AUSTIN ALFRED

THE BRIDLING OF PEGASUS: PROSE PAPERS ON POETRY

Alfred Austin

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Austin A.

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Содержание

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TO

THE RIGHT HONOURABLE

SIR ALFRED C. LYALL, K.C.B

My dear Lyall,

I should think you must have observed, in the course of your reading, that even in the most accredited organs of opinion, principles of literary criticism, either explicitly stated or tacitly assumed, are often utterly ignored, in the notice of some work or other in the self-same number. The result can only be to create confusion in the public mind.

In this volume, consisting of papers written at various times during the last thirty years, no such contradiction will, I think, be found. Whether they be deemed sound or otherwise, they are at least coherent; the canons of criticism underlying them being that no verse which is unmusical or obscure can be regarded as Poetry, whatever other qualities it may possess; that Imagination in Poetry, as distinguished from mere Fancy, is the transfiguring of the Real, or actual, into the Ideal, by what Prospero calls his “so potent art”; and, if these conditions are complied with, that the greatness of the poem depends on the greatness of the theme.

To no one so much as to you am I indebted for criticism of the frankest kind. That alone would lead me to ask you to accept the dedication of these pages. But I find a yet further and stronger impulse to do so, in the long and uninterrupted friendship that has subsisted between us, and to which I attach so much value.

Believe me always,
Yours most sincerely,
Alfred Austin.

Swinford Old Manor,
January 1910.

THE ESSENTIALS OF GREAT POETRY

The decay of authority is one of the most marked features of our time. Religion, politics, art, manners, speech, even morality, considered in its widest sense, have all felt the waning of traditional authority, and the substitution for it of individual opinion and taste, and of the wavering and contradictory utterances of publications ostensibly occupied with criticism and supposed to be pronouncing serious judgments. By authority I do not mean the delivery of dogmatic decisions, analogous to those issued by a legal tribunal from which there is no appeal, that have to be accepted and obeyed, but the existence of a body of opinion of long standing, arrived at after due investigation and experience during many generations, and reposing on fixed principles or fundamentals of thought. This it is that is being dethroned in our day, and is being supplanted by a babel of clashing, irreconcilable utterances, often proceeding from the same quarters, even the same mouths.

In no department of thought has this been more conspicuous than in that of literature, especially the higher class of literature; and it is most patent in the prevailing estimate of that branch of literature to which lip-homage is still paid as the highest of all, viz. poetry. Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, have not been openly dethroned; but it would require some boldness to deny that even their due recognition has been indirectly questioned by a considerable amount of neglect, as compared with the interest shown alike by readers and reviewers in poets and poetry of lesser stature. Are we to conclude from this that there is no standard, that there exist no permanent canons by which the relative greatness of poets and poetry can be estimated with reasonable conclusiveness? It is the purpose of this essay to show that such there are.

The expression of individual opinion upon a subject so wide, no matter who the individual might be, would obviously be worthless; and I have no wish to do what has been done too often in our time, to substitute personal taste or bias for canons of criticism that have stood the test of time, and whereon the relative position of poets, great, less great, and comparatively inferior, has reposed. The inductive method was employed long before it was explicitly proclaimed as distinct from and more trustworthy than the merely deductive; and it is such method that will, if indirectly, be employed in this paper. Finally, I shall carefully abstain from the rhetorical enthusiasm or invective that clouds the judgment of writers and readers alike, and invariably degenerates into personal dogmatism, together with intolerance of those who think otherwise. After indicating, to the best of my ability, the laws of thought and the canons of criticism on which should repose the estimate of the poetic hierarchy, I will then ask the reader to observe if the conclusions leave the recognised Masters of Song – Homer, Æschylus, Euripides, Sophocles, Virgil, Lucretius, Dante, Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, Byron – unassailed and unshaken in their poetic supremacy.

There must perforce be certain qualities common to all poetry, whether the greatest, the less great, or the comparatively inferior, and whether descriptive, lyrical, idyllic, reflective, epic, or dramatic; and, so long as there existed any authority or body of generally accepted opinion on the subject, these were at least two such qualities, viz. melodiousness, whether sweet or sonorous, and lucidity or clearness of expression, to be apprehended, without laborious investigation, by highly cultured and simple readers alike. Melodiousness is a quality so essential to, and so inseparable from, all verse that is poetry, that it often, by its mere presence, endows with the character of poetry verse of a very rudimentary kind, verse that just crosses the border between prosaic and poetic verse, and would otherwise be denied admission to the territory of the Muses. Some of the enthusiasts to whom allusion has been made have, I am assured, declared of certain compositions of our time, "This would be poetry, even if it meant nothing at all" – a dictum calculated, like others enunciated in our days, to harden the plain man in his disdain of poetry altogether. It would not be difficult to quote melodious verse published in our time of which it is no exaggeration to say that the words in it are used rather as musical notes than as words signifying anything. In all likelihood such compositions, and

the widespread liking for them, arise partly from the prevailing preference for music over the other arts, and in part from the mental indolence that usually accompanies emotion in all but the highest minds. Nevertheless it cannot be too much insisted on that music, or melodiousness, either sweet or sonorous, is absolutely indispensable to poetry; and where it is absent, poetry is absent, even though thought and wide speculation be conspicuous in it. As Horace put it long ago in his *Art of Poetry*,

Non satis est pulchra esse poemata: dulcia sunto.

Almost as essential to poetry, and equally as regards poetry of the loftiest and poetry of the lowliest kind, is lucidity, or clearness of expression. No poet of much account is ever obscure, unless the text happens to be corrupt. When essays and even volumes are issued, since deemed indispensable for the understanding of a writer labelled as a poet, one may be quite sure that, however deep a thinker, he is not a poet of the first order, and not a poet at all in the passages that require such explanation. When one hears a well-authenticated story to the effect that a great scholar said of an English paraphrase of a well-known Greek poem, that he thought he had succeeded in gathering its meaning with the help of the original, one ought to know what to think of the work. Yet, though much of its author's verse is of that non-lucid character, it is habitually saluted by many critics as great poetry. With all respect, I venture to affirm that in such circumstances the designation must be a misnomer. I remember a poem being read to me, in perfect good faith, by its author, a man of great mental distinction and no little imagination, of which, though I listened with the closest attention, not only did I not understand one word, but I had not the faintest idea, as the colloquial phrase is, what it was about. When it was published, I asked three ardent admirers of the author to explain to me its meaning. They failed entirely to do so. The saying, concerning the orator, *clarescit urendo*, is even yet more applicable to the poet. He brightens as he burns. Yet, of recent times, verse fuliginous, clouded, and enshrouded in obscurity, has been hailed in many quarters, not only as poetry, but poetry of an exceptionally superior sort.

If it be urged that Dante, and even Shakespeare, do not always yield up their meaning to the reader at once, the allegation must be traversed absolutely. The immediate apprehension of the meaning of the *Vita Nuova* and the *Divina Commedia* presupposes an intimate acquaintance with the various dialects of the Italian language existing in Dante's time, and likewise with the erudition he scatters so profusely, if allusively, throughout his verse. But to the Italian readers of Dante, even superficially acquainted with those dialects, and adequate masters of the theology and the astronomy of Dante's time, those poems present no difficulty. Of Shakespeare, the greatest of all the poets in our language, let it be granted that he is not unoften one of the most careless and even most slovenly; but rarely is he so to the obscuring of his meaning, and never save casually, and in some brief passage. Yet let it not be inferred that I am of opinion that the full meaning of the greatest passages in the greatest poems is to be seized all at once, or by the average reader at all. That is "deeper than ever plummet sounded," though Tennyson's "indolent reviewer" apparently imagines that he at once fathoms the more intellectual poetry of his time. There can be but few readers, and possibly none but poets themselves, or persons who, to quote Tennyson again, "have the great poetic heart," who master the full significance of *Hamlet* or of the tersely told story of Francesca da Rimini. But the whole world at once understood the more obvious tenor of both, and is not puzzled by either. There is a sliding scale of understanding, as there is a sliding scale of inspiration. "We needs must love the highest when we see it"; but "when we see it" is an important qualification in the statement.

I do not know that there are any qualities save melodiousness, sweet or sonorous, and lucidity, that are absolutely essential to whatever is to be regarded as poetry. In order to preclude misapprehension, let it be added that, while both are essential to poetry, they will not, by themselves, go far towards endowing verse with the poetic character. As an example of this, let me cite verse

which is not unmelodious, though not specially remarkable for melodiousness, and not obscure, yet is not poetry, and hardly on the border of it:

I have a boy of five years old;
His face is fair and fresh to see;
His limbs are cast in beauty's mould,
And dearly he loves me.

One morn we strolled on our dry walk,
Our quiet home all full in view,
And held such intermitted talk
As we are wont to do.

My thoughts on former pleasures ran;
I thought of Kilve's delightful shore,
Our pleasant home when spring began,
A long, long year before.

A day it was when I could bear
Some fond regrets to entertain;
With so much happiness to spare,
I could not feel a pain.

This blameless, correct, harmonious, and thoroughly lucid verse is by a poet who has written poetry of the noblest quality, no less a poet than Wordsworth. Yet he sorely tries his readers by page after page no more poetical than the foregoing; and he offered, on the first appearance of every volume of his, ample matter for such critics as would rather be sweepingly censorious than discriminating, to depreciate and even to ridicule him. His reverent admirers, who comprise all true lovers of poetry, are acquainted with, and probably possess, a copy of Matthew Arnold's Selection, entitled *Poems of Wordsworth*– a small volume which that gifted Wordsworthian, who knew and acknowledged with his usual sense of humour how many unpoetical "sermons," as he called them, Wordsworth had written, deliberately considered to contain all the real poetry he has left us. If I may refer for a moment to my own copy of it, this is scored with brief observations in pencil, the upshot of which is that the small fraction of his work, which Matthew Arnold too liberally wished to be regarded as *digna Phœbi*, would have again to be materially reduced by a dispassionate criticism.

The most generous critic, if he is to be discriminating and just, cannot, let me say again, allow that any verse which is profoundly obscure or utterly unmusical, no matter how intellectual in substance, deserves the appellation of poetry. But on a very thin thread of meaning poetry, or a very fair imitation of it, may be hung by the aid of musical sound. Without going so far as Arnold again, who once wrote to me that Shelley's "My soul is an enchanted boat" seemed to him "mere musical verbiage," that poem might serve as an instance of verse which, in spite of tenuity of meaning, becomes poetry by sheer magic of exquisite music.

My soul is an enchanted boat,
Which, like a sleeping swan, doth float
Upon the silver waves of thy sweet singing;
And thine doth like an angel sit
Beside a helm conducting it,
Whilst all the winds with melody are ringing

It seems to float ever, for ever,
Upon that many-winding river,
Between mountains, woods, abysses.
A paradise of wildernesses!
Till, like one in slumber bound,
Borne to the ocean, I float down, around,
Into a sea profound of ever-spreading sound.

There is a magic of sound in the verse so enchanting to a reader that he may be pardoned for failing to observe at once that it is mainly musical fancy. Many may remember a line of Tennyson:

Like a tale of little meaning, though the words are strong.

And are we not compelled to feel, on second thoughts, if we have any capacity for discrimination, that here we have poetry of little meaning, though the verse is exquisitely melodious? This is, I conclude, what Arnold meant when he designated it, with a little exaggeration, "musical verbiage."

I have been obliged to linger somewhat on the threshold of my subject in order to emphasise the essential importance and inseparable quality of metrical melodiousness and lucidity in poetry, in order that, in whatever follows in this paper, these indispensable conditions may not be lost sight of; and also because of late each of them has been ousted from consideration by those who have striven, and still strive, to induce literary opinion to accept not only as poetry, but as great poetry, what is conspicuously lacking in both. That I shall have the assent, however, of the weight of authority on this point, and likewise that of the ordinary unaffected lover of poetry, I can scarcely doubt; the more so, as the conclusions thus far reached leave undisturbed upon their seats those mighty ones, of all tongues and all nations, whose universally recognised greatness has received the seal and sanction of many generations.

What may be called the first principles of poetry having thus been propounded, without any necessity for reaffirming them in the investigation of other conclusions yet to be reached, I may move on to what I imagine will be less familiar and perhaps more original in the search for "The Essentials of Great Poetry." If we carefully observe the gradual development of mental power in human beings, irrespectively of any reference to poetry, but as applied to general objects of human interest, we shall find that the advance from elementary to supreme expansion of mental power is in the following order of succession, each preceding element in mental development being retained on the appearance of its successor: (1) Perception, vague at first, as in the newly born, gradually becoming more definite, along with desires of an analogous kind; (2) Sentiment, also vague at first, but by degrees becoming more definite, until it attaches itself to one or more objects exclusively; (3) Thought or Reflection, somewhat hazy in its inception, and often remaining in that condition to the last; (4) Action, which is attended and assisted by the three preceding qualities of Perception, Sentiment, and Thought or Reflection. In other words, human beings perceive before they feel, perceive and feel before they think, perceive, feel, and think before they act, or at least before they act reasonably, though it may be but imperfectly, and though the later or higher stages may in many cases scarcely be reached at all.

Now let us see if, in poetry, the same order or succession in development and expansion does not exist. Never forgetting the essential qualities of melody and lucidity, do we not find that mere descriptive verse, which depends on perception or observation, is the humblest and most elementary form of poetry; that descriptive verse, when suffused with sentiment, gains in value and charm; that if, to the foregoing, thought or reflection be superadded, there is a conspicuous rise in dignity, majesty, and relative excellence; and finally, that the employment of these in narrative action, whether epic or dramatic, carries us on to a stage of supreme excellence which can rarely be predicated of any poetry

in which action is absent? If this be so, we have to the successive development of observation, feeling, thought, and action, an exact analogy or counterpart in (1) Descriptive Poetry; (2) Lyrical Poetry; (3) Reflective Poetry; (4) Epic or Dramatic Poetry; in each of which, melody and lucidity being always present, there is an advance in poetic value over the preceding stage, without the preceding one being eliminated from its progress.

Once again let us have recourse to illustration, which, when fairly chosen, is probably the most effective method for securing assent. Wordsworth presents us with an ample supply of illustrations in three out of the four different kinds of poetry; and therefore to him let us have recourse. In reading the first stanza of *The Pet Lamb*, and two or three stanzas that follow, we have descriptive verse which may be regarded as very elementary poetry, but to which it would seem to many to be hypercritical to refuse that designation. It is too well known to need citation. The opening lines of *The Leech-Gatherer* display the same elementary descriptive character.

> There was a roaring in the wind all night;
> The rain came heavily and fell in floods;
> But now the sun is rising calm and bright;
> The birds are singing in the distant woods;
> Over his own sweet voice the Stock-dove broods;
> The Jay makes answer as the Magpie chatters;
> And all the air is filled with pleasant noise of waters.
>
> All things that love the Sun are out of doors;
> The sky rejoices in the morning's birth;
> The grass is bright with rain-drops; on the moors
> The Hare is running races in her mirth;
> And with her feet she from the plashy earth
> Raises a mist, that, glittering in the sun,
> Runs with her all the way, wherever she doth run.
>
> I was a traveller then upon the moor;
> I saw the Hare that raced about with joy;
> I heard the woods and distant waters roar;
> Or heard them not, as happy as a boy:
> The pleasant season did my heart employ;
> My old remembrances went from me wholly,
> And all the ways of men, so vain and melancholy.

I perceive that, in my copy of the volume of Selections made by Matthew Arnold from the poems of Wordsworth, already alluded to, I have written at the end of *Margaret*, "If this be poetry, surely many people may say they have written poetry all their lives without knowing it." But as Matthew Arnold's critical opinions will carry more weight than mine, and he has included *Margaret* in his Selection, let me quote a dozen lines or so from its opening passage:

> 'Twas Summer, and the Sun had mounted high:
> Southward the landscape indistinctly glared
> Through a pale steam; but all the northern downs,
> In clearest air ascending, showed far off
> A surface dappled o'er with shadows flung
> From brooding clouds; shadows that lay in spots

Determined and unmoved, with steady beams
Of bright and pleasant sunshine interposed;
Pleasant to him who on the soft cool moss
Extends his careless limbs along the front
Of some huge cave, whose rocky ceiling casts
A twilight of its own, an ample shade,
Where the Wren warbles.

But there is, it must not be overlooked, merely Descriptive Poetry of a much higher kind than the foregoing, though Wordsworth may not be the best source from which to draw it. Perhaps its highest possibilities are to be found in Byron, and conspicuously in the third and fourth cantos of *Childe Harold*. Many of the passages of the kind that one remembers there are, however, either too much suffused with the poet's personal feeling, or too closely connected with great incidents in history and the fall of empires, to be quite pertinent examples. A minor but sufficient example taken from *Childe Harold* may suffice for illustration:

It is the hush of night, and all between
Thy margin and the mountains, dusk, yet clear,
Mellow'd and mingling, yet distinctly seen,
Save darken'd Jura, whose capt heights appear
Precipitously steep; and drawing near,
There breathes a living fragrance from the shore,
Of flowers yet fresh with childhood; on the ear
Drops the light drip of the suspended oar,
Or chirps the grasshopper one good-night carol more.

Far finer instances of poetry essentially descriptive in the same poem may be referred to, *e. g.* Canto IV., stanza xcix., beginning "There is a stern round tower of other days"; stanza cvii., beginning with "Cypress and ivy, weed and wallflower grown"; stanza clxxiii., descriptive of Lake Nemi; and even – for it also is strictly descriptive – stanza cxl., opening with the well-known line "I see before me the gladiator lie."

It could not be allowed that any of these, considered separately, satisfies the conditions or essentials of great poetry, though, in company with others, they contribute to that character in a very great poem indeed. Moreover, they serve to show that even mere Descriptive Poetry, which I have spoken of as the "lowest" or most elementary kind of poetry, may rise to striking elevation of merit, and has its counterpart in the sliding scale of observation in various individuals.

Let us now take a step, and a long one, in the scale of importance attained by the various kinds of poetry, and consider the classics of Lyrical Poetry. Here extensive quotation will be less necessary, partly by reason of the wide ground Lyrical Poetry covers, and partly because of its relative popularity in our time, and the familiarity of so many readers with its most enchanting specimens. There is ample room for personal taste and individual idiosyncrasy within the vast boundaries of this fruitful field. Many persons are sadly wanting in observation; and to only a minority can real, serious thought be ascribed. But we all feel, we all have visitations of sentiment; and therefore to all of us is Lyrical Poetry more or less welcome.

The causes, personal and social, that have given to Lyrical Poetry in our time almost exclusive favour in public taste will be dealt with presently. It will distract less from our main purpose to confine ourselves for the present to the recognition of the fact, and to seek to show how very various are the degrees of eminence in Lyrical Poetry. The lyrical note is so natural to poets and poetry that we may expect to find it in the verse of all poets, though in a minor degree in didactic verse; while in some

poets it almost monopolises their utterance. Though perhaps not obvious to many ears to-day, it lurks in no little of Pope's *Epistle of Eloisa to Abelard*, and is unmistakably present in his *Ode on St. Cecilia's Day*. If I am asked if the lyrical note is to be found in Chaucer, the reply must be that, though Chaucer has left nothing which the modern reader would recognise as lyrical, what is called his iambic or five-foot metre is far more anapæstic and lyrical than is the case with any subsequent poet, except Shakespeare. There is a lilt in it equivalent to the lyrical note, which those who read as Chaucer wrote recognise at once. One has only to read the opening lines of the Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales* to perceive this. Not quite to the same extent perhaps as in Chaucer, but withal very noticeably to the ear, the lyrical note is frequently to be caught in Spenser, even where he is not obviously offering the reader Lyrical Poetry; as, for instance, in this stanza in the first canto of the *Fairy Queen*, beginning:

A little lowly hermitage it was,
Down in a dale, hard by a forest's side.

This is not Lyrical Poetry proper, as now understood. But Spenser has left us in his *Epithalamion* a lyrical poem with which only one other English lyric can be placed in competition for the first place. It is too long for more than one brief excerpt to be cited here:

Wake now, my love, awake! for it is time;
The rosy Morne long since left Tithones bed,
All ready to her silver coche to clyme;
And Phœbus gins to shew his glorious hed.
Hark! how the cheerefull birds do chaunt theyr laies
And carroll of loves praise.
The merry Larke hir mattins sings aloft;
The Thrush replyes; the Mavis descant playes;
The Ouzell shrills; the Ruddock warbles soft;
So goodly all agree, with sweet consent,
To this dayes meriment,
Ah! my deere love, why doe ye sleepe thus long,
When meeter were that ye should now awake,
T' awayt the comming of your joyous make,
And hearken to the birds love-learned song,
The deawy leaves among?
For they of joy and pleasance to you sing
That all the woods them answer, and theyr eccho ring.

One is sorry to think that this long, lovely, and varied lyric is less known than it ought to be to the modern readers of Lyrical Poetry. I can only say to them, "Make haste to read it."

In Shakespeare's plays the lyrical note is so often to be heard in the blank verse that the poet's natural aptitude and inclination for singing were amply exercised there; and he gives most voice to it in such plays as *As You Like It* and *Romeo and Juliet*. But it recurs again and again throughout his dramas. Such lines as:

All over-canopied with lush woodbine,

How sweet the moonlight sleeps upon this bank,

Under the shade of melancholy boughs,

are illustrations of what I am pointing out.

Without dwelling on the excellent lyrics written in the reigns of Charles I. and Charles II., and confining ourselves to the *di majores* of poetry, we may pass on to Milton, whose *Allegro* and *Penseroso* as likewise the lyrics in *Comus*, are too familiar to every one to be more than mentioned as evidence of the persistence, in the past as in the present, of the warbling impulse in all poets. Heard but fitfully during the greater part of the eighteenth century, yet most arrestingly in Gray, Collins, and Burns, Lyrical Poetry from the last onward without intermission, to our own time, in Scott, Byron, Wordsworth, Keats, Shelley, and Tennyson, is almost the only poetry that has in recent days been much listened to, or much written and talked about. This circumstance is far from being conclusive as to whether, during the same period, poems higher and greater than mere Lyrical Poetry have or have not been produced. But it is absolutely certain that, if produced, they have been, so far, more or less ignored; and that, if the same poets have written such and Lyrical Poetry as well, they will have been considered and estimated by the latter only.

But the domain of feeling and emotion in which Lyrical Poetry has room to display its power and versatility is so extensive that lyrics are very various in their themes and in the treatment of them. Love, religion, patriotism, cosmopolitan benevolence, being, as I have shown in *The Human Tragedy*, the most elevated and most permanent sources of human sentiment and emotion, there will necessarily be in Lyrical Poetry, even considered by itself, and apart from all the other forms of poetry, a scale of relative elevation and importance.

The love of individuals for each other, whether domestic, romantic, or sexual, is much more common than any of the other three, being practically universal; and it has given birth to so many well-known lyrics that it is unnecessary to cite any of them here. Some of them are very beautiful; but none of them, by reason of the comparative narrowness of their theme, satisfies the essentials of great poetry. Not even Tennyson's *Maud*, which is perhaps the most ambitious and the best known of long poems dedicated mainly to the subject, though it contains lovely passages, approaches greatness.

Though what is understood as religious sentiment comes next to the love of individuals for each other in the extent of its influence, it has produced much verse, but, it must be allowed, little poetry, the reason probably being that the religious sentiment of the few who are endowed with the gift of writing poetry differs from that of the average "religious" person. Nor can the fact be overlooked that there is a certain character of reserve in Protestantism which has operated since the Reformation against the growth of religious Lyrical Poetry. For that we must go either to pre-Reformation days, or to the poetry of those who, like George Herbert and the poetic kin of his time, clung to the Roman Catholic creed after the modification of belief and ritual in the Anglican Church; or to the poets in our own time trained in the Roman Catholic faith, and to that extent, and on that ground, debarred from wide popularity among a Protestant people. The De Veres, Faber, Coventry Patmore, and Newman, the last notably in his *Dream of Gerontius*, may be named as instances of what has been done in recent times in the sphere of religious poetry. Scott's lovely "Ave Maria" in *The Lady of the Lake*, and Byron's stanza beginning:

Ave Maria! 'tis the hour of prayer,

are briefer specimens of what may be, and has been contributed in later times to religious poetry; much smaller in bulk and volume than poetry dedicated to the love of individuals for each other, but higher in the rising scale of greatness, because of the greater dignity of its theme.

Patriotic Lyrical Poetry need not detain us long. Most patriotic verse, however spirited, is verse only, nothing or little more, though exceptions could be cited, such as Drayton's *Agincourt*, Tennyson's *Relief of Lucknow*, and *The Ballad of the "Revenge."* But if in patriotic Lyrical Poetry we include, as I think we should, poetry in the English tongue, but not concerning England or the British Empire,

I may name Byron's "Isles of Greece" in *Don Juan*, which I had in my mind when I observed that there is in our language only one lyrical poem that can compete for the first place in Lyrical Poetry with Spenser's *Epithalamion*.

3. Reflective Poetry. Over Reflective Poetry, in itself a stage of advance beyond Descriptive Poetry and Lyrical Poetry in themselves, we need not linger long, for the reason that, though Reflective Poetry is ample in quantity, it is, outside the Drama, very limited in quality, most of it being of so prosaic a character as not only not to be ranked above average Lyrical Poetry, but far below it. Wordsworth furnishes us, for the purpose of illustration, with both kinds, the higher and the lower Reflective Poetry. As regards the latter, I would rather let Matthew Arnold, than whom there is no warmer admirer of Wordsworth, be the spokesman:

> *The Excursion* abounds with Philosophy [I prefer to call it Thought or Reflection]; and therefore *The Excursion* is to the Wordsworthian what it never can be to the disinterested lover of poetry, a satisfactory work. "Duty exists," says Wordsworth in *The Excursion*; and then he proceeds thus:
>
> … Immutably survive,
> For our support, the measures and the forms
> Which an abstract Intelligence supplies,
> Whose kingdom is where time and space are not.
>
> And the Wordsworthian is delighted, and thinks that here is a sweet union of philosophy and poetry. But the disinterested lover of poetry will feel that the lines carry us really not a step farther than the proposition which they would interpret; that they are a tissue of elevated but abstract verbiage, alien to the very nature of poetry.

Merely observing that I wholly agree with the foregoing estimate, I pass to the higher Reflective Poetry, of which Wordsworth has given us such splendid but comparatively brief instances. The *Lines composed a few miles above Tintern Abbey*, *Elegiac Stanzas suggested by a Picture of Peele Castle*, his best Sonnets, the *Character of the Happy Warrior*, the *Ode to Duty*, and, finally, the *Ode on Intimations of Immortality* seem to me to place Wordsworth above all other English Poets in the domain of exclusively Reflective Poetry. I do not forget much noble Reflective Poetry in *Childe Harold*; but it is too much blent with other elements, and into it the active quality enters too strongly, for its more reflective features to be separated from them. Moreover, it generally falls far short of the intellectual note so strongly marked in Wordsworth's best Reflective Poetry, into which, be it added, both the descriptive and the lyrical notes, in accordance with the general law I am seeking to expound in this paper, enter very largely, if, of course, subordinately. It will be obvious, however, to any dispassionate lover of poetry, that a merely reflective poem of any great length cannot well be entitled to the designation of a great poem. Had such been possible, Wordsworth would have bequeathed it to us. *The Excursion* is the answer; which, notwithstanding a certain number of fine passages, is, for the most part, what Matthew Arnold says of it, "doctrine such as we hear in church, religious and philosophical doctrine; and the attached Wordsworthian loves passages of such doctrine, and brings them forward as proofs of his poet's excellence."

If the reader has followed me so far, with more or less assent, he will be prepared not only to allow, but of himself to feel, that there must be yet another kind or order of poetry, in which the greatest poems are to be found, poems that are neither exclusively nor mainly either descriptive, lyrical, or reflective, but into which all three elements enter subordinately, though none of them gives it its distinctive and supreme character.

4. Epic and Dramatic Poetry. That supreme kind of poetry is Epic and Dramatic Poetry, though there may be very poor Epics, and Dramas in which true poetry is scarcely to be observed, just as we

have seen that there is very inferior Descriptive, Lyrical, and Reflective Poetry. All that is asserted is that great epic and dramatic poems must be greater than the greatest poetry of the preceding kinds by reason of their wider range and (as a rule) the higher majesty of their theme, and of their including every other kind of poetry.

It will perhaps have been noticed that Epic and Dramatic Poetry are here placed in conjunction, not separately; and their being thus conjoined needs a word of explanation. Though there is a radical distinction between the two, this provisional union of them has been adopted in order to afford an opportunity of pointing out what I think is generally ignored – that poems which are essentially epical, or merely narrative, may be written in dialogue or dramatic form, and so mislead incautious readers into inferring that they are offered as dramas, in the acting sense of the term. It is because, while remaining substantially epical or narrative in character they may contain, here and there, dramatic situations, dramatic rhetoric, and dramatic converse. The *Iliad* is a conspicuous example of this; the movement in the earlier portion of it being full of debate and defiance among its characters, and these dramatic elements recurring, if less frequently, throughout the entire work. To many persons the episodes in the narrative of the *Divina Commedia* that give rise to converse, whether tender, terrible, or pathetic, are the most delightful portions of it. What is it that makes the first six books of *Paradise Lost* so much more telling than the later ones? Surely it is the magnificence of the speeches emanating from the mouths of the chief characters. *Childe Harold* is ostensibly only descriptive, reflective, and narrative; but the personality and supposed wrongs of Byron himself, so frequently introduced, confer on it, beyond these characters, certain features of the drama and of dramatic action. Moreover, the magnificent ruins bequeathed to the seven-hilled city by the fall of the Roman Empire enter so largely into the fourth canto that this includes in it every species of verse, from the descriptive to the dramatic. To cite a much smaller example, I once said to Tennyson, "Do you not think that, had one met in a tragedy with the couplet from Pope (*Ep. to the Sat.* ii. 205) —

> *F.* You're strangely proud …
>
> *P.* Yes, I am proud: I must be proud to see
> Men not afraid of God, afraid of *me*

– one would be right in regarding it as very fine, dramatically?" and he replied, "Yes, certainly." I recall the circumstance because it is an extreme illustration of the momentary intrusion of one style into another.

By slow but successive stages we have reached conclusions that may be thus briefly stated. (1) The essentials of great poetry are not to be found in poetry exclusively descriptive. (2) They are rarely to be met with in poetry that is lyrical, and then only when reflection of a high order, as in Wordsworth's *Intimations of Immortality*, or what is equivalent to action operating on a great theme, as in Byron's *Isles of Greece*, largely and conspicuously enters into these. (3) That they are to be met with in Reflective Poetry of the very highest character, but never throughout an exclusively reflective poem of any length. (4) That they are chiefly to be sought for and most frequently found in either epic or dramatic poetry where description, emotion, thought, and action all co-operate to produce the result; that result being, to adduce supreme examples, the *Iliad*, *Paradise Lost*, the *Divina Commedia*, the third and fourth cantos of *Childe Harold*, *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*.

Many years ago, in a couple of papers published in the *Contemporary Review* on "New and Old Canons of Poetic Criticism," I propounded, as the most satisfactory definition of poetry generally, that it is "the transfiguration, in musical verse, of the Real into the Ideal"; and I have more than once advocated the definition. The definition applies to poetry of all kinds. But, while this is so, the transfiguration must operate on a great theme greatly treated, either lyrically, reflectively, epically, or dramatically, in order to produce great poetry.

I fancy I hear some people saying, "Quite so; who ever denied or doubted it?" The answer must be that, for some time past, it has been tacitly, and often explicitly, denied by critics and readers alike; reviewers to-day criticising poetry in utter disregard and contravention of any such canons, and readers in their conversation and practice following suit, apparently without any knowledge or suspicion that such canons exist. Had it been otherwise, an inquiry into the essentials of great poetry would have been unnecessary.

The permanent passions of mankind – love, religion, patriotism, humanitarianism, hate, revenge, ambition; the conflict between free will and fate; the rise and fall of empires – these are all great themes, and, if greatly treated, and in accordance with the essentials applicable to all poetry, may produce poetry of the loftiest kind; the underlying reason being what, as usual, has been better and more convincingly stated by Shakespeare than by any one else:

> We [actors on the stage] are not all alone unhappy:
> This wide and universal theatre
> Presents more woeful pageants than the scene
> Wherein we play.

For the great treatment of great themes in Epic, and yet more in Dramatic, Poetry, think of what is required! Not mere fancy, not mere emotion, but a wide and lofty imagination, a full and flexible style, a copious and ready vocabulary, an ear for verbal melody and all its cadences, profound knowledge of men, women, and things in general, a congenital and cultivated sense of form – the foundation of beauty and majesty alike, in all art; an experience of all the passions, yet the attainment to a certain majestic freedom from servitude to these; the descriptive, lyrical, and reflective capacity; abundance and variety of illustration; a strong apprehension and grasp of the Real, with the impulse and power to transfigure it into the Ideal, so that the Ideal shall seem to the reader to be the Real; in a word, "blood and judgment," as Shakespeare says, "so commingled." These are the qualifications of the writers that have stirred, and still stir, in its worthier portion, the admiration, reverence, and gratitude of mankind.

Even this does not exhaust the requisite endowments of those who aspire to write great poetry. Their sympathy with all that is demands from them a fund of practical good sense, too often lacking in merely lyrical poets – a circumstance that may render their work less attractive to the average person, and even make it seem to such to be wanting in genius altogether. Sane they must essentially be; and their native sanity must have been fortified by some share in practical affairs, while their robustness of mind must have received aid from the open air. They will be found to be neither extravagant optimists nor extravagant pessimists, but wise teachers and indulgent moralists; neither teaching nor preaching overmuch in their verse, but unintentionally and almost unconsciously communicating their wisdom to others by radiation. Dante always speaks of Virgil as "Il Saggio." Tennyson puts it well where he says of the poet, "He saw through good, through ill; He saw through his own soul." Architecture, sculpture, music, the kindred of his own art, must be appreciated by him; and nothing that affects mankind is alien to him.

I should like to say, incidentally, and I hope I may do so without giving offence, that I have sometimes thought that, in an age much given to theorising and to considering itself more "scientific" than perhaps it really is, the diminution of practical wisdom, somewhat conspicuous of late in politics and legislation, is due in no small measure to the neglect of the higher poetry, in favour, where concern for poetry survives at all, of brief snatches of lyrical emotion. Hence legislation by emotion and haste.

If we ask ourselves, as it is but natural to do, what are the chief causes that have brought about this change in public taste and sentiment, I believe they will be found to be mainly as follow. (1) The decay of authority already mentioned. (2) The perpetual reading of novels of every kind, many of them of a pernicious nature, but nearly all of them calculated to indispose readers to care for

any poetry save of an emotional lyrical character. (3) The increase – be it said with all due chivalry – of feminine influence and activity alike in society and literature; women, generally speaking, showing but a moderate interest in great issues in public life, and finding their satisfaction, so far as reading is concerned, in prose romances, newspapers, and short lyrics. (4) The febrile quality of contemporaneous existence; the ephemeral excitements of the passing hour; and the wholesale surrender to the transient as contrasted with the permanent, great poetry concerning itself only with this last – a circumstance that makes the *Odyssey*, for instance, as fresh to-day as though it had been published for the first time last autumn; whereas the life of most prose romances, like the lady's scanty attire, *commence à peine, et finit tout de suite*.

I hope no one will imagine – for they would be mistaken in doing so – that these pages have been prompted by a disposition to depreciate the age in which we are living, and just as little to manifest disdain of it, though one need not conceal the opinion, in respect of the lower literary taste so widely prevalent, that, as Shakespeare says, "it is not and it cannot be for good." My object has been something very different from this. It has been to recall canons of poetry and standards of literary excellence which I believe can never be destroyed though for a time they may be obscured, and which have of late been too much ignored. That such neglect will in the very faintest degree prevent those whose instinct it is to say, with Virgil, "paulo majora canamus," from following their vocation, without a thought of readers or reviewers, I do not suppose. It is good for poets, and indeed for others, not to be too quickly appreciated. It is dangerous for them, and sometimes fatal, to be praised prematurely.

The great stumbling-block of literary criticism, alike for the professional critic and the unprofessional reader, is the tacit assumption that the opinions, preferences, and estimates of to-day are not merely passing opinions, preferences, and estimates, but will be permanent ones; opinions, preferences, and estimates for all future time. There is no foundation, save self-complacency, for such a surmise. What solid reason is there to suppose that the present age is any more infallible in its literary judgments than preceding ages? On the contrary, its infallibility is all the less probable because of the precipitation with which its opinions are arrived at. Yet past ages have been proved over and over again, in course of time, to be wrong in their estimate of contemporaneous poetry, in consequence of their mistaking the passing for the permanent. The consequence in our time of this error has been that one has seen the passing away of several works loudly declared on their appearance to be immortal. The only chance a critic has of being right in his judgments is to measure contemporary literature by standards and canons upon which rests the fame of the great poets and writers of the past, and, tried by which, Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, and Byron have been assigned their enduring rank in the poetic hierarchy. "Blessings be with them," says Wordsworth (Sonnet xxv.):

> Blessings be with them, and eternal praise,
> Who gave us nobler lives and nobler cares,
> The Poets who on earth have made us heirs
> Of truth and pure delight by heavenly lays.

It is only the great poets, the poets in whom we can recognise the essentials of greatness, who can do that for us. They are not rebels, as are too many lyrical poets, but reconcilers; and they offer to external things and current ideas both receptivity and resistance, being not merely of an age, but for all time. It is their thoughts and the verse in which their thoughts are embodied that are enduringly memorable. For great poetry, as Wordsworth teaches us in a single line, is not mere emotion, not mere subtle or sensuous singing, but

> Reason in her most exalted mood.

A still greater authority than Wordsworth, no other than Milton, has immortalised in verse the principles for which I have ventured to contend in prose. In *Paradise Regained* (iv. 255-266) he says:

> There thou shalt hear and learn the secret power
> Of harmony, in tones and numbers hit
> By voice or hand, and various-measured verse,
> Æolian charms and Dorian lyrick odes,
> And his who gave them breath but higher sung,
> Blind Melesigenes, thence Homer called,
> Whose poem Phœbus challenged for his own;
> Thence what the lofty grave tragedians taught
> In Chorus or Iambick, teachers best
> Of moral prudence, with delight receiv'd,
> In brief sententious precepts, while they treat
> Of fate, and chance, and change in human life,
> High actions and high passions best describing.

THE FEMININE NOTE IN ENGLISH POETRY

Women, to whom a barbarous description, willingly accepted by themselves, has been applied, have recently been much in the public eye, and still more in the public prints. But I should not class them under the designation of feminine; and, though they may have invaded prose fiction, they have not been, and I think they never will be, met with in Poetry. They are noisy, but numerically weak. Eve listening to the Tempter, then bewailing her weakness; Ruth amid the alien corn; Magdalen and her box of spikenard; Helen of Troy following evil-hearted Paris; Beatrice in heaven; Una and the milk-white lamb; Rosalind and Celia in *As You Like It*; the Lily Maid of Astolat in the *Idylls of the King*– these are women of whom, or, at least, of the sentiments and sympathies of whom, as manifested in English poetry, I wish to speak. The most progressive age one can possibly conceive will never succeed in leaving human nature behind, and I have not the smallest doubt that women will continue to be womanly to the end of time.

What, then, is feminine as contrasted with masculine? what is womanly as compared with manly, whether in literature or in life? Men and women have many qualities in common, and resemble more than they differ from each other. But while, speaking generally, the man's main occupations lie abroad, the woman's main occupation is at home. He has to deal with public and collective interests; she has to do with private and individual interests. We need not go so far as to say, with Kingsley, that man must work and woman must weep; but at least he has to fight and to struggle, she has to solace and to heal. Ambition, sometimes high, sometimes low, but still ambition – ambition and success are the main motives and purpose of his life. Her noblest ambition is to foster domestic happiness, to bring comfort to the afflicted, and to move with unostentatious but salutary step over the vast territory of human affection. While man busies himself with the world of politics, with the world of commerce, with the rise and fall of empires, with the fortunes and fate of humanity, woman tends the hearth, visits the sick, consoles the suffering – in a word, in all she does, fulfils the sacred offices of love.

Now the highest literature – and Poetry is confessedly the highest literature – is a transfiguring reflex of life; and in its magic mirror we perforce see reflected all the thoughts, feelings, interests, passions, and events of human existence. In English poetry, therefore, we shall expect to hear both the masculine note and the feminine note; and in what proportions we hear them will be incidentally indicated in the course of my remarks. But it is the Feminine Note in which we are at present specially interested, and if I am asked to define briefly what I mean by this Feminine Note, I should say that I mean the private or domestic note, the compassionate note or note of pity, and the sentimental note or note of romantic love.

Now I am well aware there are numbers of people who look on poetry as something essentially and necessarily feminine, and who will say, "What do you mean by speaking of the Feminine Note in English poetry? Surely it has no other note, poetry being an effeminate business altogether, with which men, real robust men, need not concern themselves." The people who hold this opinion can have but a very limited acquaintance with English poetry, and a yet more limited familiarity with the poetry of other ages and other nations that has come down to us. As a matter of fact, though the feminine note has rarely, if ever, been wholly absent from poetry, it is only of late years comparatively that it has become a very audible note. I should be carried too far away from my subject if I attempted to demonstrate the accuracy of this assertion by a survey, however rapid, of all the best-known poetry in languages, dead and living, of other times and other peoples. But to cite one or two familiar examples, is the feminine note, I may ask, the predominant, or even a frequent, note in the *Iliad*? The poem opens, it is true, with a dispute among the Argive chiefs, and mainly between Agamemnon and Achilles, concerning two young women. But how quickly Chryseis and Bryseis fall into the background, and in place of any further reference to them, we have a tempest of manly voices, the clang of arms, the recriminations of the Gods up in Olympus, and the cataloguing of the Grecian

ships! Lest perhaps tender interest should be absent overmuch, just when Paris is being worsted in his duel with Menelaus for the determination of the siege, Venus carries him off under cover of a cloud, and brings Helen to his side. Then follows a scene in which the fair cause of strife and slaughter stands distracted between her passion for Paris, her shame at his defeat and flight, and her recollection of the brave Argive Chief she once called her lord. But more fighting promptly supervenes, and, save in such a passing episode as the lovely leave-taking of Hector and Andromache, the poem moves on through a magnificent medley of fighting, plotting, and speech-making. Even in that exceptionally tender episode what are the farewell words of Hector to his wife, "Go to your house and see to your own duties, the loom and the distaff, and bid your handmaidens perform their tasks. But for war shall *man* provide." It is over the dead body of Patroclus that Achilles weeps; and whatever tears are shed in the *Iliad* are shed by heroes for heroes. Life, as represented in that poem, is a life in which woman plays a shadowy and insignificant part, and wherein domestic sentiments are subordinated to the rivalries of the Gods and the clash of chariot-wheels.

This subordinating of woman to man, of individual aims and private feelings to great aims and public issues, is equally present in the great Latin poem, the *Æneid*. "Arms and the Man, I sing," says Virgil at once, and in the very first line of his poem; and though in one book out of the twelve of which it consists he sings of the woman likewise, it is but to leave her to her fate and to liberate Æneas from her seductions. Virgil is rightly esteemed the most tender and refined writer of antiquity. Yet to the modern reader, accustomed to the feminine note in poetry, there is something amazingly callous, almost cruel, in the lines with which, while the funeral pyre of Dido is still smoking, he tells us how Æneas, without a moment's hesitation, makes for the open sea, and sails away from Carthage. But then the main business of Æneas was not to soothe or satisfy the Carthaginian queen, but to build the city and found the Empire of Rome. "Spirits," says Shakespeare, "are not finely touched save to fine issues"; and it never would have occurred to Virgil to allow the hero of the *Æneid* to be diverted from his masculine purpose by anything so secondary as the love, or even the self-immolation, of a woman.

Let us, however, overleap the intervening centuries, and betake ourselves to the poetry of our own land and our own language. Chaucer, the first great English poet, was, like all writers of supreme genius, a prolific and voluminous writer, and we have thousands of verses of his besides the Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*. But it is by this latter work that he is best known; and it is pre-eminently and adequately representative, both of his own genius and of the temper of the times in which he lived. You will have to hunt very diligently through his description of the Knight, the Squire, the Yeoman, the Prioress, the Monk, the Merchant, the Sergeant of the Law, the Franklin, the Miller, the Manciple, and the rest of his jovial company, in order to find anything approaching the feminine note. He says little about what any of them thought, and absolutely nothing concerning what they felt, but confines himself to descriptions of their personal appearance, of their conduct and their character, in a word, of their external presentation of themselves. The Knight who wore a doublet all stained by his coat of mail, was well mounted, and had ridden far, no man farther. The Squire, or page, had curly locks, and had borne himself well in Flanders and Picardy. The Yeoman bore a weighty bow, handled his arrows and tackle in admirable fashion, and was dressed in a coat of green. The Monk was fat and in good case, and loved a roast swan more than any other dish. The Friar, we are told, had made many a marriage at his own cost, and would get a farthing out of a poor widow, though she had only one shoe left. The Franklin had a white beard and a high complexion, kept a capital table, and blew up his cook loudly if the sauces were not to his liking. The Wife of Bath had married five husbands, not to speak of other company in her youth; and the Sumpnor loved garlic, onions, and leeks, had a fiery face, and doated on strong wine. There is nothing very feminine in all this, is there? The one sole touch of tenderness that I can remember, and it is very elementary and introduced quite casually, is that in which we are told that the Prioress is so full of pity that she would weep if she saw a mouse caught in a trap. One can easily surmise what sort of tales would proceed from such downright, hearty, unromantic personages; and, save where any of them recite

well-known stories from ancient poets, their own narratives are as buxom, burly, and as unsentimental as themselves. If princes and princesses, fine lords and ladies, be the heroes and heroines of the Tale, a certain amount of conventional pity is extended to their woes. But if the personages of the story be, as they for the most part are, common folk, and such as the story-tellers themselves would be likely to know, their misfortunes and mishaps are used merely as a theme for mirth and merciless banter. The humour displayed is excellent, but it is not the humour of *charity*. It is not compassionate, and it is not feminine. The feminine note is not absent from Chaucer's Tales, but it is generally a subordinate note, a rare note, a note scarcely heard in his great concert of masculine voices.

Passing from the pages of Chaucer to those of Spenser is like passing from some cheery tavern where the ale is good and the jokes are excellent, but a trifle coarse, and the company diverting but a little mixed, to the banqueting-hall of some stately palace, where the wines and meats are of the choicest, where all the guests are of high degree, the women all fair, the men all courtly, and where fine manners and dignified speech leave no place for loud lewd laughter or even for homely familiarity. Surely in one who is such a poet, and such a gentleman, and in every respect, to quote a line of his own "a very perfect gentle knight," we shall come across, ever and anon at least, the feminine note. And indeed we do. The first three stanzas of the *Fairy Queen* are dedicated to the description of the Knight that was pricking on the plain. But listen to the fourth:

A lovely lady rode him fair beside,
Upon a lowly ass more white than snow;
Yet she much whiter; but the same did hide
Under a veil that wimpled was full low,
And over all a black stole did she throw;
As one that inly mourned, so was she sad,
And heavy sate upon her palfrey slow.
Seemëd at heart some hidden care she had.
And by her in a line a milk-white lamb she lad.
So pure and innocent as that same lamb
She was, in life and every virtuous lore.
She by descent from royal lineage came.

Her name, as doubtless you well know, was Una, and, when by foul enchantment she is severed a while from her true knight, harken with what a truly feminine note Spenser bewails her misfortune:

Nought is there under heaven's wide hollowness
Did recover more dear compassion of the mind
Than beauty brought to unworthy wretchedness
Through envy's snare, or fortune's freaks unkind.
I, whether lately through her brightness blind,
Or through allegiance, and fast fealty
Which I do owe unto all womankind,
Feel my heart prest with so great agony,
When such I see, that all for pity I could die.

Spenser cannot endure the thought of beauty in distress. So at once he brings upon the scene a ramping lion, which, in the ordinary course of things would have put a speedy end to her woes. But not so Spenser's lion:

Instead thereof he kissed her weary feet,

And licked her lily hands with fawning tongue,
As he her wrongëd innocence did weet.
O how can beauty master the most strong.

And thus he goes on:

The lion would not leave her desolate,
But with her went along, as a strong guard
Of her chaste person, and a faithful mate
Of her sad troubles and misfortunes hard:
Still when she slept, he kept both watch and ward,
And when she waked, he waited diligent
With humble service to her will prepared.

This allegiance and fast fealty which Spenser declares he owes unto all womankind is the attitude, not only of all true knights and all true gentlemen, but likewise, I trust, of all true poets. But do not suppose on that account that Spenser is a feminine poet. He is very much the reverse. It would be impossible for a poet to be more masculine than he.

Upon a great adventure he was bound,

he says at once of his hero, and describes how the knight's heart groaned to prove his prowess in battle brave. Spenser has the feminine note, but in subordination to the masculine note; and if I were asked to name some one quality by which you may know whether a poet be of the very highest rank, I should be disposed to say, "See if in his poetry you meet with the feminine note and the masculine note, and if the first be duly subordinated to the second."

I wish it were possible, within the limit I have here assigned myself, to apply this test and pursue this enquiry at length in regard to Shakespeare, in regard to Milton, and likewise in regard to Dryden and Pope. But of this I am sure that the wider and deeper the survey the more clear would be the conclusion that in Shakespeare, as we might have expected, the masculine note and the feminine note are heard in perfect harmony, but by far the larger volume of sound proceeds from the former.

When, then, was it that the feminine note, the domestic or personal note, the compassionate note or note of pity, the purely sentimental note, was first heard in English poetry as a note asserting equality with the masculine note, and tending to assert itself as the dominant note?

One of the most beautiful and best-known poems in the English language is Gray's *Elegy written in a Country Churchyard*; and in the following stanzas which many of you will recognise as belonging to it, do we not seem to overhear something like the note of which we are in search? —

Beneath those rugged elms, that yew tree's shade,
Where heaves the turf in many a mould'ring heap,
Each in his narrow cell for ever laid,
The rude forefathers of the hamlet sleep.

The breezy call of incense-breathing Morn,
The swallow twitt'ring from the straw-built shed,
The cock's shrill clarion, or the echoing horn,
No more shall rouse them from their lowly bed.

For them no more the blazing hearth shall burn,

Or busy housewife ply her ev'ning care:
No children run to lisp their sire's return,
Or climb his knees the envied kiss to share.

Here our sympathy is asked, not for kings and princesses, not for great lords and fine ladies, not for the rise and fall of empires, but for the rude forefathers of the hamlet, for the busy housewife, for the hard-working peasant and his children, for homely joys and the annals of the poor. But Gray does not maintain this note beyond the five stanzas I have just quoted. He quickly again lapses into the traditional, the classic, the purely masculine note:

The boast of Heraldry, the pomp of Pow'r,
And all that Beauty, all that Wealth e'er gave,
Await alike th' inevitable hour,
The paths of glory lead but to the grave.

Nor you, ye proud, impute to these the fault,
If Mem'ry o'er their tombs no trophies raise,
Where through the long-drawn aisle, and fretted vault,
The pealing anthem swells the note of praise.

Can storied urn, or animated bust,
Back to its mansion call the fleeting breath?
Can Honour's voice provoke the silent dust,
Or Flatt'ry soothe the dull cold ear of Death?

The stanzas that follow are splendid stanzas, but they are the stately and sonorous verse of a detached and moralising mind, not the pathetic verse of a sympathising heart. We have to wait another twenty years before we come upon a poem of consequence in which the feminine note is not only present, but paramount. In the year 1770, nearly a century and a half ago, appeared Goldsmith's poem, *The Deserted Village*, and in it I catch, for the first time, as the prevailing and predominant note, the note of feminine compassion, the note of humble happiness and humble grief. In Goldsmith's verse we hear nothing of great folks except to be told how small and insignificant are the ills which they can cause or cure.

Princes and lords may flourish, or may fade;
A breath can make them, as a breath hath made;
But a bold peasantry, their country's pride,
When once destroyed, can never be supplied.

Goldsmith's themes in *The Deserted Village* are avowedly:

The sheltered cot, the cultivated farm,
The never-failing brook, the busy mill,
The decent church that topped the neighbouring hill,
The hawthorn bush, with seats beneath the shade,
For talking age and whispering lovers made.

We seem to have travelled centuries away from the *Troilus and Cressida*, or the *Palamon and Arcite* of Chaucer, from the Red Cross Knight and Una, from the Britomart, the Florimel, the

Calidore, the Gloriana of Spenser, from the kingly ambitions and princely passions of Shakespeare, from the throes and denunciations of *Paradise Lost*, and equally from the coffee-house epigrams and savage satire of Pope. We have at last got among ordinary people, among humble folk, people of our own flesh and blood, with simple joys and simple sorrows. What could be more unlike the poetry we have so far been surveying than these lines from *The Deserted Village*? —

> Sweet was the sound when oft at evening's close
> Up yonder hill the village murmur rose,
> There, as I passed, with careless steps and slow,
> The mingling notes came softened from below.
> The swain responsive as the milkmaid sung,
> The sober herd that lowed to meet their young,
> The noisy geese that gabbled o'er the pool,
> The playful children just let loose from school.

Which of you does not remember the description in the same poem of the Village Clergyman? the man who was to all his country dear, etc. Some of you, I daresay, know it by heart. Nothing is too lowly, some would say, nothing too mean, for Goldsmith's tender Muse. He loves to dwell on the splendour of the humble parlour, on the whitewashed wall, the sanded floor, the varnished clock, the chest of drawers, and the chimney-piece with its row of broken teacups. Truly it is a feminine Muse which can make poetry, and, in my opinion, very charming poetry, out of broken teacups.

The feminine note once struck, the note of personal tenderness, of domestic interest, of compassion for the homely, the suffering, or the secluded was never again to be absent from English poetry; and Cowper continued, without a break, the still sad music of humanity first clearly uttered by Goldsmith. What is the name of Cowper's principal and most ambitious poem? As you know, it is called *The Task*; and what are the respective titles of the six books into which it is divided? They are: *The Sofa*, *The Time-Piece*, *The Garden*, *The Winter Evening*, *The Winter Morning Walk*, *The Winter Walk at Noon*. Other poems of a kindred character are entitled *Hope*, *Charity*, *Conversation*, *Retirement*. Open what page you will of Cowper's verse, and you will be pretty sure to find him either denouncing things which women, good women, at least, find abhorrent, such as the slave-trade, gin-drinking, gambling, profligacy, profane language, or dwelling on occupations which are dear to them.

> O for a lodge in some vast wilderness,

he exclaims —

> Some boundless contiguity of shade,
> Where rumour of oppression and deceit
> Of unsuccessful or successful war,
> Might never reach me more! My ear is pained,
> My soul is sick with every day's report
> Of wrong and outrage with which earth is filled.
> There is no flesh in man's obdurate heart,
> It does not feel for man.

These are the opening lines of the *Time-Piece*, and they sound what may be called the note of feminine indignation; a note which is reverted to by him again and again.

More placidly but still in the same spirit, he exclaims:

Now stir the fire and close the shutters fast,
Let fall the curtains, wheel the sofa round,
And while the bubbling and loud hissing urn
Throws up a steaming column, and the cups
That cheer but not inebriate, wait on each,
So let us welcome peaceful evening in.

Farther on, he describes how —

'Tis pleasant through the loopholes of retreat
To peep at such a world, to see the stir
Of the great Babel, and not feel the crowd.
Thus sitting, and surveying thus at ease
The globe and its concerns, I seem advanced
To some secure and more than mortal height,
That liberates and exempts me from them all.

Again, invoking evening, he says:

Come then, and thou shalt find thy votary calm
Or make me so. Composure is thy gift:
And whether I devote the gentle hours of evening
To books, to music, or the poet's toil,
To weaving nets for bird-alluring fruit,
Or turning silken threads round ivory reels,
When they command whom man was born to please.

Could there well be a more feminine picture than that? All the politics, commerce, passions, conflicts of the world are shut out by Mrs. Unwin's comfortable curtains, and, with her and Lady Austen for sympathising companions, the poet fills his time, with perfect satisfaction, by holding their skeins of wool, and meditating such homely lines as these:

For I, contented with a humble theme,
Have poured my stream of panegyric down
The vale of nature where it creeps and winds
Among her lovely works, with a secure
And unambitious ease reflecting clear
If not the virtues, yet the worth of brutes.
And I am recompensed, and deem the toils
Of poetry not lost, if verse of mine
May stand between an animal and woe,
And teach one tyrant pity for his drudge.

Cowper was never married, nor ever, as far as I know, in love, though Lady Austen, to her and his misfortune, for a time seemed to fancy he was; and in his verse therefore we do not meet with the note of amatory sentiment. But what love is there in this world more beautiful, more touching, more truly romantic, than the love of a mother for her son, and of a son for his mother? And where has it been more charmingly expressed than in Cowper's lines on the receipt of his mother's picture? After that beautiful outburst —

O that those lips had language! Life has passed
With me but roughly since I heard thee last

– he proceeds to recall the home, the scenes, the tender incidents of his childhood, but, most of all, the fond care bestowed on him by his mother:

Thy nightly visits to my chamber made
That thou mightst know me safe and warmly laid,
Thy fragrant waters on my cheek bestowed
By thy own hand, till fresh they were and glowed,
All this, and more endearing still than all,
Thy constant flow of love that knew no fall,
Ne'er roughened by those cataracts and breaks
That humour interposed too often makes;
All this still legible in memory's page,
And still to be so to my latest age,
Adds joy to duty, makes me glad to pay
Such honour to thee as my numbers may,
Perhaps a frail memorial, but sincere,
Not scorned in Heaven, though little noticed here.

The lines are not in what is called the highest vein of poetry. They have not the bluff masculinity of Chaucer. They lack the magic of Spenser. They do not purify the passions through terror as is done by *Lear* or *Macbeth*, and they are much inferior in majesty to the of Milton. But they come straight from the heart, and go straight to the heart. They are thoroughly human, what we all have felt, or are much to be pitied if we have not felt. They are instinct with the holiest form of domestic piety. They are feminine in the best sense, and have all the feminine power to attract, to chasten, and to subdue.

Cherubic trumpets blowing martial sound

As far as character and conduct are concerned, there could not well be two poets more unlike than Cowper and Burns; and their poetry is as unlike as their temperament. I fear Burns indulged in most of the vices against which Cowper inveighs; and not unoften he glorified them in verse. Upon that theme do not ask me to dwell this evening. All it is necessary to point out here is, that in Burns, as in Cowper, and as in Goldsmith, we have the compassionate note, the note of pity for suffering, of sympathy with the lowly; in a word, we again have the feminine note. In *The Cotter's Saturday Night* Burns paints a picture, as complete as it is simple, of humble life. We have the cotter returning home through the chill November blast with the weary beasts; the collecting of his spades, his mattocks, and his hoes; the arrival at his cottage; the expectant wee things running out to meet him; the ingle-nook blinking bonnily; the cheerful supper of wholesome porridge; the reading of a passage from the Bible, the evening hymn, and the family prayer before retiring to rest. There is a line in *The Cotter's Saturday Night* which might be taken as the text on which most of Burns's poems are written:

The cottage leaves the palace far behind.

All his sympathies are with cottages and cottagers, whether he be expressly describing their existence, writing *A Man's a Man for a' that*, *The Birks of Aberfeldy*, *Auld Lang Syne*, or addressing lines to a mouse whose nest he has turned up with his plough. All are written in a spirit of compassion

for suffering, of sympathy with the lowly, of admiration for honest poverty. They are fundamentally tender, and, though expressed in manly fashion enough, fundamentally feminine, the poetry of a man who lived habitually under the influence of women.

I think it will be allowed that I have given no grudging admiration to the feminine note in English poetry, and in so far as it is a note of sympathy with the more humble and less fortunate ones of the earth. But, in verse, kindly and compassionate sentiment is not everything. Indeed, it is nothing at all unless it be expressed in such a manner, the manner suffused with charm of style, that it is thereby raised to the dignity of true poetry. There are many excellent persons who accept as poetry any sentiment, or any opinion expressed in metre with which they happen to agree. But neither sound opinion nor wholesome sentiment suffices to produce that exceedingly delicate and subtle thing which alone is rightly termed poetry, and, in abandoning lofty themes, and descending to humbler ones, writers of verse unquestionably expose themselves to the danger not only of not rising above the level of their subject, but even of sinking below it. The Romans had a proverb that you cannot carve a Mercury out of every piece of wood, meaning thereby that by reason of Mercury not being a standing or reposing figure, but a figure flying through the air, and therefore with limbs and wings extended, the material out of which he is made has to be both considerable in size and excellent in quality. What is true of Mercury is truer still of Apollo. You cannot make poetry out of every subject; and your only chance of making poetry out of any subject is to do so by treating the subject either nobly, or with charm. Realism, unadulterated Realism, which is a dangerous experiment in prose, is a sheer impossibility in poetry; for in poetry what is offered us, and what delights us, is not realistic but ideal representation. No doubt the very music of verse is part of the means whereby this ideal representation is effected; but it will not of itself suffice, as may easily be proved by reciting mere nonsense verses in which the rhythm or music may be faultless. I could quote page after page from Cowper, which is verse only, and not poetry, because it is nothing more than the bare statement of a fact set forth in lines consisting of so many feet. Here, for instance, is a specimen. It comes in his poem on *The Sofa*:

> Joint-stools were then created, on three legs,
> Upborne they stood: three legs upholding firm
> A mossy slab, in fashion square or round.
> At length a generation more refined
> Improved the simple plan, made three legs four,
> Gave them a twisted form vermicular
> And o'er the seat with plenteous wadding stuffed
> Induced a splendid cover, green and blue,
> Yellow and red, of tapestry richly wrought,
> And woven close, or needlework sublime.

Perhaps you think this is a parody of Cowper. But I can assure you it is nothing of the kind. It was written by the poet himself; and in his abounding pages you will find hundreds of verses of this realistic and pedestrian character. But not Cowper alone, one much greater than Cowper, one who rose over and over again to the very heaven of poesy, Wordsworth himself, has likewise left hundreds, aye, thousands of verses, little better than the passage I have just read from Cowper, through the mistaken notion that kindly feeling, compassion for the poor and the patient, and sound moral sentiments, when expressed in verse, must result in poetry. There is no one here whose admiration of Wordsworth at his best can be greater than mine, but, in order to show you how the feminine note in poetry, the note of sympathy with the weak, the obscure, and the unfortunate, can even in the voice of a great master of poetry, lapse into verse utterly destitute of the soul and spirit of poetry, I will ask you to allow me to read you a portion of *Simon Lee, the Old Huntsman*:

And he is lean and he is sick;
His body, dwindled and awry,
Rests upon ankles swoln and thick;
His legs are thin and dry.
One prop he has, and only one,
His Wife, an aged woman,
Lives with him, near the waterfall,
Upon the village Common.

Oft, working by her husband's side,
Ruth does what Simon cannot do;
For she, with scanty cause for pride,
Is stouter of the two.
And though you with your utmost skill
From labour could not wean them,
Alas! 'tis very little – all
Which they can do between them.

O Reader! had you in your mind
Such stores as silent thought can bring,
O gentle Reader! you would find
A tale in everything.
What more I have to say is short,
And you must kindly take it:
It is no tale; but, should you *think*,
Perhaps a tale you'll make it.

Is not that sorry stuff, regarded as poetry? Wordsworth here had the assistance of the music, not only of verse, but of rhyme; and with what a result! It is the feminine note of pity in its dotage, whereby we see that it is not enough to have a warm heart, to have tender feelings, to be full of sympathy for the suffering, and then to express them in verse. In the prose of conversation and of everyday life, kindly feeling is all well enough. But the Heavenly Muse will not place herself at our disposal so readily and cheaply. She is a very difficult lady, is the Heavenly Muse, not easily won, and never allowing you, if you want to remain in her good graces, to approach her, that is to say, in dressing gown and slippers. She is the noblest and most gracious lady in the world, and the best, the most refined, the most elevating of companions. Therefore you must come into her presence and win her favour, not with free-and-easy gait and in slovenly attire, but arrayed in your very best, and with courtly and deferential mien. When poets wrote of gods and goddesses, of mighty sieges, and of the foundation and fall of empires; when their theme was the madness of princes, and the tragic fate of kings, when their hero was Lucifer, Son of the Morning, nay, even when they discoursed of free will and fate, or of the drawing-room intrigues of persons to whom powder, patches, billets-doux were the chief things in existence, there was no need to remind them that their style must be as lofty, as dignified, as refined, or as finished as their subject. No doubt, they sometimes waxed stilted and fell into excess, whether in rhetoric or in conceits, but they never forgot themselves so far as to be slovenly or familiar. Stella, you know, said Swift could write beautifully about a broomstick. Possibly he could; but note the concession, that if a man writes, at least if he would write poetry, he must write *beautifully*. Both Cowper and Wordsworth set the example of writing verse that is not beautiful, though indeed Young in his *Night Thoughts*, and Thomson in *The Seasons*, had already

done something of the same kind. But they have not the authority of Cowper, much less the authority of Wordsworth. Let who will be the authority for it, prosaic utterance in verse, realism in rhyme, no matter what the subject, is an incongruity that cannot be too severely condemned. A very large proportion of the verse of Crabbe, once so popular, but now, I fancy, but little read, is of little value, by reason of the presence of this defect. Yet while I indicate, and venture to reprove, the feebleness into which the feminine note in English poetry has too often declined and deteriorated, never let us forget that it has contributed lovely and immortal poetry to the language, poetry to be found in Wordsworth, poetry such as melts us almost to tears in Hood's *Song of the Shirt*, or in Mrs. Barrett Browning's *The Cry of the Children*. Horace, who was a great critic as well as a great poet, said long ago that it is extremely difficult to express oneself concerning ordinary everyday facts and feelings in a becoming and agreeable manner; and to do this in verse demands supreme genius. As a set-off to the example of feebleness I just now cited in Wordsworth, listen how, when the mood of inspiration is on him, he can see a Highland girl reaping in a field – surely an ordinary everyday sight – and threw around her the heavenly halo of the divinest poetry:

Behold her, single in the field,
Yon solitary Highland Lass!
Reaping and singing by herself;
Stop here, or gently pass!
Alone she cuts, and binds the grain,
And sings a melancholy strain;
O listen! for the Vale profound
Is overflowing with the sound.

No Nightingale did ever chaunt
So sweetly to reposing bands
Of Travellers in some shady haunt,
Among Arabian sands:
A voice so thrilling ne'er was heard
In spring-time from the Cuckoo-bird,
Breaking the silence of the seas
Among the farthest Hebrides.

Will no one tell me what she sings?
Perhaps the plaintive numbers flow
For old, unhappy, far-off things,
And battles long ago:
Or is it some more humble lay,
Familiar matter of to-day?
Some natural sorrow, loss, or pain,
That has been, and may be again?

Whate'er the theme, the Maiden sang
As if her song could have no ending;
I saw her singing at her work,
And o'er the sickle bending; —
I listened till I had my fill,
And when I mounted up the hill,
The music in my heart I bore,

Long after it was heard no more.

But there is another manifestation of the feminine note in English poetry, distinct from, though doubtless akin to, the one we have been considering; a note which likewise was not heard in it till about a hundred years ago, but which has been heard very frequently since, and which seems at times to threaten to become its dominant and all-prevailing note, or at any rate the only one that is keenly listened to. Instead of the note of interest in and pity for others, it has become the note of interest in and pity either for oneself, or for one's other self; a note so strongly personal and suggestive as to become egotistic and entirely self-regarding. This is the amatory or erotic note, which I think you will all recognise when I give it that designation; the note which appears to consider the love of the sexes as the only important thing in life, and certainly the only thing worth writing or singing about. More than two thousand years ago, a Greek poet wrote a lyric beginning, "I would fain sing of the heroes of the House of Atreus, I would fain chant the glories of the line of Cadmus; but my lyre refuses to sound any note save that of love." In these days the poet who expressed that sentiment and acted on it would have a great many listeners; and no doubt Anacreon, too, had his audience in ancient Greece. But he was not ranked by them side by side with their great poets who *did* take the tragic story of the House of Atreus for their theme. It can only be when feminine influence is supreme in society and in literature, and when the feminine note in poetry has become, or threatens to become, paramount, that the sentiment and practice of Anacreon is viewed with approbation and favour. Byron has said in a well-known passage:

For love is of man's life a thing apart;
'Tis woman's whole existence.

If I know anything about women, that is a gross exaggeration, unless in the term love be included love of parents, love of brothers and sisters, love of children, in a word, every form and manifestation of affection. Still it is not necessary to deny – indeed if it be true it is necessary to admit – that love, in the narrower if more intense signification of the word, does play a larger part in the lives, or at any rate in the imagination, of most women than it does in the lives and the imagination of most men; and it is not to be denied that practically all women, and a fair sprinkling of men, now take an almost exclusive interest in the amatory note in poetry. Nor let any one say that this was always so, and that poetry and poets have from time immemorial occupied themselves mainly with the passion of love. Indeed they have not done so. It would be to show an utter ignorance of the genius of Homer, of the great Greek dramatists, of Virgil, of Dante, of Spenser, of Shakespeare, of Milton, and of the temper of the times in which they lived, to say that they could sound only notes of love. They sounded these sometimes, but seldom and rarely, in comparison with their other and more masculine notes, and always in due subordination to these. I will not go so far as to say that they thought, with Napoleon, that love is the occupation of the idle, and the idleness of the occupied, but they knew that however absorbing for a season the passion of love as described by many poets and by nearly all modern novelists may be, it *is* a thing apart; and, as such, they dealt with it. They did not ignore its existence, or even its importance, but they did not exaggerate its existence and its importance, relatively to other interests, other occupations, other duties in life. It was because of the high fealty and allegiance which Spenser declared he owed to all womankind that he did not represent women as perpetually sighing or being sighed for by men. It was because Shakespeare had such absolute familiarity, not with this or that part of life, but with the whole of it, that even in *Romeo and Juliet*, in *Othello*, in *Measure for Measure*, and again in *As You Like It*, he represented the passion of love at work and in operation along with other sentiments and other passions; and, in the greater portion of his dramas either does not introduce it at all, or assigns to it a quite subordinate place. In *Romeo and Juliet* the brave Mercutio, the Tybalt "deaf to peace," the garrulous nurse, the true apothecary,

the comfortable Friar, as Juliet calls him, all these and more, have their exits and their entrances, and all, in turn, demand our attention. *Romeo and Juliet* is a love-drama indeed; but even in *Romeo and Juliet*, though love occupies the foremost place and plays the leading part, it stands in relation to other passions and other characters, and moves onward to its doom surrounded and accompanied by a medley of other circumstances and occurrences; just as true love, even the most engrossing, does in real life. The same just apprehension of life, the same observance of accurate proportion between the action of love and the action of other passions and other interests, may be observed in *Othello*. Othello is not represented merely as a man who is consumed and maddened by jealousy, but as a citizen and a soldier, encompassed by friends and enemies, and brought into contact, not with Desdemona and Iago alone, but with the Duke of Venice, with valiant Cassio, with witty Montano, with Brabantio, with Gratiano, in a word with people and things in general.

Neither would it be any more to the purpose to object that Herrick, that Suckling, that Lovelace, and other poets of the seventeenth century wrote love-lyrics by the score, with many of which I have no doubt you are acquainted, and some of which are very beautiful. For these, for the most part, were amatory exercises, not real breathing and burning love-poems; dainty works of art sometimes, but not sicklied o'er with the pale cast of amatory passion. They were seventeenth-century reminiscences of the conventional love-lyrics of the Troubadours of Provence, when there existed an imaginary court of Love and a host of imaginary lovers. Indeed, if I were asked what was the truest and most succinct note uttered by their English imitators, I think I should have to say that I seem to catch it most distinctly in the lines of Suckling beginning:

> Why so pale and wan, fond lover?
> Prithee, why so pale?

– and ending with:

> If of herself she will not love,
> Nothing can make her:
> The devil take her!

But we catch a very different amatory note, and that of the most personal and earnest kind, when the voice of Burns, and then the voice of Byron, were heard in English poetry. In Byron the note is almost always passionate. In Burns it is sometimes sentimental, sometimes jovial, sometimes humorous, sometimes frankly and offensively coarse. Many readers cannot do full justice to the North-Country dialect in the following lines, but the most Southern of accents could not quite spoil their simple beauty:

> The westlin wind blaws loud an' shrill;
> The night's baith mirk and rainy, O;
> But I'll get my plaid, an' out I'll steal,
> An' owre the hills to Nannie, O.
>
> Her face is fair, her heart is true,
> As spotless as she's bonnie, O:
> The op'ning gowan, wat wi' dew,
> Nae purer is than Nannie, O.

That is one amatory, one feminine note in Burns. Here is another:

There's nought but care on every han',
In every hour that passes, O;
What signifies the life o' man,
An' 'twere na for the lasses, O.

Auld Nature swears the lovely dears
Her noblest work she classes, O:
Her 'prentice han' she tried on man,
An' then she made the lasses, O.

I have no fault to find with these lines. They express a profound and enduring truth; and, if they do so with some little exaggeration, they do it half humorously, and so protect themselves against criticism. But I really think – I hope you will not deem me unchivalrous in saying so – we have, during the present century, heard too much, both in poetry and in prose romance, as we are now hearing too much in newspapers and magazines, of "the lasses, O." Not that we can hear too much of them in their relation to each other, to men, and to life. The "too much" I indicate is the too much of romantic love, that leaves no place for other emotions and other passions equally worthy, or relegates these to an inferior position and to a narrower territory. I should say that there is rather too much of the sentimental note in Byron, in Shelley, in Keats, just as I should say that there is not too much of it in Wordsworth or in Scott. To say this is not to decry Byron, Shelley, and Keats – what lover of poetry would dream of decrying such splendid poets as they? – but only to indicate a certain tendency against which I cannot help feeling it is well to be on our guard. The tendency of the times is to encourage writers, whether in prose or verse, to deal with this particular theme and to deal with it too frequently and too pertinaciously. Moreover, there is always a danger that a subject, in itself so delicate, should not be quite delicately handled, and indeed that it should be treated with indelicacy and grossness. That, too, unfortunately, has happened in verse; and when that happens, then I think the Heavenly Muse veils her face and weeps. It must have been through some dread of poetry thus dishonouring itself that Plato in his ideal Republic proposed that poets should be crowned with laurel, and then banished from the city. For my part, I would willingly see such poets banished from the city, but not crowned with laurel. No doubt Plato's notion that poets should chant nothing but hymns to the Gods and praises of virtue is a little narrow and exacting, but if they are to sing songs worthy of themselves, and of mankind, they must be on the side of virtue and of the Gods. Hark with what perfect delicacy a masculine poet like Scott can deal with a feminine theme:

What though no rule of courtly grace
To measured mood had trained her pace,
A foot more light, a step more true
Ne'er from the heath-flower dashed the dew.
Ev'n the light harebell raised its head,
Elastic from her airy tread.
What though upon her speech there hung
The accents of the mountain tongue?
Those solemn sounds, so soft, so clear,
The listener held his breath to hear.

That is how manly poets write and think of women. But they do not dwell over much on the theme; they do not harp on it; and when you turn the page, you read in a totally different key:

The fisherman forsook the strand,

The swarthy smith took dirk and brand;
With changëd cheer the mower blythe
Left in the half-cut swathe the scythe.
The herds without a keeper strayed,
The plough was in mid-furrow stayed.
The falconer tossed his hawk away,
The hunter left the stag at bay.
Prompt at the signal of alarms,
Each son of Albion rushed to arms.
So swept the tumult and affray
Along the margin of Achray.

Does it not remind you of the passage I quoted from Homer, where Hector says to Andromache, "Go! to your house, and see to your loom and distaff, but for war men will provide"? Scott, like Homer, observed the due proportion between love and life, giving love ample room, but not allotting it excessive space. If again one wants to hear how delicately, how worthily, how manfully, poets can write of love and of women, what can one do better than recall this perfect lyric of Wordsworth's? —

Three years she grew in sun and shower,
Then Nature said, "A lovelier flower
On earth was never sown;
This Child I to myself will take;
She shall be mine, and I will make
A Lady of my own.

"Myself will to my darling be
Both law and impulse: and with me
The Girl, in rock and plain,
In earth and heaven, in glade and bower,
Shall feel an overseeing power
To kindle or restrain.

"She shall be sportive as the Fawn
That wild with glee across the lawn
Or up the mountain springs;
And hers shall be the breathing balm,
And hers the silence and the calm
Of mute insensate things.

"The floating Clouds their state shall lend
To her; for her the willow bend;
Nor shall she fail to see
Even in the motions of the Storm
Grace that shall mould the Maiden's form
By silent sympathy.

"The Stars of midnight shall be dear
To her; and she shall lean her ear
In many a secret place

Where Rivulets dance their wayward round,
And beauty born of murmuring sound
Shall pass into her face.

"And vital feelings of delight
Shall rear her form to stately height,
Her virgin bosom swell;
Such thoughts to Lucy I will give
While she and I together live
Here in this happy Dell."

Thus Nature spake – The work was done —
How soon my Lucy's race was run!
She died, and left to me
This heath, this calm and quiet scene;
The memory of what has been,
And never more will be.

Neither should I like it to be supposed that I think Byron could not write on this same theme in the noblest manner. He did so frequently; he would not have been the great poet he is if he had not done so. Listen to this, for example:

She walks in beauty, like the night
Of cloudless climes and starry skies,
And all that's best of dark and light
Meet in her aspect and her eyes.
Thus mellowed to that tender light
Which Heaven to gaudy day denies.

One shade the more, one ray the less,
Had half impaired the nameless grace
Which waves in every raven tress,
Or softly lightens o'er her face,
Where thoughts serenely sweet express
How pure, how dear, their dwelling place.

And on that cheek, and o'er that brow,
So soft, so calm, yet eloquent,
The smiles that win, the tints that glow,
But tell of days in goodness spent,
A mind at peace with all below,
A heart whose love is innocent.

Women are honoured and exalted when they are sung of in that manner. They are neither honoured nor exalted, they are dishonoured and degraded, when they are represented, either in prose or verse, as consuming their days in morbid longings and sentimental regrets, and men are represented as having nothing to do save to stimulate or satisfy such feelings. What is written in prose is not here my theme. I am writing of poets and poetry, and of the readers of poetry. Novelists and novel-readers are a different and separate subject. But I may say in passing that poetry and the readers of

poetry have suffered somewhat during the present generation from novels and novel-readers. A newer and narrower standard of human interest has been set up; and while the great bulk of readers have turned from poetry to prose romances, writers of verse have too frequently tried to compete with novelists, by treating love as the central interest and the main business of life. Homer did not think it such, neither did Virgil, nor Dante, nor Chaucer, nor Spenser, nor Shakespeare, nor Milton, and let us not think so. I urge every one, every now and again at least, to lay down the novel and open the poem: but let it be a poem that will enlarge one's conception of life, that will help one to think loftily, and to feel nobly, will teach us that there is something more important to ourselves even than *ourselves*, something more important and deserving of attention than one's own small griefs and own petty woes, the vast and varied drama of History, the boundless realm of the human imagination, and the tragic interests and pathetic struggles of mankind. We need not close our ear to the feminine note, but should not listen to it over much. The masculine note is necessarily dominant in life; and the note that is dominant in life should be dominant in literature, and, most of all, in poetry.

MILTON AND DANTE: A COMPARISON AND A CONTRAST

No celebrations in our time have been more serious, more scholarly, or more impressive, than the various gatherings, held during the year lately come to end, in commemoration of the three hundredth anniversary of the birth of Milton. The earliest was held, with peculiar appropriateness, at Christ College, Cambridge, in the month of June. In the hall of the college was given a dinner, presided over by the Master, who had gathered round him men holding high positions alike at Cambridge and Oxford, and poets, scholars, artists, historians, and essayists of true distinction. On this occasion an admirable eulogium of Milton was pronounced by Mr. Mackail. The dinner was succeeded by a representation of *Comus* in the theatre of the town, by the students of the University, with all the charm that usually accompanies the efforts of competent amateurs. With the advent of the exact date of the tercentenary the celebrations were many in number and interesting in variety, in which the members of the British Academy took a prominent part. On December 9 a musical celebration was held in the afternoon in the church of St. Mary-le-Bow, at which the Bishop of Ripon delivered an eloquent sermon; and at the same hour the writer of this paper gave a private lecture before the Dante Society, from the notes of which this article is expanded. In the evening he had the honour of attending and responding to the toast of Poetry, proposed by the Italian ambassador, at the banquet given by the Lord Mayor of London at the Mansion House, to the largest and most impressive gathering of men of eminence in letters, the arts, the drama, the law, and the Legislature, that has ever met in that spacious hall of traditionally magnificent hospitality. A week later a performance of *Samson Agonistes* was given in the Burlington Theatre before a large and representative audience. The more serious section of the daily press, moreover, allotted much space to reports of the celebrations in honour of Milton, the *Times* maintaining in this respect its best traditions.

No one, therefore, can say that the birth, the poetry and prose, the character and the career and the influence of Milton have not been solemnly celebrated by his countrymen. But it is necessary to add, in the interests of truth, that the celebrations were essentially and exclusively scholarly, and were hardly, if at all, shared in by the nation at large. The intellectual sympathies of the educated were warmly touched, but the heart of the British people was not reached.

Now let us turn – for the subject of this paper is not Milton alone, but Milton and Dante – to the sexcentenary of the birth of Dante in the city of Florence, the month and year of his birth having been May 1265. I had been spending the winter in the City of Flowers, and I could not leave it, in order to journey northward, till after the Dante Commemoration had been held. I shall never forget it. From dawn to dusk the entire Florentine people held joyous festival; and, with the coming of night, not only the entire city, its palaces, its bridges, its Duomo, its Palazzo Vecchio, that noblest symbol of civic liberty, but indeed all its thoroughfares and the banks of its river broke into lovely light produced by millions of little cressets filled with olive oil, and every villa round was similarly illuminated. The pavement of the famous square of the Uffizi Palace was boarded over; and overhead was spread a canvas covering dyed with the three Italian national colours. Thither thronged hundreds of peasant men and women, who danced and made merry till the early hours of the morning. At the Pagliano Theatre were given *tableaux vivants* representing the most famous episodes in the *Divina Commedia*, Ristori, Salvini, and Rossi reciting the corresponding passages from that immortal poem.

What a comparison, what a contrast it suggests between the solemn, serious, but limited honour done by us to Milton, and the exultant, universal, national honour paid by his countrymen to Dante! I should add that eight thousand Italian municipalities sent a deputation carrying their local pennons to the square of Santa Croce, where a statue of Dante was unveiled, amid thunderous applause, to popular gaze.

Now let us turn to a more personal contrast between the two poets. To many persons, probably to most in these days, the most interesting feature in the life of a poet is his relation to the sex that is commonly assumed, perhaps not quite correctly, to be the more romantic of the two. In comparing Dante and Milton in that respect one is struck at once by the fact that, while with Dante are not only associated, but inseparably interwoven, the name and person of Beatrice, so that the two seem in our minds but one, knit by a spiritual love stronger even than any bond sanctioned by domestic law for happiness and social stability, Milton had no Beatrice. It would be idle to contend that the absence of such love has not detracted, and will not continue to detract, from the interest felt in Milton and his poetry, not perhaps by scholars, but by the world at large, and the average lover of poetry and poets. For just as women can do much, to use a phrase of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, towards "making a poet out of a man," so can they do even more, either by spiritual influence or by consummate self-sacrifice, to widen the field and deepen the intensity of his fame. No poet ever enjoyed this advantage so conspicuously as Dante. It will perhaps be said that this was effected more by himself than by her. Let us not be too sure of that. In Italy, far more than in northern climes, first avowals of love are made by the eyes rather than by the tongue, by tell-tale looks more than by explicit words. What says Shakespeare, who knew men and women equally well?

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.