been found in an almost breathless condition from the sheer weight of its traditionary harness. In its history we can trace where this hardening process begins, and follow its gradually increasing pressure until the chain begins to gall, and the soul of art begins to sicken under its ever-accumulating burden. Then enters the reformer—some Cromwell of art—who, by the inherent unfetterability of genius, snaps the chain in two and orders the bauble away.

Never was there a greater innovator, or one who

shocked the art proprieties with greater effect than Shakspeare himself; and, dating from his time, it is interesting to watch this ebb and flow, or rather this alternate heating and cooling process in the history of the poetic faculty, the oscillation between the claims of the natural poet and the literary and partially made one. Poetry in the Elizabethan era was poured out molten and alive, so much so, that some of its creations—built out of airy nothing—are yet to us more real than the realities of that time. It was not to be expected that the poetical thermometer could have remained long at that height, so we find that it gradually cooled down and hardened, until Dryden and the Restoration group brought back in some measure its wonted fire and vigour; yet only to fall back again and freeze more completely than ever into the cold monotony and prim formality of the poets of Queen Anne. Again the blood began to warm in the veins of Gray, and Cowper, and Campbell, till at last it reached its modern climax in the glowing passion—not altogether free from fever—of Lord Byron. The tide turned again, and retreated according to its law, till it reached the cultured serenity of Windermere, the placid and almost oriental quietism of Wordsworth. And through his influence we arrive at our own time, with all its advantages and disadvantages, waiting for the next deliverer, as some

would almost imply, who do not hide their impatience and restlessness under the artificialities of modern culture. Nor, notwithstanding all the unquestionably high poetry our time has yielded, is their impatience altogether without reason. Unreasonable it might appear, if applied to particular cases, but anyone paying attention to the general tenor and teaching of much of the poetical criticism now obtaining, must have observed how frequently it is hinted—and more than hinted—that if we are to pass for judges at all, we must give our hearty approval in many instances to poetry that has little else to recommend it than a certain technical finish, and musical completeness, and that even for the sake of these artistic advantages, we must be prepared to overlook other qualities that are clearly and unquestionably objectionable. Such critics may carry a few readers with them ; but it is too far on in our day to expect of the majority of men that they should dance to the piping of an educated satyr, even if his exquisite music should compel them to admit that he has found the reed of Pan himself. We make no reference to the metrical attitudinizing of the school which mistakes a cultured eccentricity for genius, and which seems to think it a duty to train their Pegasus, as if he were a circus hack, to do nothing but tricks. Such extravagances may be safely left to cure themselves. But

leaving these out of sight, men have a right to express their disappointment, when they believe they have amongst them possessors of the real gift, who have allowed the subject to decline in their hands until it has become little better than a lay figure, upon which they are contented to display the mere millinery of poetical thought: inheritors of a real inspiration, misled by the affectation of the hour, allowing themselves to be tempted into the tricks of the literary *costumier*, who clothes his muse with 'samite' and puts a 'cithern' in her hand, and instructs her in all the mannered mimicry of an obsolete English. There is no doubt a sweet and dainty delight in much of this poetry. In many instances it is a real gift exercised only in a wrong direction. There is a quaint prettiness about it that reminds one of an old enamel, an antique Watteau-like artificial simplicity, that has its peculiar charm. It is clearly a step in advance of the Damons and Delias, the Chloes and Phillises, the imitation shepherds and shepherdesses, and all the book-rural mockeries of nature and human nature, that so daintily disfigured what is commonly called the classical period of English literature. It is the same in kind, however; the same misdirection of the same faculty, developed under slightly modified conditions. Better bred if you choose, and more elaborately cultured, but

nearly identical. Time has changed the actors and the *mise en scène*, but the thing produced is just a revival of the old farce. Such poetry will always have its admirers of a kind, just as there are still readers living who can convince themselves they find nature and reality in the Pastorals of Pope, or the amatory ditties of Shenstone and others of his time. We do not at all quarrel with the fact ; only let no critic attempt to foist upon us such things, as if they belonged to the order of that poetry which holds the mirror up to nature, when they do not even hold it up to art in any dignified sense so much as to artifice.

The 'classic period of English literature,' how easy to expand the title—and the fatal sarcasm that time will clothe it in—to a whole chapter on the influence of supposed culture on the poetic faculty. Showing, as it might be made to show, the easiness of writing the most polished verse and the difficulty of writing even the roughest of true poetry. How easy to illustrate from much of the verse called classic that inveterate tendency of art to run into mere drapery, to the almost burial and oblivion of the thing draped. And in our time the danger is imminent. In our anxiety 'to paint the outward wall so costly gay,' the soul of the thing itself seems to be escaping us. With all deference to one or two great poetical names

amongst us, we cannot help thinking that seldom has a time stood more in need than the present of the advent of a soul great enough to be simple, and bringing with it the sacred fire that burns convention to a cinder.

It is not to be disguised that many readers of present-day poetry would gladly hail a reversion in favour of

> The few strong instincts, and the few plain rules,

that Wordsworth spoke of. They complain, and not altogether without reason, that too much of what is offered for their delectation wants the freshness and fragrance of Nature, nor are they content, just yet, to accept, in the place of Nature's growths, the most carefully cultivated of exotics. Perfect of its kind as much of our later poetry may be, its perfection is too studied and finically correct to give general or abiding satisfaction, and carries too plainly upon it the marks of the supersubtle manipulation of the modern *littérateur*. These trim gardens of thought are pleasant enough in their way, but in every healthy estimation they will never be preferred—nay, nor compared—to those unbroken acres of wilderness and wild flowers where the indigenous forces of Nature are at work, and God only is the gardener.

One of the commonest sources of this over-mannered

feebleness in modern poetry, is directly attributable to an overstrained and artificial culture of what has been called word-music—a literary affectation which in a great measure sacrifices intelligibility to mere euphony, and which is not only indulged in by many modern poets, but not uncommonly praised by modern critics. One of the most enthusiastic of Mr. Tennyson's commentators, and no mean critic—waxing eloquent over the word-music of one of the laureate's early and minor poems, tells us that the poem under examination 'does not mean much' (we think differently)—but, instead of stopping short with this confession, he goes on in his rapture to declare, that in spite of its not meaning much, it is perfect, and 'that it would not matter *if it meant nothing*'![1] Now, were we for one moment to compare this worshipper of word-music to the old lady who talked of 'that blessed word Mesopotamia,' he would probably think we were poking fun at him. But what does such criticism really amount to, if it does not plainly confess, that meaning in poetry may with impunity be sacrificed to music, that intelligibility, force, perspicuity, is of little or no importance, so long as by a euphonious arrangement of vowel sounds, or a tinkling tintinabulation of consonants, you

[1] 'Study of Tennyson,' by Tainish, p. 40.

can produce something, that at all events keeps its promise to the ear, if it break it to the sense?

The almost universal cultivation of music, and the rapidly increasing appreciation of the highest kinds of it, are certainly features upon which the age may be fairly congratulated, and it is not to be supposed that such a wonderful development of the art could possibly fail to make its mark upon contemporary poetry. When the poetry of the Victorian era has receded far enough in time to admit of a final and unbiassed summing-up, we make no question but that one of its most conspicuous excellences will be found to be its musicalness. The exquisite melody alone of Mr. Tennyson is more than sufficient to consecrate a muse far less profound than his. Beyond doubt the most perfect passages in poetry have always been the most musical, but to say that on that account they can dispense with meaning, or even consider it a thing of minor importance, would be ridiculous. On the contrary, one has only to take to pieces any of those exquisite passages which, by reason of their perfection, have become permanently embedded and interwoven with the very texture of our language, 'those jewels five-words long,' as Mr. Tennyson calls them—

> That on the stretched forefinger of all time
> Sparkle for ever—

in order to come to a very different conclusion. Take any such passage and examine it minutely, and you will find that its perfection consists of a subtle interfusion of sound and sense, and a perfect equipoise of meaning and melody, that sacrifices not so much as a hair on either side.

One cannot but regard the culture of sound for poetical purposes—and, as far as that goes, for prose as well—as of the highest consequence. To a certain extent we are all victims, consciously or unconsciously, of the Mesopotamian fallacy, whether we care to admit it or not. That mere noise, mere colour, mere form, mere motion, altogether apart from any intellectual association or moral significance, do of themselves affect us, is not to be denied, and need not be laughed at. And, that euphonious sound gives wings to thought as nothing else does, whether we can explain it or not, is a simple fact that transcends the region of argument. It has the power even of endowing very commonplace thought with a kind of fictitious immortality. In all languages some of the weakest and most childish of proverbs have held their place for ages by reason only of the musical mould in which they have been cast. Many of them owe their continued existence to a mere trick of sound, some catching rhyme, or euphonious alliteration, some silvery see-saw of sibilants, or, perhaps most of all, to a dexterously balanced distribu-

tion and modulation of vowel sounds. In the world of art the end justifies everything, and any limitation as to means is not for a moment to be considered. We do not trouble ourselves to enquire too minutely whether or not Turner produced those wonderful effects of surging sea by a twirl of his thumb-nail. For us it is sufficient that the effect is there. The water is alive, and Genius is justified of her children. No exercise of faculty can be too mean or too minute as long as it is controlled by the inspiration, and is not permitted to sink into the region of mere mechanism.

The art of good writing, either in prose or poetry, was defined by Shenstone as consisting of 'spontaneous thought and laboured expression,' and the definition has a certain scope that gives it a fitness for all the other arts. Elaboration can hardly be overdone as long as the thought which sustains and directs it is the *vrai feu*, and not the *ignis fatuus* of a mistaken ambition. The capacity, in fact, for minute refinement in detail, and infinite loving labour, is an instinct of all truly artistic genius. But it should not be forgotten that art in these matters of detail, except in the most competent hands, is apt to degenerate into artifice, until the means and expedients called in for the purpose of enforcing thought, are found only to hamper and enfeeble it. To attempt the finish of Rembrandt one

must have his insight as well. In such a case music degenerates into mere '*Musikmacherei*,' and poetry becomes the mechanical trick of the mere versemaker, the work not of the artist, but rather of the weak artificer, whose pottering demon tempts him on to

> Add and alter many times
> Till all is ripe and rotten.

Given the strong poetical thought, and we question much whether or not it is possible to give it an embodiment that shall be too musical; but when critics can show such fondness for the vehicle of poetical thought rather than the thing itself, as shall lead them to avow that if language be only musical enough it does not matter if it mean nothing, it is surely time to enter a protest, if poetry has not to sink into an empty jingle, and become to us the trick *of one that hath a pleasant voice, and can play well on an instrument.*

The abuse of the music-worshippers in poetry is capable of illustration from an exactly diverse quarter. Wagner and his school are endeavouring to enforce a theory, which, as it seems to us, is rooted in an error on the exactly opposite side. By an attempt to get out of music an amount of dramatic meaning, which from the very nature of music, and the character of its art imple-

ments, it cannot be made to render up, they are making the same mistake—on the other side—with those who attempt to load poetry with more music than the nature of articulate language will artistically admit of. To claim anything like originality for Wagner's theory is almost puerile. It is as old as the phenomenon of sound, or the sense of hearing; a thesis universally received, only pushed to an unreasonable and untenable extreme. No one ever doubted that music and poetry possessed much in common, and must of necessity play into each other's hands. Nevertheless, the products of each art must stand or fall alone. Beethoven's music to 'Egmont,' or Mendelssohn's to 'A Midsummer Night's Dream,' or Schumann's to 'Manfred,' have distinctive merits of their own, altogether independent of the names Goethe, or Shakspeare, or Byron.

No doubt the association and conjunction of exquisite words with exquisite music is an encounter worthy of the gods themselves, and in every case to be desired. And unfortunately it is not to be denied that only too many of our *libretti*, even to this day, go to prove the justice of Beaumarchais' sarcasm in the 'Barber of Séville,' 'Ce qui ne vaut pas la peine d'être dit, on le chante.' But had these *libretti* been perfect, would the music have been other than it is? No; genius by itself must justify itself,

or nothing. No possible poverty of sound-accompaniment could ever successfully veil the grandeur of Shakspeare's genius, just as no conceivable triviality of word-accompaniment could alter by a cubit the stature of Beethoven's soul. Bad music just remains bad music, and the bray of the beast is not to be concealed, clothe it as you will in the bravest lion's skin of words. On the other hand, the exploded divinities of poetry—your Beatties, Klopstocks, Blackmores, *et hoc*, would in all likelihood continue to hug the ground if their words were yoked to the song of the morning stars.

The two arts are not only to be much better judged apart, but they can be drawn so near as to destroy and neutralise the special perfection that distinctively belongs to each. They must not move on the same line, but rather glide forward on imperceptible parallels, that, by the nature of the case, can never touch. To take an illustration from music itself; it is not the similarity but the difference between a note and its minor third that makes their harmony so sweetly plaintive and pathetic. You have only to draw them closer together by a very few vibrations in order to set your teeth on edge. And so

> If music and sweet poetry agree
> As they must needs, the sister and the brother,

let the very fact of their family connection forbid the banns of a closer alliance. Except by a violation of their nature they can never become one flesh, or one art, in the Wagnerian sense. Where such an alliance has been attempted, the offspring has been some beautifully brainless poetry on the one side, and on the other, music, of which a great part, at least, is unintelligible even amongst musical people. Whether the nonsense or the noise of to-day will ever become, in either case, the wisdom or the music of the future, is a question we are quite contented to let the future settle for itself. But unless these good people—so seemingly essential to every age—who display such an indecent haste in the matter of the Millennium, are much nearer their final triumph than we have any sober means of computing, we suspect that our grandchildren will probably find with us, that a good deal more than sufficient unto the day are the impossible theories thereof.

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