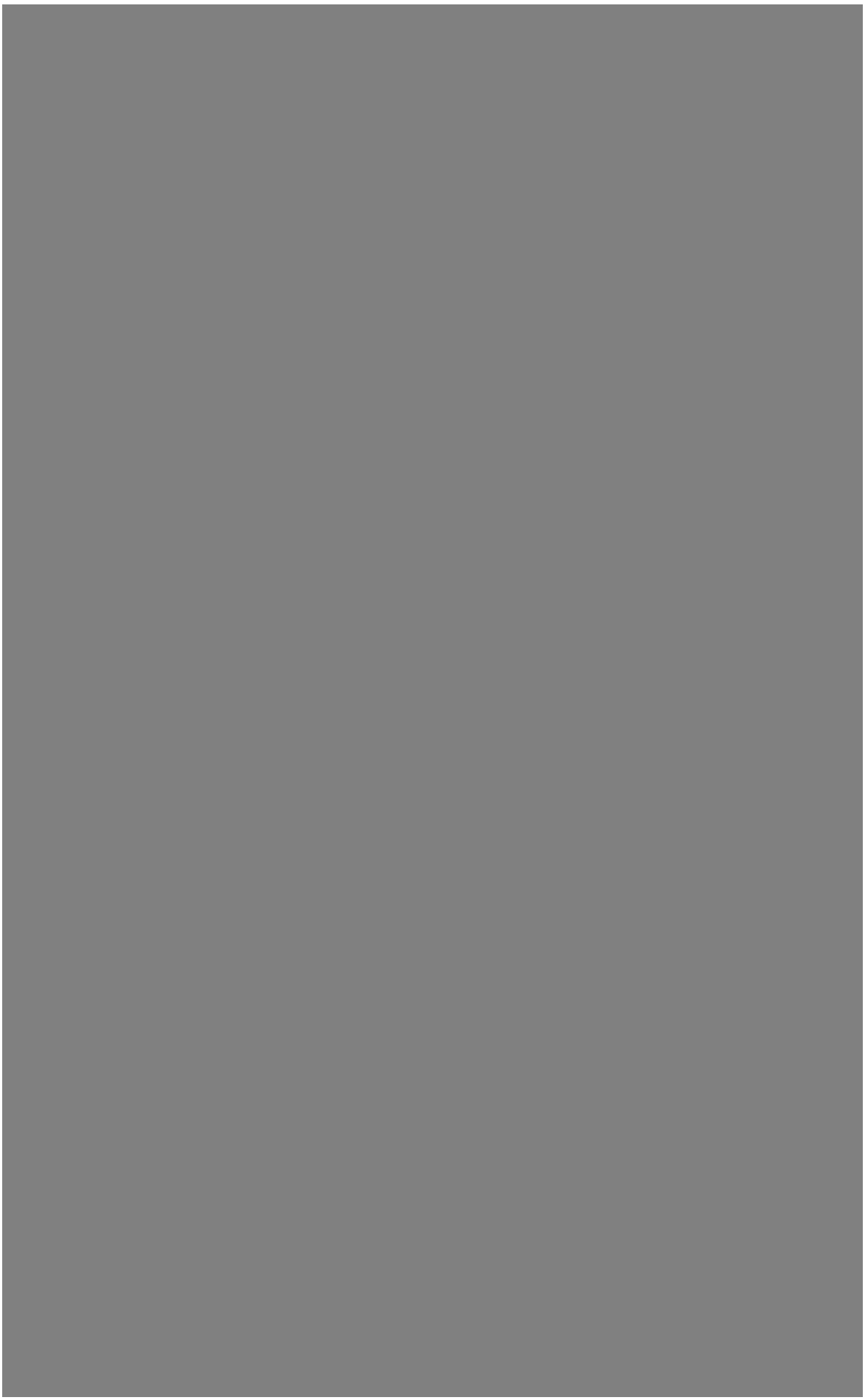
On ENGLISH POETRY

Robert Graves



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ON
ENGLISH POETRY

POEMS BY ROBERT GRAVES

FAIRIES AND FUSILEERS [1918]
COUNTRY SETTLEMENT [1920]
THE PIER-GLASS [1921]

ON ENGLISH POETRY

Being an Irregular Approach to the Psychology of This Art, from Evidence Mainly Subjective

BY ROBERT GRAVES

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MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

To T. E. Lawrence of Arabia and All Soul's College, Oxford, and to W. H. R. Rivers of the Solomon Islands and St. John's College, Cambridge, my gratitude for valuable critical help, and the dedication of this book.

… Also of the Mustarde Tarte: Suche
problemis to paynt, it longyth to his arte.

JOHN SKELTON.

Poetry subdues to union under its light yoke
all irreconcilable things.

P. B. SHELLEY.

NOTE

The greater part of this book will appear controversial, but any critic who expects me to argue on what I have written, is begged kindly to excuse me; my garrison is withdrawn without a shot fired and his artillery may blow the fortress to pieces at leisure. These notebook reflections are only offered as being based on the rules which regulate my own work at the moment, for many of which I claim no universal application and have promised no lasting regard. They have been suggested from time to time mostly by particular problems in the writing of my last two volumes of poetry. Hesitating to formulate at present a comprehensive water-tight philosophy of poetry, I have dispensed with a continuous argument, and so the sections either stand independently or are intended to get their force by suggestive neighbourliness rather than by logical catenation. The names of the glass houses in which my name as an authority on poetry lodges at present, are to be found on a back page.

It is a heartbreaking task to reconcile literary and scientific interests in the same book. Literary enthusiasts seem to regard poetry as something miraculous, something which it is almost blasphemous to analyse, witness the outcry against R. L. Stevenson when he merely underlined examples of Shakespeare’s wonderful dexterity in the manipulation of consonants; most scientists on the other hand, being either benevolently contemptuous of poetry, or if interested, insensitive to the emotional quality of words and their associative subtleties, themselves use words as weights and counters rather than as chemicals powerful in combination and have written, if at all, so boorishly about poetry that the breach has been actually widened. If any false scientific assumptions or any bad literary blunders I have made, be held up for popular execration, these may yet act as decoys to the truth which I am anxious to buy even at the price of a snubbing; and where in many cases no trouble has apparently been taken to check over-statements, there is this excuse to offer, that when putting a cat among pigeons it is always advisable to make it as large a cat as possible.

R. G.

Islip,
Oxford.

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I

DEFINITIONS

THERE are two meanings of Poetry as the poet himself has come to use the word:—first, Poetry, the unforeseen fusion in his mind of apparently contradictory emotional ideas; and second, Poetry, the more-or-less deliberate attempt, with the help of a rhythmic mesmerism, to impose an illusion of actual experience on the minds of others. In its first and peculiar sense it is the surprise that comes after thoughtlessly rubbing a mental Aladdin's lamp, and I would suggest that every poem worthy of the name has its central idea, its nucleus, formed by this spontaneous process; later it becomes the duty of the poet as craftsman to present this nucleus in the most effective way possible, by practising poetry more consciously as an art. He creates in passion, then by a reverse process of analyzing, he tests the implied suggestions and corrects them on common-sense principles so as to make them apply universally.

Before elaborating the idea of this spontaneous Poetry over which the poet has no direct control, it would be convenient to show what I mean by the Poetry over which he has a certain conscious control, by contrasting its method with the method of standard Prose. Prose in its most prosy form seems to be the art of accurate statement by suppressing as far as possible the latent associations of words; for the convenience of his readers the standard prose-writer uses an accurate logical phrasing in which perhaps the periods and the diction vary with the emotional mood; but he only says what he appears at first to say. In Poetry the implication is more important than the manifest statement; the underlying associations of every word are marshalled carefully. Many of the best English poets have found great difficulty in writing standard prose; this is due I suppose to a sort of tender-heartedness, for standard prose-writing seems to the poet very much like turning the machine guns on an innocent crowd of his own work people.

Certainly there is a hybrid form, prose poetry, in which poets have excelled, a perfectly legitimate medium, but one that must be kept distinct from both its parent elements. It employs the indirect method of poetic suggestion, the flanking movement rather than the frontal attack, but like Prose, does not trouble to keep rhythmic control over the reader. This constant control seems an essential part of Poetry proper. But to expect it in prose poetry is to be disappointed; we may take an analogy from the wilder sort of music where if there is continual changing of time and key, the listener often does not “catch on” to each new idiom, so that he is momentarily confused by the changes and the unity of the whole musical form is thereby broken for him. So exactly in prose poetry. In poetry proper our delight is in the emotional variations from a clearly indicated norm of rhythm and sound-texture; but in prose poetry there is no recognizable norm. Where in some notable passages (of the Authorised Version of the Bible for instance) usually called prose poetry, one does find complete rhythmic control even though the pattern is constantly changing, this is no longer prose poetry, it is poetry, not at all the worse for its intricate rhythmic resolutions. Popular confusion as to the various properties and qualities of Poetry, prose poetry, verse, prose, with their subcategories of good, bad and imitation, has probably been caused by the inequality of the writing in works popularly regarded as Classics, and made taboo for criticism. There are few “masterpieces of poetry” that do not occasionally sink to verse, many disregarded passages of Prose that are often prose poetry and sometimes even poetry itself.

II

THE NINE MUSES

I SUPPOSE that when old ladies remark with a breathless wonder "My dear, he has *more* than *mere talent*, I am convinced he has a *touch of genius*" they are differentiating between the two parts of poetry given at the beginning of the last section, between the man who shows a remarkable aptitude for conjuring and the man actually also in league with the powers of magic. The weakness of originally unspontaneous poetry seems to be that the poet has only the very small conscious part of his experience to draw upon, and therefore in co-ordinating the central images, his range of selection is narrower and the links are only on the surface. On the other hand, spontaneous poetry untested by conscious analysis has the opposite weakness of being liable to surface faults and unintelligible thought-connections. Poetry composed in sleep is a good instance of the sort I mean. The rhymes are generally inaccurate, the texture clumsy, there is a tendency to use the same words close together in different senses, and the thought-connections are so free as to puzzle the author himself when he wakes. A scrap of dream poetry sticks in my mind since my early schooldays:

"It's Henry the VIII!
It's Henry the VIII!
I know him by the smile on his face
He is leading his armies over to France.

Here *eighth* and *face* seemed perfect rhymes, to the sleeping ear, the spirit was magnificent, the implications astonishing; but the waking poet was forced to laugh. I believe that in the first draft of Coleridge's *Kubla Khan, Abora* was the rhyme for *Dulcimer*, as:—

“A damsel with a dulcimer
Singing of Mount Abora”

because “saw” seems too self-conscious an assonance and too far removed from “Abora” to impress us as having been part of the original dream poem. “Could I revive within me” again is surely written in a waking mood, probably after the disastrous visit of the man from Porlock.

Henceforward, in using the word *Poetry* I mean both the controlled and uncontrollable parts of the art taken together, because each is helpless without the other. And I do not wish to limit Poetry, as there is a new tendency to do, merely to the short dramatic poem, the ballad and the lyric, though it certainly is a convenience not to take these as the normal manifestations of Poetry in order to see more clearly the inter-relation of such different forms as the Drama, the Epic, and the song with music. In the Drama, the emotional conflict which is the whole cause and meaning of Poetry is concentrated in the mental problems of the leading character or characters. They have to choose for instance between doing what they think is right and the suffering or contempt which is the penalty, between the gratification of love and the fear of hurting the person they love, or similar dilemmas. The lesser actors in the drama do not themselves necessarily speak the language of poetry or have any question in their minds as to the course they should pursue; still, by throwing their weight into one scale or another they affect the actions of the principals and so contribute to the poetry of the play. It is only the master dramatist who ever attempts to develop subsidiary characters in sympathy with the principals.

The true Epic appears to me as an organic growth of dramatic scenes, presented in verse which only becomes true poetry on occasion; but these scenes are so placed in conflicting relation that between them they compose a central theme of Poetry not to be found in the detachable parts, and this theme is a study of the interactions of the ethical principles of opposing tribes or groups. In the Iliad, for instance, the conflict is not only between the Trojan and Greek ideas, but between groups in each camp. In the Odyssey it is between the ethics of sea-wandering and the ethics of the dwellers on dry land. I would be inclined

to deny the *Beowulf* as an epic, describing it instead as a personal allegory in epical surroundings. The Canterbury Tales are much nearer to an English Epic, the interacting principles being an imported Eastern religion disguised in Southern dress and a ruder, more vigorous Northern spirit unsubdued even when on pilgrimage.

The words of a song do not necessarily show in themselves the emotional conflict which I regard as essential for poetry, but that is because the song is definitely a compound of words and music, and the poetry lies in this relation. Words for another man's music can hardly have a very lively independent existence, yet with music they must combine to a powerful chemical action; to write a lyric to conflict with imaginary music is the most exacting art imaginable, and is rather like trying to solve an equation in *x*, *y* and *z*, given only *x*.

I wonder if there are as many genuine Muses as the traditional nine; I cannot help thinking that one or two of them have been counted twice over. But the point of this section is to show the strong family likeness between three or four of them at least.

III

POETRY AND PRIMITIVE MAGIC

ONE may think of Poetry as being like Religion, a modified descendant of primitive Magic; it keeps the family characteristic of stirring wonder by creating from unpromising lifeless materials an illusion of unexpected passionate life. The poet, a highly developed witch doctor, does not specialize in calling up at set times some one particular minor divinity, that of Fear or Lust, of War or Family Affection; he plays on all the emotions and serves as comprehensive and universal a God as he can conceive. There is evidence for explaining the origin of poetry as I have defined it, thus:—Primitive man was much troubled by the phenomenon of dreams, and early discovered what scientists are only just beginning to acknowledge, that the recollection of dreams is of great use in solving problems of uncertainty; there is always a secondary meaning behind our most fantastic nightmares. Members of a primitive society would solemnly recount their dreams to the wise ones of the clan and ask them to draw an inference. Soon it happened that, in cases of doubt, where the dream was forgotten and could not be recalled, or where it was felt that a dream was needed to confirm or reverse a decision, the peculiarly gifted witch doctor or priestess would induce a sort of self-hypnotism, and in the light of the dream so dreamed, utter an oracle which contained an answer to the problem proposed. The compelling use of rhythm to hold people's attention and to make them beat their feet in time, was known, and the witch doctor seems to have combined the rhythmic beat of a drum or gong with the recital of his dream. In these rhythmic dream utterances, intoxicating a primitive community to sympathetic emotional action for a particular purpose of which I will treat later, Poetry, in my opinion, originated, and the dream symbolism of Poetry was further encouraged by the restrictions of the *taboo,* which made definite reference to certain people, gods and objects, unlucky.

This is not to say that verse-recital of laws or adventures or history did not possibly come before oracular poetry, and whoever it was who found it convenient that his word stresses should correspond with beat of drum or stamp of feet, thereby originated the rhythm that is common both to verse and to poetry. Verse is not necessarily degenerate poetry; rhymed advertisement and the *memoria technica* have kept up the honest tradition of many centuries; witty verse with no poetical pretensions justifies its existence a hundred times over; even the Limerick can become delightful in naughty hands; but where poetry differs from other verse is by being essentially a solution to some pressing emotional problem and has always the oracular note.

Between verse, bad poetry and fake poetry, there is a great distinction. Bad poetry is simply the work of a man who solves his emotional problems to his own satisfaction but not to anybody else's. Fake poetry, the decay of poetry, corresponds exactly with fake magic, the decay of true magic. It happens that some member of the priestly caste, finding it impossible to go into a trance when required, even with the aid of intoxicants, has to resort to subterfuge. He imitates a state of trance, recalls some one else's dream which he alters slightly, and wraps his oracular answer in words recollected from the lips of genuine witch doctors. He takes care to put his implied meaning well to the fore and the applicants give him payment and go away as well pleased with their money's worth as the readers of Tupper, Montgomery and Wilcox with the comfortable verses supplied them under the trade name of "Poetry."

Acrostics and other verses of *wit* have, I believe, much the same ancestry in the ingenious *double entendres* with which the harassed priestesses of Delphi insured against a wrong guess.

IV

CONFLICT OF EMOTIONS

THE suggestion that an emotional conflict is necessary for the birth of true poetry will perhaps not be accepted without illustrative instances. But one need only take any of the most famous lines from Elizabethan drama, those generally acknowledged as being the most essential poetry, and a battle of the great emotions, faith, hope or love against fear, grief or hate, will certainly appear; though one side may indeed be fighting a hopeless battle.

When Marlowe's Doctor Faustus is waiting for the clock to strike twelve and the Devil to exact his debt, he cries out:

> That Time may cease and midnight never come
> *O lente, lente currite noctis equi*.

Scholastic commentators have actually been found to wonder at the "inappropriateness" of "Go slowly, slowly, coursers of the night," a quotation originally spoken by an Ovidian lover with his arms around the mistress from whom he must part at dawn. They do not even note it as marking the distance the scholar Faustus has travelled since his first dry-boned Latin quotation *Bene disserere est finis logices* which he pedantically translates:

> Is, to dispute well, Logicke's chiefest end.

Far less do they see how Marlowe has made the lust of life, in its hopeless struggle against the devils coming to bind it for the eternal bonfire, tragically unable to find any better expression than this feeble over-sweetness; so that there follows with even greater insistence of fate:—

The starres moove stil, time runs, the clocke wil strike,
The divel wil come and Faustus must be damnd.

When Lady Macbeth, sleep-walking, complains that "all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand," these perfumes are not merely typically sweet smells to drown the reek of blood. They represent also her ambitions for the luxury of a Queen, and the conflict of luxurious ambition against fate and damnation is as one-sided as before. Or take Webster's most famous line in his Duchess of Malfi:

Cover her face; mine eyes dazzle; she died young,

spoken by Ferdinand over the Duchess' body; and that word "dazzle" does duty for two emotions at once, sun-dazzled awe at loveliness, tear-dazzled grief for early death.

The effect of these distractions of mind is so often an appeal to our pity, even for the murderers or for the man who has had his fill of "vaine pleasure for 24 yeares" that to rouse this pity has been taken, wrongly, I think, as the chief end of poetry. Poetry is not always tragedy; and there is no pity stirred by Captain Tobias Hume's love song "Faine would I change this note, To which false love has charmed me," or in Andrew Marvell's Mower's address to the glow-worms:

Ye country comets that portend
No war nor prince's funeral,
Shining unto no higher end
Than to presage the grass's fall.

There is no pity either for Hume's lover who suddenly discovers that he has been making a sad song about nothing, or for Marvell's glow-worms and their rusticity and slightness of aim. In the first case Love stands up in its glory against the feeble whining of minor poets; in the second, thoughts of terror and majesty, the heavens themselves blazing forth the death of princes, conflict ineffectually with security and peace, the evening glow-worm prophesying fair weather for mowing next morning, and meanwhile lighting rustic lovers to their tryst.

V

THE PATTERN UNDERNEATH

THE power of surprise which marks all true poetry, seems to result from a foreknowledge of certain unwitting processes of the reader's mind, for which the poet more or less deliberately provides. The underlying associations of each word in a poem form close combinations of emotion unexpressed by the bare verbal pattern.

In this way the poet may be compared with a father piecing together a picture-block puzzle for his children. He surprises them at last by turning over the completed picture, and showing them that by the act of assembling the scattered parts of "Red Riding Hood with the Basket of Food" he has all the while been building up unnoticed underneath another scene of the tragedy—"The Wolf eating the Grandmother."

The analogy can be more closely pressed; careless arrangement of the less important pieces or wilfully decorative borrowing from another picture altogether may look very well in the upper scene, but what confusion below!

The possibilities of this pattern underneath have been recognized and exploited for centuries in Far Eastern systems of poetry. I once even heard an English Orientalist declare that Chinese was the only language in which true poetry could be written, because of the undercurrents of allusion contained in every word of the Chinese language. It never occurred to him that the same thing might be unrecognizedly true also of English words.

VI

“INSPIRATION”

PEOPLE are always enquiring how exactly poets get their “inspiration,” perhaps in the hope that it may happen to themselves one day and that if they know the signs in advance, something profitable may come of it.

It is a difficult conundrum, but I should answer somehow like this:—The poet is consciously or unconsciously always either taking in or giving out; he hears, observes, weighs, guesses, condenses, idealizes, and the new ideas troop quietly into his mind until suddenly every now and again two of them violently quarrel and drag into the fight a group of other ideas that have been loitering about at the back of his mind for years; there is great excitement, noise and bloodshed, with finally a reconciliation and drinks all round. The poet writes a tactful police report on the affair and there is the poem.

Or, to put it in a more sober form:—

When conflicting issues disturb his mind, which in its conscious state is unable to reconcile them logically, the poet acquires the habit of self-hypnotism, as practised by the witch doctors, his ancestors in poetry.

He learns in self-protection to take pen and paper and let the pen solve the hitherto insoluble problem which has caused the disturbance.

I speak of this process of composition as self-hypnotism because on being interrupted the poet experiences the disagreeable sensations of a sleep-walker disturbed, and later finds it impossible to remember how the early drafts of a poem ran, though he may recall every word of a version which finally satisfied his conscious scrutiny. Confronted afterwards with the very first draft of the series he cannot in many cases decipher his own writing, far less recollect the process of thought which made him erase this word and substitute that. Many poets of my acquaintance have corroborated what I have just said and also observed that on laying down their pens after the first excitement of composition

they feel the same sort of surprise that a man finds on waking from a “fugue,” they discover that they have done a piece of work of which they never suspected they were capable; but at the same moment they discover a number of trifling surface defects which were invisible before.

VII

THE PARABLE OF MR. POETA AND MR. LECTOR

MR. POETA was a child of impulse, and though not really a very careful student of Chaucer himself, was incensed one day at reading a literary article by an old schoolfellow called Lector, patronizing the poet in an impudent way and showing at the same time a great ignorance of his best work. But instead of taking the more direct and prosaic course of writing a letter of protest to the review which printed the article, or of directly giving the author a piece of his mind, he improvised a complicated plot for the young man’s correction.

On the following day he invited Mr. Lector to supper at his home and spent a busy morning making preparations. He draped the dining-room walls with crape, took up the carpet, and removed all the furniture except the table and two massive chairs which were finally drawn up to a meal of bread, cheese and water. When supper-time arrived and with it Mr. Lector, Mr. Poeta was discovered sitting in deep dejection in a window seat with his face buried in his hands; he would not notice his guest’s arrival for a full minute. Mr. Lector, embarrassed by the strangeness of his reception (for getting no answer to his knock at the door he had forced his way in), was now definitely alarmed by Mr. Poeta’s nervous gestures, desultory conversation and his staring eyes perpetually turning to a great rusty scimitar hanging on a nail above the mantelpiece. There was no attendance, nor any knife or plate on the board. The bread was stale, the cheese hard, and no sooner had Mr. Lector raised a glass of water to his lips than his host dashed it from his hands and with a bellow of rage sprang across the table. Mr. Lector, saw him seize the scimitar and flourish it around his head, so for want of any weapon of defence, the unfortunate young man reacted to terror-stricken flight. He darted from the room and heard the blade whistle through the air behind him.

Out of an open window he jumped and into a small enclosed yard; with the help of a handy rainwater tub he climbed the opposite wall, then dashed down a pathway through a shrubbery and finding the front door of a deserted cottage standing open, rushed in and upstairs, then breathlessly flinging into an empty room at the stairhead, slammed the door.

By so slamming the door he had locked it and on recovering his presence of mind found himself a close prisoner, for the only window was stoutly barred and the door lock was too massive to break. Here then, he stayed in confinement for three days, suffering severely until released by an accomplice of Mr. Poeta, who affected to be much surprised at finding him there and even threatened an action for trespass. But cold, hungry and thirsty, Mr. Lector had still had for companion in his misery a coverless copy of Chaucer which he found lying in the grate and which he read through from beginning to end with great enjoyment, thereupon reconsidering his previous estimate of the poet's greatness.

But he never realized that every step he had taken had been predetermined by the supposed maniac and that once frightened off his balance, he had reacted according to plan. Mr. Poeta did not need to pursue him over the wall or even to go any further than the dining-room door; he counted on the all-or-none principle of reaction to danger finishing the job for him. So out at the window went Mr. Lector and every recourse offered for escape he accepted unquestioningly. Mr. Poeta knew well enough that Mr. Lector would eventually treasure that copy of Chaucer prepared for him, as a souvenir of his terrible experience, that he would have it rebound and adopt the poet as a "discovery" of his own.

The reader in interpreting this parable, must not make too close a comparison of motives; the process is all that is intended to show. The poet, once emotion has suggested a scheme of work, goes over the ground with minute care and makes everything sure, so that when his poem is presented to the reader, the latter is thrown off his balance temporarily by the novelty of the ideas involved. He has no critical weapons at his command, so he must follow the course which the poet has mapped out for him. He is carried away in spite of himself and though the actual words do not in themselves express all the meaning which the poet manages to convey (Mr. Poeta, as has been said, did not pursue) yet the reader on recovering from the first excitement finds the

implied conclusion laid for him to discover, and flattering himself that he has reached it independently, finally carries it off as his own. Even where a conclusion is definitely expressed in a poem the reader often deceives himself into saying, “I have often thought that before, but never so clearly,” when as a matter of fact he has just been unconsciously translating the poet’s experience into terms of his own, and finding the formulated conclusion sound, imagines that the thought is originally his.

VIII

THE CARPENTER'S SON

FABLES and analogies serve very well instead of the psychological jargon that would otherwise have to be used in a discussion of the poet's mental clockwork, but they must be supported wherever possible by definite instances, chapter and verse. An example is therefore owed of how easily and completely the poet can deceive his readers once he has assumed control of their imagination, hypnotizing them into a receptive state by indirect sensuous suggestions and by subtle variations of verse-melody; which hypnotism, by the way, I regard as having a physical rather than a mental effect and being identical with the rhythmic hypnotism to which such animals as snakes, elephants or apes are easily subject.

Turn then to Mr. Housman's classic sequence "A Shropshire Lad," to No. XLVII "The Carpenter's Son," beginning, "Here the hangman stops his cart." Ask any Housman enthusiasts (they are happily many) how long it took them to realize what the poet is forcing on them there. In nine cases out of ten where this test is applied, it will be found that the lyric has never been consciously recognized as an Apocryphal account of the Crucifixion; and even those who have consciously recognized the clues offered have failed to formulate consciously the further daring (some would say blasphemous) implications of its position after the last three pieces "Shot, lad? So quick, so clean an ending," "If it chance your eye offend you" and the momentary relief of "Bring in this timeless grave to throw."

Among Jubilee bonfires; village sports of running, cricket, football; a rustic murder; the London and North Western Railway; the Shropshire Light Infantry; ploughs; lovers on stiles or in long grass; the ringing of church bells; and then this suicide by shooting, no reader is prepared for the appearance of the historic Son of Sorrow. The poet has only to call the Cross a gallows-tree and make the Crucified call His disciples "Lads"

instead of “My Brethren” or “Children,” and we are completely deceived.

In our almost certain failure to recognize Him in this context lies, I believe, the intended irony of the poem which is strewn with the plainest scriptural allusions.

In justification of the above and of my deductions about “La Belle Dame sans Merci” in a later section I plead the rule that “Poetry contains nothing haphazard,” which follows naturally on the theory connecting poetry with dreams. By this rule I mean that if a poem, poem-sequence or drama is an allegory of genuine emotional experience and not a mere cold-blooded exercise, no striking detail and no juxtaposition of apparently irrelevant themes which it contains can be denied at any rate a personal significance—a cypher that can usually be decoded from another context.

IX

THE GADDING VINE

WHEN we say that a poet is born not made, it is saying something much more, that Poetry is essentially spontaneous in origin, and that very little of it can therefore be taught on a blackboard; it means that a man is not a poet unless there is some peculiar event in his family history to account for him. It means to me that with the apparent exceptions given in the next section, the poet, like his poetry, is himself the result of the fusion of incongruous forces. Marriages between people of conflicting philosophies of life, widely separated nationalities or (most important) different emotional processes, are likely either to result in children hopelessly struggling with inhibitions or to develop in them a central authority of great resource and most quick witted at compromise. Early influences, other than parental, stimulate the same process. The mind of a poet is like an international conference composed of delegates of both sexes and every shade of political thought, which is trying to decide on a series of problems of which the chairman has himself little previous knowledge—yet this chairman, this central authority, will somehow contrive to sign a report embodying the specialized knowledge and reconciling the apparently hopeless disagreements of all factions concerned. These factions can be called, for convenience, the poet's sub-personalities.

It is obviously impossible to analyze with accuracy the various elements that once combined to make a phrase in the mind of a poet long dead, but for the sake of illustration here is a fanciful reconstruction of the clash of ideas that gave us Milton's often quoted "Gadding Vine." The words, to me, represent an encounter between the poet's sub-personalities "B" and "C." Says "B":—

"What a gentle placid fruitful plant the vine is; I am thinking of putting it in one of my speeches as emblem of the kindly weakness of the Vegetables."

C replies very tartly:—

“Gentle placid fruitful fiddle-sticks! Why, my good friend, think of the colossal explosive force required to thrust up that vast structure from a tiny seed buried inches deep in the earth; against the force of gravity too, and against very heavy winds. Placidity! Look at its leaves tossing about and its greedy tendrils swaying in search of something to attack. Vegetable indeed! It’s mobile, it’s vicious, it’s more like a swarm of gad-flies.” B continues obstinate, saying “I never heard such nonsense. A vine is still a vine, in spite of your paradoxes.”

“Anyhow, the juice of the vine makes you gad about pretty lively, sometimes,” says C.

“Grapes are the conventional fruit for the sick-room,” retorts B.

“Well, what did the Greeks think about it?” pursues C. “Wasn’t Dionysos the god of the Vine? He didn’t stop rooted all his life in some miserable little Greek valley. He went gadding off to India and brought back tigers.”

“If you are going to appeal to the poets,” returns B, “you can’t disregard the position of the vine in decorative art. It has been conventionalized into the most static design you can find, after the lotus. When I say *Vine*, that’s quite enough for me, just V for vegetable.”

They are interrupted by A the master spirit who says with authority:—

“Silence, the two of you! I rule a compromise. Call it a “gadding vine” and have done with it.”

… … … … … … … . .

The converse of the proposition stated at the beginning of this section, namely that every one who has the sort of family history mentioned above and is not the prey of inhibitions, will become a poet, is certainly not intended. Poetry is only one outlet for peculiar individual expression; there are also the other arts, with politics, generalship, philosophy, and imaginative business; or merely rhetoric, fantastic jokes and original swearing—

X

THE DEAD END AND THE MAN OF ONE POEM

THE question of why Poets suddenly seem to come to a dead end and stop writing true Poetry, is one that has always perplexed literary critics, and the poets themselves still more. The explanation will probably be found in two causes.

In the first case the poet's preoccupation with the clash of his emotions has been transmuted into a calmer state of meditation on philosophic paradox: but poetry being, by accepted definition, sensuous and passionate is no vehicle of expression for this state. Impersonal concepts can perhaps be expressed in intellectual music, but in poetry the musical rhythm and word-texture are linked with a sensuous imagery too gross for the plane of philosophic thought. Thus dithyramb, by which I mean the essentially musical treatment of poetry in defiance of the sense of the words used, is hardly a more satisfactory medium than metaphysical verse: in which even a lyrical sugar-coating to the pill cannot induce the childish mood of poetry to accept philosophic statements removed beyond the plane of pictorial allegory.

In the second case the conflict of the poet's subpersonalities has been finally settled, by some satisfaction of desire or removal of a cause of fear, in the complete rout of the opposing parties, and the victors dictate their own laws, uncontradicted, in legal prose or (from habit) in verse.

Distinction ought to be drawn between the poet and the man who has written poetry. There are certainly men of only one poem, a James Clarence Mangan, a Christopher Smart, a Julian Grenfell (these are instances more convenient than accurate) who may be explained either as born poets, tortured with a lifelong mental conflict, though able perhaps only once in their life to "go under" to their own self-hypnotism, or as not naturally poets at all but men who write to express a sudden intolerable clamour in their brain; this is when circumstances have

momentarily alienated the usually happy members of their mental family, but once the expression has brought reconciliation, there is no further need of poetry, and the poet born out of due time, ceases to be.

This temporary writing of poetry by normal single-track minds is most common in youth when the sudden realization of sex, its powers and its limited opportunities for satisfactory expression, turns the world upside down for any sensitive boy or girl. Wartime has the same sort of effect. I have definite evidence for saying that much of the trench-poetry written during the late war was the work of men not otherwise poetically inclined, and that it was very frequently due to an insupportable conflict between suppressed instincts of love and fear; the officer’s actual love which he could never openly show, for the boys he commanded, and the fear, also hidden under a forced gaiety, of the horrible death that threatened them all.

XI

SPENSER’S CUFFS

THE poet’s quarrelsome lesser personalities to which I have referred are divided into camps by the distinction of sex. But in a poet the dominant spirit is male and though usually a feminist in sympathy, cannot afford to favour the women at the expense of his own sex. This amplifies my distrust of poets with floppy hats, long hair, extravagant clothes and inverted tendencies. Apollo never to my knowledge appears in Greek art as a Hermaphrodite, and the Greeks understood such problems far better than we do. I know it is usual to defend these extravagances of dress by glorifying the Elizabethan age; but let it be remembered that Edmund Spenser himself wore “short hair, little bands and little cuffs.”

If there is no definite sexual inversion to account for breaking out in fancy dress, a poet who is any good at all ought not to feel the need of advertising his profession in this way. As I understand the poet’s nature, though he tries to dress as conventionally as possible, he will always prove too strong for his clothes and look completely ridiculous or very magnificent according to the occasion.

This matter of dress may seem unimportant, but people are still so shy of acknowledging the poet in his lifetime as a gifted human being who may have something important to say, that any dressing up or unnecessary strutting does a great deal of harm.

I am convinced that this extravagant dressing up tendency, like the allied tendency to unkemptness, is only another of the many forms in which the capricious child spirit which rules our most emotional dreams is trying also to dominate the critical, diligent, constructive man-spirit of waking life, without which the poet is lost beyond recovery. Shelley was a great poet not because he enjoyed sailing paper boats on the Serpentine but because, in spite of this infantile preference he had schooled his mind

to hard thinking on the philosophical and political questions of the day and had made friends among men of intellect and sophistication.

It is from considerations rather similar to these that I have given this book a plain heading and restrained my fancy from elaborating a gay seventeenth-century title or sub-title:—“A Broad-side from Parnassus,” “The Mustard Tart,” “Pebbles to Crack Your Teeth,” or “Have at you, Professor Gargoyle!” But I am afraid that extravagance has broken down my determination to write soberly, on almost every page. And … no, the question of the psychology of poetesses is too big for these covers and too thorny in argument. When psycho-analysis has provided more evidence on the difference between the symbolism of women’s dreams and men’s, there will be something to say worth saying. Meanwhile it can only be offered as a strong impression that the dreams of normally-sexed women are, by comparison with those of normally-sexed men, almost always of the same simple and self-centred nature as their poetry and their humour.

XII

CONNECTION OF POETRY AND HUMOUR

IT was no accident that gave Chaucer, Shakespeare and Keats a very sly sense of humour, because humour is surely only another product of the same process that makes poetry and poets—the reconciliation of incongruities.

When, for instance, Chaucer says that one of his Canterbury characters could trip and dance "after the schole of Oxenforde" he is saying two things:—

I. That Absalom thought he could dance well.

II. That the professors of the University of Oxford are hardly the people from whom one would expect the most likely instruction in that art,

and to point the joke he adds to "trip and dance" the absurd "and with his legges casten to and fro." A sympathetic grin, as poets and other conjurors know, is the best possible bridge for a successful illusion. Coleridge was the first writer, so far as I know, to see the connection between poetry and humour, but his argument which uses the Irish Bull "I was a fine child but they changed me" to prove the analogy, trails off disappointingly.

XIII

DICTION

IDEALLY speaking, there is no especially poetic range of subjects, and no especially poetic group of words with which to treat them. Indeed, the more traditionally poetical the subject and the words, the more difficult it is to do anything with them. The nymph, the swain, the faun, and the vernal groves are not any more or less legitimate themes of poetry than Motor Bicycle Trials, Girl Guides, or the Prohibition Question, the only difference being a practical one; the second category may be found unsuitable for the imaginative digestion because these words are still somehow uncooked; in the former case they are unsuitable because overcooked, rechauffé, tasteless. The cooking process is merely that of constant use. When a word or a phrase is universally adopted and can be used in conversation without any apologetic accentuation, or in a literary review without italics, inverted commas or capital letters, then it is ready for use in poetry.

As a convenient general rule, Mr. Lascelles Abercrombie has pointed out in his admirable pamphlet “Poetry and Contemporary Speech,” the poet will always be best advised to choose as the main basis of his diction the ordinary spoken language of his day; the reason being that words grow richer by daily use and take on subtle associations which the artificially bred words of literary or technical application cannot acquire with such readiness; the former have therefore greater poetic possibilities in juxtaposition.

… … … … … … … . .

An objection will be raised to the term “universal” as applied to the audience for poetry; it is a limited universality when one comes to consider it. Most wise poets intend their work only for those who speak the same language as themselves, who have a “mental age” not below normal, and who, if they don’t perhaps understand all the allusions in a

poem, will know at any rate where to go to look them up in a work of reference.

XIV

THE DAFFODILS

ART of every sort, according to my previous contentions, is an attempt to rationalize some emotional conflict in the artist's mind. When the painter says "That's really good to paint" and carefully arranges his still life, he has felt a sort of antagonism between the separate parts of the group and is going to discover by painting on what that antagonism is founded, presenting it as clearly and simply as he knows how, in the slightly distorting haze of the emotion aroused. He never says, "I think I'll paint a jug or bottle, next," any more than the poet says "I've a free morning on Saturday; I'll write an ode to the Moon or something of that sort, and get two guineas for it from the *London Mercury*." No, a particular jug or bottle may well start a train of thought which in time produces a painting, and a particular aspect of the moon may fire some emotional tinder and suggest a poem. But the Moon is no more the *subject* of the poem than the murder of an Archduke was the cause of the late European War.

Wordsworth's lines "I wandered lonely as a cloud" are, as he would have said, about "something more" than yellow daffodils at the water's brim. I have heard how schoolmasters and mistresses point out in the "Poetry Lesson" that the whole importance of this poem lies in Wordsworth's simple perception of the beauty of Spring flowers; but it seems to me to be an important poem only because Wordsworth has written spontaneously (though perhaps under his sister's influence) and recorded to his own satisfaction an emotional state which we all can recognize.

These daffodils have interrupted the thoughts of an unhappy, lonely man and, reminding him of his childhood, become at once emblems of a golden age of disinterested human companionship; he uses their memory later as a charm to banish the spectres of trouble and loneliness. I hope I have interpreted the poem correctly. Let us now fantastically suppose for the sake of argument that Wordsworth had been intentionally seeking

solitude like a hurt beast hating his kind, and had suddenly come across the same daffodil field: he surely might have been struck with a sudden horror for such a huge crowd of flower-faces, especially if his early memories of flower picking had been blighted by disagreeable companionship and the labour of picking for the flower market. He would then have written a poem of exactly the opposite sense, recording his sudden feeling of repulsion at the sight of the flowers and remarking at the end that sometimes when he is lying on his couch in vacant or in pensive mood, they flash across that inward eye which is the curse of solitude,

"Oh then my heart with horror fills
And shudders with the daffodils."

For readers to whom he could communicate his dislike of daffodils on the basis of a common experience of brutal companionship in childhood and forced labour, the poem would seem a masterpiece, and those of them who were schoolmasters would be pretty sure to point out in *their* Poetry Lessons that the importance of the poem lay in Wordsworth's "perception of the dreadfulness of Spring Flowers."

Again the scholastic critic finds the chief value of Wordsworth's "Intimations of Immortality" in the religious argument, and would not be interested to be told that the poet is being disturbed by a melancholy contradiction between his own happy childhood, idealistic boyhood and disappointed age. But if he were to go into the psychological question and become doubtful whether as a matter of fact, children have not as many recollections of Hell as of Heaven, whether indeed the grown mind does not purposely forget early misery and see childhood in a deceptive haze of romance; and if he therefore suspected Wordsworth of reasoning from a wrong premise he would have serious doubts as to whether it was a good poem after all. At which conclusion even the most pagan and revolutionary of modern bards would raise a furious protest; if the poem holds together, if the poet has said what he means honestly, convincingly and with passion—as Wordsworth did—the glory and the beauty of the dream are permanently fixed beyond reach of the scientific lecturer's pointer.

XV

VERS LIBRE

THE limitation of *Vers Libre*, which I regard as only our old friend, Prose Poetry, broken up in convenient lengths, seems to be that the poet has not the continual hold over his reader's attention that a regulated (this does not mean altogether "regular") scheme of verse properly used would give him. The temporary loss of control must be set off against the freedom which *vers libre*-ists claim from irrelevant or stereotyped images suggested by the necessity of rhyme or a difficult metre.

This is not to say that a poet shouldn't start his race from what appears to hardened traditionalists as about ten yards behind scratch; indeed, if he feels that this is the natural place for him, he would be unwise to do otherwise. But my contention is that *vers libre* has a serious limitation which regulated verse has not. In *vers libre* there is no natural indication as to how the lines are to be stressed. There are thousands of lines of Walt Whitman's, over the pointing of which, and the intended cadence, elocutionists would disagree; and this seems to be leaving too much to chance.

I met in a modern *vers libre* poem the line spoken by a fallen angel, "I am outcast of Paradise"; but how was I to say it? What clue had I to the intended rhythm, in a poem without any guiding signs? In regulated verse the reader is compelled to accentuate as the poet determines. Here is the same line introduced into three nonsensical examples of rhyming:—

Satan to the garden came
And found his Lordship walking lame,
"Give me manna, figs and spice,
I am outcast of Paradise."

or quite differently:—

“Beryls and porphyries,
Pomegranate juice!
I am outcast of Paradise
(What was the use?)

or one can even make the reader accept a third alternative, impressively dragging at the last important word:—

He came to his Lordship then
For manna, figs and spice,
“I am chief of the Fallen Ten,
I am outcast of Paradise.”

The regulating poet must of course make sure at the beginning of the poem that there is no possible wrong turning for the reader to take. Recently, and since writing the above, an elder poet, who asks to remain anonymous, has given me an amusing account of how he mis-read Swinburne’s “Hertha,” the opening lines of which are:—

I am that which began;
Out of me the years roll;
Out of me, God and man;
I am equal and whole;
God changes, and man, and the form of them bodily. I am the soul.

My informant read the short lines as having four beats each:—

I´ am thát || whích begán;
Oút of mé || the yeárs róll;
Oút of mé || Gód and mán;
I´ am équal || ánd whóle

and thought this very noble and imposing, though the “équal ánd whóle” was perhaps a trifle forced. The next stanza told him that

something was amiss and he discovered that it was only a two-beat line after all. “It was Swinburne’s impudence in putting the Almighty’s name in an unaccented place of the line, and accenting the name of Man, that put me on the wrong track,” he said. Swinburne’s fault here, for such as agree with the accusation, was surely in his wrong sense of material; he was making muslin do the work of camel’s hair cloth. He was imposing a metre on his emotions, whereas the emotions should determine the metre —and even then constantly modify it. Apropos of the *vers libre*-ists, my friend also denied that there was such a thing as *vers libre* possible, arguing beyond refutation that if it was *vers* it couldn’t be truly *libre* and if it was truly *libre* it couldn’t possibly come under the category of *vers*.

Perhaps the most damaging criticism (if true) of the *vers libre* school of today is that the standard which most of its professors set themselves is not a very high one; with rhythmic freedom so dearly bought, one expects a more intricate system of interlacing implications than in closer bound poetry. Natural rhythms need no hunting; there is some sort of rhythm in every phrase you write, if you break it up small enough and make sufficient allowances for metric resolutions. There is often a queer, wayward broken-kneed rhythm running through whole sentences of standard prose. The following news item has not had a word changed since I found it in *The Daily Mirror*.

> Jóhn Fráin
> Of Bállyghaderéen
> Was indícted at Roscómmon for the múrder of his fáther;
> He báttered his fáther, an óld man, to deáth with a poúnder;
> The júry foúnd him unáble to pléad
> And hé was commítted
> Tó an as´ylum.

One doesn’t “listen” when reading prose, but in poetry or anything offered under that heading a submerged metre is definitely expected. Very few readers of Mr. Kipling’s “Old Man Kangaroo” which is printed as prose, realize that it is written in strict verse all through and that he is, as it were, pulling a long nose at us. The canny *vers librist* gets help from his printer to call your attention to what he calls “cadence” and

“rhythmic relations” (not easy to follow) which might have escaped you if printed as prose; *this* sentence, you’ll find, has its thumb to its nose.

XVI

MOVING MOUNTAINS

PERHAPS some people who buy this book will be disappointed at not being told the correct way of writing triolets and rondeaux. Theirs is the same practical type of mind that longs to join a Correspondence School of Art and learn the formulas for drawing a washer-woman or trousers or the stock caricature of Mr. Winston Churchill.

But poetry is not a science, it is an act of faith; mountains are often moved by it in the most unexpected directions against all the rules laid down by professors of dynamics—only for short distances, I admit; still, definitely moved. The only possible test for the legitimacy of this or that method of poetry is the practical one, the question, “Did the mountain stir?”

XVII

LA BELLE DAME SANS MERCI

THE psalmist explains an outburst of sorrowful poetry as due to a long suppression of the causes of his grief. He says, “I kept silent, yea, even from good words. My heart was hot within me and while I was thus musing, the fire kindled, and at the last I spake with my tongue.” So it was I believe with Keats in the composition of this compellingly sorrowful ballad. Sir S. Colvin’s “Life of Keats” gives the setting well enough. We do not know exactly what kindled the fire but I am inclined to think with Sir S. Colvin, that Keats had been reading a translation ascribed to Chaucer from Alan Chartier’s French poem of the same title. The poet says:—

> “I came unto a lustie greene vallay
> Full of floures …
> … riding an easy paas
> I fell in thought of joy full desperate
> With great disease and paine, so that I was
> Of all lovers the most unfortunate …”

Death has separated him from the mistress he loved…. We know that Keats’ heart had been hot within for a long while, and the suppressed emotional conflict that made him keep silent and muse is all too plain. He has a growing passion for the “beautiful and elegant, graceful, silly, fashionable and strange … MINX” Fanny Brawne; she it was who had doubtless been looking on him “as she did love” and “sighing full sore,” and this passion comes into conflict with the apprehension, not yet a certainty, of his own destined death from consumption, so that the Merciless Lady, to put it baldly, represents both the woman he loved and the death he feared, the woman whom he wanted to glorify by his poetry and the death that would cut his poetry short. Of shutting “her wild, wild eyes with kisses four” which makes the almost intolerable climax to the

ballad, he writes in a journal-letter to his brother George in America, with a triviality and a light-heartedness that can carry no possible conviction. He is concealing the serious conditions of body and of heart which have combined to bring a “loitering indolence” on his writing, now his livelihood; he does not want George to read between the lines; at the same time it is a relief even to copy out the poem. George knows little of Fanny beyond the purposely unprepossessing portraits of her that John himself has given, but the memory of their beloved brother Tom’s death from consumption is fresh in the minds of both. George had sailed to America not realizing how ill Tom had been, John had come back tired out from Scotland, to find him dying; he had seen the lily on Tom’s brow, the hectic rose on his cheek, his starved lips in horrid warning gaping, and, as the final horrible duty, had shut his brother’s wild staring eyes with coins, not kisses. Now Fanny’s mocking smile and sidelong glance play hide and seek in his mind with Tom’s dreadful death-mask. It was about this time that Keats met Coleridge walking by Highgate Ponds and it is recorded that Keats, wishing with a sudden sense of the mortality of poets, to “carry away the memory” of meeting Coleridge, asked to press his hand. When Keats had gone, Coleridge, turned to his friend Green and said, “There is death in that hand.” He described it afterwards as “a heat and a dampness”—but “fever-dew” is Keats’ own word.

There are many other lesser reminiscences and influences in the poem, on which we might speculate—Spenser’s “Faery Queen,” the ballad of Thomas the Rhymer, Malory’s “Lady of the Lake,” Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan” with its singing maiden and the poet’s honey-dew, traceable in Keats’ “honey wild and manna dew,” an echo from Browne “Let no bird sing,” and from Wordsworth “her eyes are wild”; but these are relatively unimportant.

History and Psychology are interdependent sciences and yet the field of historical literary research is almost overcrowded with surveyors, while the actual psychology of creative art is country still pictured in our text-books as Terra Incognita, the rumoured abode of Phoenix and Manticor. The spirit of adventure made me feel myself a regular Sir John Mandeville when I began even comparing Keats’ two descriptions of Fanny as he first knew her with the lady of the poem, noting the “tolerable” foot, the agreeable hair, the elfin grace and elvish manners, in transformation: wondering, did the Knight-at-arms set her on his steed

and walk beside so as to see her commended profile at best advantage? When she turned towards him to sing, did the natural thinness and paleness which Keats noted in Fanny's full-face, form the association-link between his thoughts of love and death? What was the real reason of the "kisses four"? was it not perhaps four because of the painful doubleness of the tragic vision—was it extravagant to suppose that two of the kisses were more properly pennies laid on the eyes of death?

The peculiar value of the ballad for speculation on the birth of poetry is that the version that we know best, the one incorporated in the journal-letter to America, bears every sign of being a very early draft. When Keats altered it later, it is noteworthy that he changed the "kisses four" stanza to the infinitely less poignant:—

> … there she gazed and sighèd deep,
> And here I shut her wild sad eyes—
> So kissed asleep.

Sir S. Colvin suggests that the kisses four were "too quaint": Keats may have told himself that this was the reason for omitting them, but it is more likely that without realizing it he is trying to limit the painful doubleness: the change of "wild wild eyes" which I understand as meaning "wild" in two senses, elf-wild and horror-wild, to "wild sad eyes" would have the same effect.

In writing all this I am sorry if I have offended those who, so to speak, prefer in their blindness to bow down to wood and stone, who shrink from having the particular variety of their religious experience analyzed for them. This section is addressed to those braver minds who can read "The Golden Bough" from cover to cover and still faithfully, with no dawning contempt, do reverence to the gods of their youth.

XVIII

THE GENERAL ELLIOTT

IT is impossible to be sure of one's ground when theorizing solely from the work of others, and for commenting on the half-comedy of my own, "The General Elliott," I have the excuse of a letter printed below. It was sent me by an American colonel whose address I do not know, and if he comes across these paragraphs I hope he will understand that I intended no rudeness in not answering his enquiries.

This is the poem:—

THE GENERAL ELLIOTT

He fell in victory’s fierce pursuit,
   Holed through and through with shot,
A sabre sweep had hacked him deep
   Twixt neck and shoulderknot …

The potman cannot well recall,
   The ostler never knew,
Whether his day was Malplaquet,
   The Boyne or Waterloo.

But there he hangs for tavern sign,
   With foolish bold regard
For cock and hen and loitering men
   And wagons down the yard.

Raised high above the hayseed world
   He smokes his painted pipe,
And now surveys the orchard ways,
   The damsons clustering ripe.

He sees the churchyard slabs beyond,
   Where country neighbours lie,
Their brief renown set lowly down;
   His name assaults the sky.

He grips the tankard of brown ale
   That spills a generous foam:
Oft-times he drinks, they say, and winks
   At drunk men lurching home.

No upstart hero may usurp
   That honoured swinging seat;
His seasons pass with pipe and glass
   Until the tale’s complete.

And paint shall keep his buttons bright
   Though all the world’s forgot
Whether he died for England’s pride
   By battle, or by pot.

And this is the letter:

“April, 1921.

“*My dear Mr. Graves*,—

“Friday, I had the pleasure of reading your lines to “The General Elliott” in *The Spectator*. Yesterday afternoon, about sunset, on returning across fields to Oxford from a visit to Boar’s Hill, to my delight and surprise I found myself suddenly confronted with the General Elliott himself, or rather the duplicate presentment of him—nailed to a tree. But could it be the same, I asked. He did not grip the tankard of brown ale that spills a generous foam—nor did his seasons seem to pass with pipe and glass—and alas, nor did paint keep his tarnished buttons bright. In spite of your assertion, is the general’s tale not already complete? Was he not (like me) but a “temporory officer”? Or have I perhaps seen a spurious General Elliott? He *should* not die; the post from which he views the world is all too lonely for his eyes to be permitted to close upon that scene, albeit the churchyard slabs do not come within the range…. May *I* help to restore him?

“Sincerely,
“J—— B——
“Lt. Col. U. S. A.”

To which letter I would reply, if I had his address:—

My dear Colonel B——

… The poet very seldom writes about what he is observing at the moment. Usually a poem that has been for a long while maturing unsuspected in the unconscious mind, is brought to birth by an outside shock, often quite a trivial one, but one which—as midwives would say—leaves a distinct and peculiar birthmark on the child.

The inn which you saw at Hinksey is the only “General Elliott” I know, but I do not remember ever noticing a picture of him. I remember only a board

THE GENERAL ELLIOTT.
MORRELL’S ALES AND STOUT.

and have never even had a drink there; but once I asked a man working in the garden who this General Elliott was, and he answered that

really he didn’t know; he reckoned he was a fine soldier and killed somewhere long ago in a big battle. As a matter of fact, I find now that Elliott was the great defender of Gibraltar from 1779 to 1783, who survived to become Lord Heathfield; but that doesn’t affect the poem. Some months after this conversation I passed the sign board again and suddenly a whole lot of floating material crystallized in my mind and the following verse came into my head—more or less as I quote it:—

“Was it Schellenberg, General Elliott,
Or Minden or Waterloo
Where the bullet struck your shoulderknot,
And the sabre shore your arm,
And the bayonet ran you through?”

On which lines a poem resulted which seemed unsatisfactory, even after five drafts. I rewrote in a different style a few days later and after several more drafts the poem stood as it now stands. There appear to be more than one set of conflicting emotions reconciled in this poem. In the false start referred to, the 1. A. idea was not properly balanced by 1. B. and 1. C., which necessitated reconstruction of the whole scheme; tinkering wouldn’t answer. I analyze the final version as follows:—

1. A. Admiration for a real old-fashioned General beloved by his whole division, killed in France (1915) while trying to make a broken regiment return to the attack. He was directing operations from the front line, an unusual place for a divisional commander in modern warfare.

B. Disgust for the incompetence and folly of several other generals under whom I served; their ambition and jealousy, their recklessness of the lives of others.

C. Affection, poised between scorn and admiration, for an extraordinary thick-headed, kind-hearted militia Colonel, who

was fond enough of the bottle, and in private life a big farmer. He was very ignorant of military matters but somehow got through his job surprisingly well.

2. A. My hope of settling down to a real country life in the sort of surroundings that the two Hinkseys afford, sick of nearly five years soldiering. It occurred to me that the inn must have been founded by an old soldier who felt much as I did then. Possibly General Elliott himself, when he was dying, had longed to be back in these very parts with his pipe and glass and a view of the orchard. It would have been a kind thought to paint a signboard of him so, like one I saw once (was it in Somerset or Dorset?)—"The Jolly Drinker" and not like the usual grim, military scowl of "General Wellington's" and "General Wolfe's."

   B. I ought to have known who Elliott was because, I used once to pride myself as an authority on military history. The names of Schellenberg, Minden, Malplaquet, The Boyne (though only the two middle battles appear on the colours as battle honours) are imperishable glories for the Royal Welch Fusilier. And the finest Colonel this regiment ever had, Ellis, was killed at Waterloo; he had apparently on his own initiative moved his battalion from the reserves into a gap in the first line.

3. A. My own faith in the excellent qualities of our national beverage.

   B. A warning inscription on a tomb at Winchester over a private soldier who died of drink. But his comrades had added a couplet—"An honest soldier ne'er shall be forgot, Whether he died by musket or by pot."

There are all sorts of other sentiments mixed up, which still elude me, but this seems enough for an answer….

Yours sincerely,

R. G.—(late Captain R. W. F.)

Poe’s account of the series of cold-blooded deliberations that evolved “The Raven” is sometimes explained as an attempt in the spirit of “Ask me no questions, and I’ll tell you no lies,” to hoodwink a too curious Public. A juster suggestion would be that Poe was quite honest in his record, but that the painful nature of the emotions which combined to produce the poem prompted him afterwards to unintentional dishonesty in telling the story. In my account of “The General Elliott” there may be similar examples of false rationalization long after the event, but that is for others to discover: and even so, I am not disqualified from suggesting that the bird of ill omen, perching at night on the head of Wisdom among the books of a library, is symbolism too particularly applicable to Poe’s own disconsolate morbid condition to satisfy us as having been deducted by impersonal logic.

It is likely enough that Poe worked very hard at later drafts of the poem and afterwards remembered his deliberate conscious universalizing of an essentially personal symbolism: but that is a very different matter from pretending that he approached “The Raven” from the first with the same cold reasoning care that constructed, for instance, his Gold-Bug cipher.

XIX

THE GOD CALLED POETRY

A PIECE with this title which appeared in my “Country Sentiment” was the first impulse to more than one of the main contentions in this book, and at the same time supplies perhaps the clearest example I can give of the thought-machinery that with greater luck and cunning may produce something like Poetry. I wrote it without being able to explain exactly what it was all about, but I had a vision in my mind of the God of Poetry having two heads like Janus, one savage, scowling and horrible, the face of Blackbeard the Pirate, the other mild and gracious, that of John the Evangelist. Without realizing the full implication of the symbolism, I wrote:-

Then speaking from his double head
The glorious fearful monster said,
“I am *Yes* and I am *No*
Black as pitch and white as snow;
Love me, hate me, reconcile
Hate with love, perfect with vile,
So equal justice shall be done
And life shared between moon and sun.
Nature for you shall curse or smile;
A poet you shall be, my son.”

The poem so far as I can remember was set going by the sight of … a guard of honour drilling on the barrack-square of a camp near Liverpool! I was standing at the door of the Courts-Martial room where I was shortly to attend at the trial of a deserter (under the Military Service Act) who had unsuccessfully pleaded conscientious objection before a tribunal and had been in hiding for some weeks before being arrested. Now, I had been long pondering about certain paradoxical aspects of Poetry and, particularly, contrasting the roaring genius of Christopher

Marlowe with that of his gentle contemporary Shakespeare; so, standing there watching the ceremonial drill, I fancifully made the officer in command of the guard, a young terror from Sandhurst, into a Marlowe strutting, ranting, shouting and cursing—but making the men *move*; then I imagined Shakespeare in his place. Shakespeare would never have done to command a guard of honour, and they would have hated him at Camberley or Chelsea. He would have been like a brother-officer who was with me a few weeks before in this extremely "regimental" camp; he hated all the "sergeant-major business" and used sometimes on this barrack square to be laughing so much at the absurd pomposity of the drill as hardly to be able to control his word of command. I had more than once seen him going out, beltless, but with a pipe and a dog, for a pleasant walk in the country when he should really have been on parade. In France, however, this officer was astonishing: the men would do anything for him and his fighting feats had already earned him the name of *Mad Jack* in a shock-division where military fame was as fugitive as life. This brother-officer, it is to be noted, was a poet, and had a violent feeling against the Military Service Act. I wondered how he would behave if he were in my place, sitting on the Court-Martial; or how would Shakespeare? Marlowe, of course, would thunder "two years" at the accused with enormous relish, investing the cause of militarism with a magnificent poetry. But Shakespeare, or "Mad Jack"?

That night in the quarters which I had once shared with "Mad Jack," I began writing:—

"I begin to know at last,
These nights when I sit down to rhyme,
The form and measure of that vast
God we call Poetry….

… I see he has two heads
Like Janus, calm, benignant this,
That grim and scowling. His beard spreads
From chin to chin; this God has power
Immeasurable at every hour….

The black beard scowls and says to me
"Human frailty though you be
Yet shout and crack your whip, be harsh;
They'll obey you in the end,
Hill and field, river and marsh
Shall obey you, hop and skip
At the terrour of your whip,
To your gales of anger bend.

The pale beard smiles and says in turn
"True, a prize goes to the stern
But sing and laugh and easily run
Through the wide airs of my plain;
Bathe in my waters, drink my sun,
And draw my creatures with soft song;
They shall follow you along
Graciously, with no doubt or pain."

Then speaking from his double head, etc.

The rather scriptural setting of what the pale beard said was probably suggested by the picture I had formed in my mind of the conscientious objector, whom I somehow sympathetically expected to be an earnest Christian, mild and honest; as a matter of fact, he turned out to be the other kind, violent and shifty alternately. He was accordingly sentenced by Major Tamburlaine and Captains Guise and Bajazeth, to the customary term of imprisonment.

And by the way, talking of Marlowe and Shakespeare;—

Here ranted Isaac’s elder son,
The proud shag-breasted godless one
From whom observant Smooth-cheek stole
Birth-right, blessing, hunter’s soul.

XX

LOGICALIZATION

John King is dead, that good old man
You ne’er shall see him more.
He used to wear a long brown coat
All buttoned down before.

Apparently a simple statement, this rustic epitaph has for any sensitive reader a curiously wistful quality and the easiest way I can show the mixed feelings it stirs, is by supposing a typical eighteenth-century writer to have logicalized them into a polite epigram. The poem would appear mutilated as follows:—

Hereunder lies old John Brown’s honoured dust:
His worthy soul has flown to Heav’n we trust.
Yet still we mourn his vanished russet smock
While frowning fates our trifling mem’ries mock.

Many of the subtler implications are necessarily lost in the formal translation for in poetry the more standardized the machinery of logical expression, the less emotional power is accumulated. But the force of the words “he used to wear” is shown in more obvious opposition to the words “dead” and “good.” The importance of “good” will appear at once if we substitute some word like “ancient” for “good old” and see the collapse of the poetic fabric, still more if we change “good” to “bad” and watch the effect it has in our imaginations on the “you ne’er shall see him more,” the cut of his coat, and the reasons John King had for buttoning it. *Good* John King wore a long brown coat because he was old and felt the cold and because, being a neat old man, he wished to conceal his ragged jacket and patched small-clothes. *Bad* John King kept pheasants, hares, salmon and silver spoons buttoned for concealment

under his. How did good John King die? A Christian death in bed surrounded by weeping neighbours, each begging a coat-button for keepsake. Bad John King? Waylaid and murdered one dark night by an avenger, and buried where he fell, still buttoned in his long brown coat.

The emotional conflict enters curiously into such one-strand songs as Blake's "Infant Joy" from the *Songs of Innocence*, a poem over which for the grown reader the sharp sword of Experience dangles from a single horsehair. The formal version (which I beg nobody to attempt even in fun) logicalized in creaking sonnet-form would have the octave filled with an address to the Melancholy of Sophistication, the sestet reserved for:—

> But thou, Blest Infant, smiling radiantly
> Hast taught me etc, etc.

An immoral but far more entertaining parlour game than logicalization—perhaps even a profitable trade—would be to extract the essentials from some long-winded but sincere Augustan poem, disguise the self-conscious antitheses, modernize the diction, liven up the rhythm, fake a personal twist, and publish. Would there be no pundit found to give it credit as a poem of passion and originality? I hope this suggestion for a New-Lamps-for-Old Industry will not meet the eye of those advanced but ill-advised English Masters who are now beginning to supervise with their red-and-blue pencils the writing of English Poetry in our schools.

Now, the trouble about the use of logic in poetry seems not to be that logic isn't a very useful and (rightly viewed) a very beautiful invention, but that it finds little place in our dreams: dreams are illogical as a child's mind is illogical, and spontaneous undoctored poetry, like the dream, represents the complications of adult experience translated into thought-processes analogous to, or identical with, those of childhood.

This I regard as a very important view, and it explains, to my satisfaction at any rate, a number of puzzling aspects of poetry, such as the greater emotional power on the average reader's mind of simple metres and short homely words with an occasional long strange one for wonder; also, the difficulty of introducing a foreign or unusual prosody

into poems of intense passion: also the very much wider use in poetry than in daily speech of animal, bird, cloud and flower imagery, of Biblical types characters and emblems, of fairies and devils, of legendary heroes and heroines, which are the stock-in-trade of imaginative childhood; also, the constant appeal poetry makes to the childish habits of amazed wondering, sudden terrors, laughter to signify mere joy, frequent tears and similar manifestations of uncontrolled emotion which in a grown man and especially an Englishman are considered ridiculous; following this last, the reason appears for the strict Classicist's dislike of the ungoverned Romantic, the dislike being apparently founded on a feeling that to wake this child-spirit in the mind of a grown person is stupid and even disgusting, an objection that has similarly been raised to the indiscriminate practice of psycho-analysis, which involves the same process.

XXI

LIMITATIONS

ONE of the most embarrassing limitations of poetry is that the language you use is not your own to do entirely what you like with. Times actually come when in the conscious stage of composition you have to consult a dictionary or another writer as to what word you are going to use. It is no longer practical to coin words, resurrect obsolete ones and generally to tease the language as the Elizabethans did. A great living English poet, Mr. Charles Doughty, is apparently a disquieting instance to the contrary. But he has lost his way in the centuries; he belongs really to the sixteenth. English has never recovered its happy-go-lucky civilian slouch since the more than Prussian stiffening it was given by the eighteenth century drill-sergeants.

It is intolerable to feel so bound compared with the freedom of a musician or a sculptor; in spite of the exactions of that side of the art, the poet cannot escape into mere rhythmic sound; there is always the dead load of sense to drag about with him. I have often felt I would like to be a painter at work on a still life, puzzling out ingenious relationships between a group of objects varying in form, texture and colour. Then when people came up and asked me: “Tell me, sir, is that a Spode jar?” or “Isn’t that a very unusual variety of lily?” I would be able to wave them away placidly; the questions would be irrelevant. But I can’t do that in poetry, everything *is* relevant; it is an omnibus of an art—a public omnibus.

There are consolations, of course; poetry, to be appreciated, is not, like music, dependent on a middleman, the interpretative artist; nor, once in print, is it so liable to damage from accident, deterioration or the reproducer as the plastic arts.

XXII

THE NAUGHTY BOY

BOUND up with the business of controlling the association-ghosts which haunt in their millions every word of the English language, there is the great mesmeric art of giving mere fancy an illusion of solid substance. The chief way this is done, and nobody has ever done it better than Keats, is constantly to make appeals to each of the different bodily senses, especially those more elementary ones of taste, touch, smell, until they have unconsciously built up a scene which is as real as anything can be. As an example of the way Keats rung the changes on the senses, take his “Song about Myself”:—

There was a naughty Boy
And a naughty boy was he
He ran away to Scotland
The people for to see
Then he found
That the ground
Was as hard,
That a yard
Was as long,
That a song
Was as merry,
That a cherry
Was as red—
That lead
Was as weighty,
That fourscore
Was as eighty,
That a door
Was as wooden
As in England—

So he stood in his shoes
And he wonder’d,
He wonder’d,
He stood in his shoes
And he wonder’d.

Here we have a succession of staccato notes, but in the “Eve of St. Agnes” or “Ode to Autumn” almost every phrase is a chord, the individual notes of which each strike a separate sense.

XXIII

THE CLASSIC AND ROMANTIC IDEAS

WHEN Aristotle lays down that poets describe the thing that might be, but that the historian (like the natural historians above mentioned) merely describes that which has been, and that poetry is something of "more philosophic, graver import than history because its statements are of a universal nature" so far his idea of poetry tallies with our own. But when he explains his "might be" as meaning the "probable and necessary" according to our every-day experience of life, then we feel the difference between the Classical and Romantic conceptions of the art—Aristotle was trying to weed poetry of all the symbolic extravagances and impossibilities of the dream state in which it seems to have originated, and to confine it within rational and educative limits. Poetry was with him only an intuitive imitation of how typical men think and react upon each other when variously stimulated. It was what we might call the straight goods of thought conveyed in the traditional magic hampers; but there proved to be difficulties in the packing; the Classical ideal was, in practice, modified by the use of heroic diction and action, conventional indications to the audience that "imitation" was not realism, and that there must be no criticisms on that score; every one must "go under" to the hypnotic suggestion of the buskin and the archaic unnatural speech, and for once think ideally. For the same reason the Classical doctrine lays stress on the importance of the set verse-forms and the traditional construction of drama. For the benefit of my scientific readers, if my literary friends promise not to listen to what I am saying, I will attempt a definition of Classical and Romantic notions of Poetry:—

Classical is characteristic and Romantic is Metamorphic, that is, though they are both expressions of a mental conflict, in Classical poetry this conflict is expressed within the confines of waking probability and logic, in terms of the typical interaction of typical minds; in Romantic poetry the conflict is expressed in the illogical but vivid method of dream-changings.

The dream origin of Romantic Poetry gives it the advantage of putting the audience in a state of mind ready to accept it; in a word, it has a naturally hypnotic effect. Characteristic poetry, which is social rather than personal, and proudly divorced from the hit-and-miss methods of the dream, yet feels the need of this easy suggestion to the audience for ideal thinking; and finds it necessary to avoid realism by borrowing shreds of accredited metamorphic diction and legend and building with them an illusion of real metamorphism. So the Hermit Crab, and once it has taken up a cast-off shell to cover its nakedness, it becomes a very terror among the whelks. The borrowed Metamorphism is hardened to a convention and a traditional form, and can be trusted almost inevitably to induce the receptive state in an average audience wherever used. Such a convention as I mean is the May-day dream of the Mediaeval rhymed moralities or the talking beasts of the fabulists.

Sometimes, however, owing to a sudden adventurous spirit appearing in the land, a nation's Classical tradition is broken by popular ridicule and the reappearance of young Metamorphic Poets. But after a little paper-bloodshed and wranglings in the coffee-houses, the Classical tradition reappears, dressed up in the cast-off finery of the pioneer Metamorphics (who have by this time been succeeded by licentious and worthless pyrotechnists), and rules securely again. It is only fair to observe that the Romantic Revivalist often borrows largely from some Classical writer so obscured by Time and corrupt texts as to seem a comparative Romantic. This complicated dog-eat-dog process is cheerfully called "The Tradition of English Poetry."

There is an interesting line of investigation which I have no space to pursue far, in a comparison between the Classicism of Wit and the Romanticism of Humour.

Wit depends on a study of the characteristic reactions of typical men to typically incongruous circumstances, and changed little from Theophrastus to Joe Miller. It depends for its effect very largely on the set form and careful diction, e. g:—

A certain inn-keeper of Euboea, with gout in his fingers, returned to his city after sacrificing an Ox to Delphic Apollo…. The celebrated wit, Sidney Smith, one day encountered Foote the comedian, in the Mall….

An Englishman, an Irishman and a Scotchman agreed on a wager of one hundred guineas….

That is Classicism.

Romantic humour is marked by the extravagant improbability of dream-vision and by the same stereoscopic expression as in Romantic poetry.

Would Theophrastus have deigned to laugh at the *fabliau* of "The Great Panjandrum himself with the little round button at top?" I think not. Our leading living Classical poet was recently set a Romantic riddle as a test of his humour, "What did the tooth-paste say to the tooth brush?" Answer: "Squeeze me and I'll meet you outside the Tube." The bard was angry. "Who on earth squeezes his tube of tooth-paste with his tooth brush? Your riddle does not hold water." He could understand the fable convention of inanimate objects talking, but this other was not "the probable and necessary."

XXIV

COLOUR

THE naming of colours in poetry may be used as a typical instance of the circumspection with which a poet is forced to move. The inexperienced one drenches his poems in gold, silver, purple, scarlet, with the idea of giving them, in fact, “colour.” The old hand almost never names a colour unless definitely presenting the well-known childish delight for bright colours, with the aid of some other indication of childhood, or unless definitely to imply a notable change from the normal nature of the coloured object, or at least some particular quality such as the ripeness of the cherry in Keats’ song just quoted. But even then he usually prefers to find a way round, for the appeal to the sense of colour alone is a most insecure way of creating an illusion; colours vary in mood by so very slight a change in shade or tone that pure colour named without qualification in a poem will seldom call up any precise image or mood.

To extemporize a couple of self-conscious blackboard examples:—

I. “Then Mary came dressed in a robe that was green
And her white hands and neck were a sight to be seen.”

II. “Mary’s robe was rich pasture, her neck and her hands
Were glimpses of river that dazzled those lands.”

The first couplet has not nearly so much colour in it as the second, although in the first the mantle is definitely called green and the lady’s hands and neck, white, while in the second no colour is mentioned at all. The first robe is as it were coloured in a cheap painting-book; the green paint has only come off the cake in a thin yellowish solution and the painting-book instructions for colouring the hands and neck were “leave

blank.” The second robe derives its far richer colour from the texture that the pasture simile suggests; the flesh parts get their whiteness from the suggestion of sun shining on water.

XXV

PUTTY

THE conscious part of composition is like the finishing of roughly shaped briars in a pipe factory. Where there are flaws in the wood, putty has to be used in order to make the pipe presentable. Only an expert eye can tell the putty when it has been coloured over, but there it is, time will reveal it and nobody is more aware of its presence now than the man who put it there. The public is often gulled into paying two guineas for a well-coloured straight-grain, when a tiny patch of putty under the bowl pulls down its sentimental value to ten shillings or so.

It is only fair to give an example of putty in a poem of my own; in writing songs, where the pattern is more fixed than in any other form, putty is almost inevitable. This song started sincerely and cheerfully enough:—

Once there came a mighty furious wind
(So old worthies tell).
It blew the oaks like ninepins down,
And all the chimney stacks in town
Down together fell.
That was a wind—to write a record on,
to hang a story on,
to sing a ballad on,
To ring the loud church bell!
But for one huge storm that cracks the sky
Came a thousand lesser winds rustling by,
And the only wind that will make me sing
Is breeze of summer or gust of spring
But no more hurtful thing.

This was leading up to a final verse:—

Once my sweetheart spoke an unkind word
As I myself must tell,
For none but I have seen or heard
My sweetheart to such cruelty stirred
For one who loved her well.
That was a word—to write no record on,
to hang no story on,
to sing no ballad on,
To ring no loud church bell!
Yet for one fierce word that has made me smart
Ten thousand gentle ones ease my heart,
So all the song that springs in me
Is “Never a sweetheart born could be
So kind as only she.”

Half-way through this verse I was interrupted, and had to finish the poem consciously as best I could. On picking it up again, apparently I needed another middle verse of exactly the same sort of pattern as the first, to prepare the reader for the third. Searching among natural phenomena, I had already hit on drought as being a sufficiently destructive plague to be long remembered by old worthies. This would make the second verse.

So without more ado I started:—

Once there came a mighty thirsty drought
(So old worthies tell).
The quags were drained, the brooks were dried,
Cattle and sheep and pigs all died,
The parson preached on Hell.
That was a drought—to write a record on etc.

So far I had concealed the poverty of my inspiration well enough, I flattered myself, but here we were stuck, my self-conscious muse and I. What was a pleasing diminutive of *drought*?—Pleasant sunshine? Not quite; the thirstiness of nature doesn’t show in pleasant sunshine at all. So, knowing all the time that I was doing wrong, I took my putty knife

and slapped the stuff on thick, then trimmed and smoothed over carefully:—

> But for one long drought of world-wide note
> Come a thousand lesser ones on man’s throat,
> And the only drought for my singing mood
> Is a thirst for the very best ale that’s brewed,
> Soon quenched, but soon renewed.

In manuscript, the putty didn’t show, somehow, but I am ashamed to say I published the song. And in print, it seemed to show disgracefully. “It was the best butter,” said the *March Hare*. “It was the best putty,” I echoed, to excuse myself. But there is too much of it; the last half of the last verse even, is not all sound wood. This poem has been on my conscience for some time.

If spontaneous poetry is like the Genie from Aladdin’s Lamp, this conscious part of the art is like the assemblage of sheet, turnip-head, lighted candle and rake to make the village ghost.

> As I were a trapesin’
> To Fox and Grapes Inn
> To get I a bottle of ginger wine
> I saw summat
> In they old tummut
> And Lordie how his eyes did shine!
> *Suffolk rhyme.*
> (*Cetera desunt*)

The Genie is the most powerful magic of the two, and surest of its effect, but the Turnip Ghost is usually enough to startle rustics who wander at night, into prayer, sobriety, rapid movement or some other unusual state.

XXVI

READING ALOUD

THOUGH it is a sound principle that the poet should write as if his work were first of all intended to be repeated from mouth to mouth, recitation or reading aloud actually distracts attention from the subtler properties of a poem, which though addressed nominally to the ear, the eye has to see in black and white before they can be appreciated. A beautiful voice can make magic of utter nonsense; I have been taken in by this sort of thing too often. The eye is the most sophisticated organ of sense and is therefore the one to which the poet must make a final appeal in critical matters, but as limited an appeal as possible when he is engaged in the art of illusion. The universal use of printing has put too much work on the eye: which has learned to skip and cut in self-defence. Ask any one who has read CRIME AND PUNISHMENT the name of the hero. It is probable that he will remember the initial letter, possible that he will be able to repeat the whole name more or less recognizably, unlikely that he will be able to spell it correctly, almost certain that he will not have troubled to find out the correct pronunciation in Russian.

XXVII

L’ARTE DELLA PITTURA

A SCIENTIFIC treatise *could*, I suppose, be written on how to manipulate vowels and consonants so as to hurry or slow down rhythm, and suggest every different emotion by mere sound sequence but this is for every poet to find out for himself and practise automatically as a painter mixes his paints.

There was once an old Italian portrait painter, who coming to the end of his life, gathered his friends and pupils together and revealed to them a great discovery he had made, as follows:—

“The art of portrait painting consists in putting the High Lights in exactly the right place in the eyes.”

When I come to my death-bed I have a similarly important message to deliver:—

“The art of poetry consists in knowing exactly how to manipulate the letter S.”

XXVIII

ON WRITING MUSICALLY

IN true poetry the mental bracing and relaxing on receipt of sensuous impressions, which we may call the rhythm of emotions, conditions the musical rhythm. This rhythm of emotions also determines the sound-texture of vowels and consonants, so that Metre, as schoolboys understand it when they are made to scan:—Friĕnds, Rōm|ans, count|rymēn, lĕnd mē|your eārs!, has in spontaneous poetry only a submerged existence. For the moment I will content myself by saying that if all words in daily speech were spoken at the same rate, if all stressed syllables and all unstressed syllables, similarly, were dwelt on for exactly the same length of time, as many prosodists assume, poetry would be a much easier art to practise; but it is the haste with which we treat some parts of speech, the deliberation we give to others, and the wide difference in the weight of syllables composed of thin or broad vowels and liquid or rasping consonants, that make it impossible for the Anglo-French theory of only two standardized sound values, long or short, to be reasonably maintained. A far more subtle notation must be adopted, and if it must be shown on a black-board, poetry will appear marked out not in “feet” but in convenient musical bars, with the syllables resolved into quaver, dotted crotchet, semibreve and all the rest of them. Metre in the classical sense of an orderly succession of iambuses, trochees or whatnot, is forced to accept the part of policeman in the Harlequinade, a mere sparring partner for Rhythm the Clown who with his string of sausages is continually tripping him up and beating him over the head, and Texture the Harlequin who steals his truncheon and helmet. This preparatory explanation is necessary because if I were to proclaim in public that “the poet must write musically” it would be understood as an injunction to write like Thomas Moore, or his disciples of today.

XXIX

THE USE OF POETRY

AT this stage the question of the use of poetry to its readers may be considered briefly and without rhapsody. Poetry as the Greeks knew when they adopted the Drama as a cleansing rite of religion, is a form of psycho-therapy. Being the transformation into dream symbolism of some disturbing emotional crisis in the poet's mind (whether dominated by delight or pain) poetry has the power of homoeopathically healing other men's minds similarly troubled, by presenting them under the spell of hypnosis with an allegorical solution of the trouble. Once the allegory is recognized by the reader's unconscious mind as applicable the affective power of his own emotional crisis is diminished. Apparently on a recognition of this aspect of poetry the Greeks founded their splendid emblem of its power—the polished shield of Perseus that mirrored the Gorgon's head with no hurtful effect and allowed the hero to behead her at his ease. A well chosen anthology is a complete dispensary of medicine for the more common mental disorders, and may be used as much for prevention as cure if we are to believe Mr. Housman's argument in "Terence, this is stupid stuff" no. LXII of his *Shropshire Lad*.

The musical side of poetry is, properly understood, not merely a hypnotic inducement to the reader to accept suggestions, but a form of psycho-therapy in itself, which, working in conjunction with the pictorial allegory, immensely strengthens its chance of success.

XXX

HISTORIES OF POETRY

THE History of English Poetry is a subject I hope I shall never have to undertake, especially as I have grave doubts if there really is such a thing. Poets appear spasmodically, write their best poetry at uncertain intervals and owe nothing worth mentioning to any school or convention. Most histories of English Poetry are full of talk about “schools” or they concentrate on what they are pleased to call “the political tendencies” of poetry, and painfully trace the introduction and development in English of various set forms like the Sonnet, Blank Verse, and the Spenserian Stanza. This talk about politics I read as an excuse of the symmetrical-minded for spreading out the Eighteenth Century poets famous in their day to a greater length than the quality of their work can justify. As for the history of metric forms it is, in a sense, of little more vital importance to poetry than the study of numismatics would appear to an expert in finance.

… … … … … … … . .

An undergraduate studying English Literature at one of our oldest universities was recently confronted by a senior tutor, Professor X, with a review of his terminal studies and the charge of temperamentalism.

“I understand from Prof. Y,” he explained, “that your literary judgments are a trifle summary, that in fact you prefer some poets to others.”

He acknowledged the charge with all humility.

XXXI

THE BOWL MARKED DOG

“I am sorry, nephew, that I cannot understand your Modern Poetry. Indeed I strongly dislike it; it seems to me mostly mere impudence.”

“But, uncle, you are not expected to like it! The old house-dog goes at dinner time to the broken biscuits in his bowl marked DOG and eats heartily. Tomorrow give him an unaccustomed dainty in an unaccustomed bowl and he will sniff and turn away in disgust. Though tempted to kick him for his unrecognizing stupidity, his ingratitude, his ridiculous preference for the formal biscuit, yet refrain!

“The sight and smell associations of the DOG BOWL out of which he has eaten so long have actually, scientists say, become necessary for bringing the proper digestive juices into his mouth. What you offer him awakes no hunger, his mouth does not water; he is puzzled and insulted.

“But give it to the puppies instead; they’ll gobble it up and sniff contemptuously afterwards at the old dog and his bowl of biscuit.”

XXXII

THE ANALYTIC SPIRIT

IN England, since—shall we name the convenient date 1851, the year of the Great Exhibition?—the educated reading public has developed analytic powers which have not been generally matched by a corresponding development of the co-ordinating arts of the poet. Old charms will no longer hold, old baits will no longer be taken; the reader has become too wary. The triumph of the analytic spirit is nowhere better shown than in these histories of Poetry just mentioned, where the interest in fake poetry is just as strong or even stronger than the interest in poetry itself.

As Religions inevitably die with their founders, the disciples having either to reject or formularize their master's opinions, so with Poetry, it dies on the formation of a poetic school. The analytic spirit has been, I believe, responsible both for the present coma of religion among our educated classes and for the disrespect into which poetry and the fine arts have fallen. As for these histories of poetry, the very fact that people are interested in failures of the various "Schools" to universalize the individual system of a master, is a great discouragement to a poet trying by every means in his power to lay the spirit of sophistication.

But the age of poetry is not yet over if poets will only remember what the word means and not confuse it with acrostic-making and similar ingenious Alexandrianisms. Earlier civilizations than ours have forgotten the necessarily spontaneous nature of the art, and have tried (for lack of any compelling utterance) to beat the sophisticated critics of their day by piling an immense number of technical devices on their verses, killing what little passion there was, by the tyranny of self-imposed rules. The antithetical couplet of Pope or the Ovidian hexameter-and-pentameter are bad enough, but the ancient Irish and Welsh bards were even more restricted by their chain-rhymes and systems of consonantal sequence, the final monstrosity being the Welsh *englyn* of four lines, governed by ninety-odd separate rules. The way out for Poetry does not lie by this

road, we may be sure. But neither on the other hand do we yet need to call in the Da-da-ists.

XXXIII

RHYMES AND ALLITERATION

RHYMES properly used are the good servants whose presence gives the dinner table a sense of opulent security; they are never awkward, they hand the dishes silently and professionally. You can trust them not to interrupt the conversation of the table or allow their personal disagreements to come to the notice of the guests; but some of them are getting very old for their work.

The principle governing the use of alliteration and rhyme appear to be much the same. In unsophisticated days an audience could be moved by the profuse straight-ahead alliteration of *Piers Plowman*, but this is too obvious a device for our times. The best effects seem to have been attained in more recent poetry by precisely (if unconsciously) gauging the memory length of a reader’s mental ear and planting the second alliterative word at a point where the memory of the first is just beginning to blurr; but has not quite faded. By cross-alliteration on these lines a rich atmosphere has resulted and the reader’s eye has been cheated. So with internal and ordinary rhyme; but the memory length for the internal rhyme appears somewhat longer than memory for alliteration, and for ordinary rhyme, longer still.

XXXIV

AN AWKWARD FELLOW CALLED ARIPHRADES

ARISTOTLE defended poetical “properties” that would correspond nowadays with “thine” and “whensoe’er” and “flowerets gay,” by saying “it is a great thing indeed to make proper use of these poetic forms as also of compounds and strange words. The mere fact of their not being in ordinary speech, gives the diction a non-prosaic character.” One Ariphrades had been ridiculing the Tragedians on this score; and Aristotle saw, I suppose, that a strange diction has for the simple-minded reader a power of surprise which enables the poet to work on his feelings unhindered, but he did not see that as soon as a single Ariphrades had ridiculed what was becoming a conventional surprise, a Jack-in-the-Box that every one expected, then was the time for the convention to be scrapped; ridicule is awkwardly catching.

The same argument applies to the use of rhyme to-day; while rhyme can still be used as one of the ingredients of the illusion, a compelling force to make the reader go on till he hears an echo to the syllable at the end of the last pause, it still remains a valuable technical asset. But as soon as rhyme is worn threadbare the ear anticipates the echo and is contemptuous of the clumsy trick.

The reader must be made to surrender himself completely to the poet, as to his guide in a strange country; he must never be allowed to run ahead and say “Hurry up, sir, I know this part of the country as well as you. After that ‘snow-capped mountain’ we inevitably come to a ‘leaping fountain.’ I see it ‘dancing’ and ‘glancing’ in the distance. And by the token of these ‘varied flowers’ on the grass, I know that another few feet will bring us to the ‘leafy bowers’ which, if I am not mistaken, will protect us nicely from the ‘April showers’ for a few ‘blissful hours.’ Come on, sir! am I guiding you, or are you guiding me?”

However, the time has not yet come to get rid of rhyme altogether: it has still plenty of possibilities, as *Dumb Crambo* at a Christmas party will soon convince the sceptical; and assonances separated even by the whole length of the mouth can work happily together, with or without the co-operation of ordinary rhyme.

These are all merely illustrations of the general principle that as soon as a poem emerges from the hidden thought processes that give it birth, and the poet reviews it with the conscious part of his mind, then his task is one not of rules or precedents so much as of ordinary common-sense.

XXXV

IMPROVISING NEW CONVENTIONS

THERE is a great dignity in poetry unaffectedly written in stern stiff traditional forms and we feel in spite of ourselves that we owe it the reverence due to ruined abbeys, prints of Fujiyama, or Chelsea pensioners with red coats, medals, and long white beards. But that is no reason for following tradition blindly; it should be possible for a master of words to improvise a new convention, whenever he wishes, that will give his readers just the same notion of centuried authority and smoothness without any feeling of contempt.

XXXVI

WHEN IN DOUBT

A YOUNG poet of whose friendship I am very proud was speaking about poetry to one of those University literary clubs which regard English poetry as having found its culmination in the last decade of the nineteenth century and as having no further destiny left for it. He said that he was about to tell them the most important thing he knew about poetry, so having roused themselves from a customary languor, the young fellows were disappointed to hear, not a brilliant critical paradox or a sparkling definition identifying poetry with decay, but a mere rule of thumb for the working poet:

When in Doubt
Cut it Out.

XXXVII

THE EDITOR WITH THE MUCKRAKE

ORDINARY readers may deplore the habit of raking up the trivial and bad verse of good poets now long dead, but for living poets there is nothing more instructive in the world than these lapses, and in the absence of honest biography they alone are evidence for what would be naturally assumed, that these great poets in defiance of principle often tried to write in their dull moments just because they longed for the exquisite excitement of composition, and thought that the act of taking up a pen might induce the hypnotic state of which I have spoken. But afterwards they forgot to destroy what they produced, or kept it in the hope that it was some good after all.

XXXVIII

THE MORAL QUESTION

MODERN treatises on Poetry usually begin with definitions; ancient treatises with a heavy weight of classical authority and a number of grave reflections on the nature of the Poet, proving conclusively that he should be a man of vast experience of life, apt judgment, versatile talent, and above all unimpeachable moral character. Authority seems to count for nothing in these days, compared with the value set on it by Sir Philip Sidney in his “Apologie for Poetrie,” and the modern treatise would never ask its reader more than to admit a negative conclusion on the moral question, that poets who think they can combine indiscriminate debauch with dyspeptic Bohemian squalor and yet turn out good work merely by applying themselves conscientiously and soberly in working hours, are likely to be disappointed; however, my personal feeling is that poets who modify the general ethical principles first taught them at home and at school, can only afford to purchase the right to do so at a great price of mental suffering and difficult thinking. Wanton, lighthearted apostasies from tradition are always either a sign or a prophecy of ineffectual creative work.

Art is not moral, but civilized man has invented the word to denote a standard of conduct which the mass demands of the individual and so poetry which makes a definitely anti-moral appeal is likely to antagonize two readers out of three straight away, and there is little hope of playing the confidence trick on an enemy. Being therefore addressed to a limited section even of the smallish class who read poetry, such poetry will tend like most high-brow art to have more dexterity than robustness.

For a complete identification of successful art with morality I always remember with appreciation what an Irishman, a complete stranger, once said to my father on hearing that he was author of the song “Father O’Flynn”—“Ye behaved well, sir, when ye wrote that one.”

XXXIX

THE POET AS OUTSIDER

THE ethical problem is further complicated for poets by the tussle in their nature between the spontaneous and the critical biases. The principle of loyalty on which the present non-religious system of English manners depends is strained in them to breaking point by the tendency to sudden excitement, delight or disgust with ideas for which mature consideration entirely alters the values, or with people who change by the same process from mere acquaintances to intimate friends and back in a flash. Which should explain many apparently discreditable passages in, for instance, the life and letters of Keats or Wordsworth, and should justify Walt Whitman's outspoken "Do I contradict myself? Very well then, I contradict myself. I am large, I contain multitudes."

The poet is the outsider who sees most of the game, and, by the same token, all or nearly all the great English poets have been men either of ungenteel birth or of good family which has been scandalized by their subsequent adoption of unusual social habits during the best years of their writing. To the polite society of their day—outsiders to a man.

XL

A POLITE ACKNOWLEDGMENT

DEAR SIR,—

Many thanks for the volume of your poems you have sent me. Though I had never seen any of your compositions before, they are already old friends—that is, I like them but I see through them.

Yours cordially, Etc.

XLI

FAKE POETRY, BAD POETRY AND MERE VERSE

AS in household economics, you cannot take out of a stocking more than has been put in, so in poetry you cannot present suffering or romance beyond your own experience. The attempt to do this is one of the chief symptoms of the fake poet; ignorance forces him to draw on the experience of a real poet who actually has been through the emotional crises which he himself wants to restate. The fake is often made worse by the theft of small turns of speech which though not in any sense irregular or grotesque, the poet has somehow made his own; it is like stealing marked coins, and is a dangerous practice when Posterity is policeman. Most poets visit Tom Tiddler's ground now and then, but the wise ones melt down the stolen coin and impress it with their own "character."

There is a great deal of difference between fake poetry and ordinary bad poetry. The bad poet is likely to have suffered and felt joy as deeply as the poet reckoned first class, but he has not somehow been given the power of translating experience into images and emblems, or of melting words in the furnace of his mind and making them flow into the channels prepared to take them. Charles Sorley said, addressing the good poets on behalf of the bad poets (though he was really on the other side):—

> We are the homeless even as you,
> Who hope but never can begin.
> Our hearts are wounded through and through
> Like yours, but our hearts bleed within;
> We too make music but our tones
> Scape not the barrier of our bones.

Mere verse, as an earlier section has attempted to show, is neither bad poetry nor fake poetry necessarily. It finds its own categories, good

verse, bad verse and imitation. In its relation to poetry it stands as chimpanzee to man: only the theory that a conflict of emotional ideas is a necessary ingredient of verse to make it poetry, will satisfactorily explain why many kinds of verse, loosely called Poetry, such as Satire and Didactic verse are yet popularly felt not to be the “highest” forms of Poetry. I would say that in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred these bear no real relation to Poetry, even though dressed up in poetical language, and that in the hundredth case they are poetry in spite of themselves. Where the writer is dominated by only one aim, in satire, the correction of morals; in didactic verse, instruction; there is no conflict and therefore no poetry. But in rare cases where some Juvenal slips through feelings of compunction to a momentary mood of self-satire and even forgets himself so much as to compliment his adversary; or in didactic verse where a sudden doubt arises and the teacher admits himself a blind groper after truth (so Lucretius time and time again) and breaks his main argument in digressions after loveliness and terror, only then does Poetry appear. It flashes out with the surprise and shock of a broken electric circuit.

Even the *memoria technica* can slide from verse into poetry. The rhyme to remember the signs of the Zodiac by, ends wonderfully:—

The Ram the Bull, the Heavenly Twins,
And next the Crab, the Lion shines,
  The Virgin and the Scales,
The Scorpion, Archer and He Goat,
The Man who carries the Watering Pot,
  The Fish with glittering tails.

The language of science makes a hieroglyphic, or says “The sign of Aquarius”; the language of prose says “A group of stars likened by popular imagery to a Water Carrier”; the language of Poetry converts the Eastern water carrier with his goatskin bag or pitcher, into an English gardener, then puts him to fill his watering pot from heavenly waters where the Fish are darting. The author of this rhyme has visualized his terrestrial emblems most clearly; he has smelt the rankness of the Goat, and yet in the “Lion shines” and the “glittering tails” one can see that he has been thinking in terms of stars also. The emotional contradiction lies

in the stars' remote aloofness from complications of this climatic and smelly world, from the terror of Lion, Archer, Scorpion, from the implied love-interest of Heavenly Twins and Virgin, and from the daily cares of the Scales, Ram, Bull, Goat, Fish, Crab and Watering Pot.

The ready way to distinguish verse from poetry is this, Verse makes a flat pattern on the paper, Poetry stands out in relief.

XLII

A DIALOGUE ON FAKE-POETRY

Q When is a fake not a fake?

A. When hard-working and ingenious conjurors are billed by common courtesy as ‘magicians.’

Q. But when is a fake not a fake?

A. When it’s a Classic.

Q. And when else?

A. When it’s “organ-music” and all that.

Q. Elaborate your answer, dear sir!

A. A fake, then, is not a fake when lapse of time has tended to obscure the original source of the borrowing, and when the textural and structural competence that the borrower has used in synthesising the occasional good things of otherwise indifferent authors is so remarkable that even the incorruptible Porter of Parnassus winks and says “Pass Friend!”

Q. Then the Fake Poet is, as you have hinted before, a sort of Hermit Crab?

A. Yes, and here is another parable from Marine Life. Poetry is the protective pearl formed by an oyster around the irritations of a maggot. Now if, as we are told, it is becoming possible to put synthetic pearls on the market, which not even the expert with his X-ray can detect from the natural kind, is not our valuation of the latter perhaps only a sentimentality?

XLIII

ASKING ADVICE

THERE is a blind spot or many blind spots in the critical eye of every writer; he cannot find for himself certain surface faults which anybody else picks out at once. Especially there is a bias towards running to death a set of words which when he found them, were quite honest and inoffensive. Shelley had a queer obsession about “caves,” “abysses,” and “chasms” which evidently meant for him much more than he can make us see. A poet will always be wise to submit his work, when he can do no more to straighten it, to the judgment of friends whose eyes have their blind spots differently placed; only, he must be careful, I suppose, not to be forced into making any alterations while in their presence.

A poet reveals to a friend in a fit of excitement “I say, listen, I am going to write a great poem on such-and-such! I have the whole thing clear in my mind, waiting to be put down.” But if he goes on to give a detailed account of the scheme, then the act of expression (especially prose expression) kills the creative impulse by presenting it prematurely with too much definiteness. The poem is never written. It remains for a few hopeless days as a title, a couple of phrases and an elaborate scheme of work, and is then banished to the lumber room of the mind; later it probably becomes subsidiary to another apparently irrelevant idea and appears after a month or two in quite a different shape, the elaboration very much condensed, the phrase altered and the title lost.

Now this section is as suitable as any other for the prophecy that the study of Poetry will very soon pass from the hands of Grammarians, Prosodists, historical research men, and such-like, into those of the psychologists. And what a mess they’ll make of it; to be sure!

XLIV

SURFACE FAULTS, AN ILLUSTRATION

THE later drafts of some lines I wrote recently called CYNICS AND ROMANTICS, and contrasting the sophisticated and ingenuous ideas of Love, give a fairly good idea of the conscious process of getting a poem in order. I make no claim for achievement, the process is all that is intended to appear, and three or four lines are enough for illustration:

1st Draft.

> In club or messroom let them sit,
> Let them indulge salacious wit
> On love's romance, but not with hearts
> Accustomed to those healthier parts
> Of grim self-mockery….

2nd Draft. (Consideration:—It is too soon in the poem for the angry jerkiness of "Let them indulge." Also "Indulge salacious" is hard to say; at present, this is a case for being as smooth as possible.)

> In club or messroom let them sit
> Indulging contraversial wit
> On love's romance, but not with hearts
> Accustomed….

3rd Draft. (Consideration:—No, we have the first two lines beginning with "In." It worries the eye. And "sit, indulging" puts two short "i's" close together. "Contraversial" is not the word. It sounds as if they were angry, but they are too blasé for that. And "love's romance" is cheap for the poet's own ideal.)

In club or messroom let them sit
At skirmish of salacious wit
Laughing at love, yet not with hearts
Accustomed….

4th Draft. (Consideration:—Bother the thing! “Skirmish” is good because it suggests their profession, but now we have three S’s,—“sit,” “skirmish,” “salacious.” It makes them sound too much in earnest. The “salacious” idea can come in later in the poem. And at present we have two “at’s” bumping into each other; one of them must go. “Yet” sounds better than “but” somehow.)

In club or messroom let them sit
With skirmish of destructive wit
Laughing at love, yet not with hearts
Accustomed….

5th Draft. (Consideration:—And now we have two “with’s” which don’t quite correspond. And we have the two short “i’s” next to each other again. Well, put the first “at” back and change “laughing at” to “deriding.” The long “i” is a pleasant variant; “laughing” and “hearts” have vowel-sounds too much alike.)

In club or messroom let them sit
At skirmish of destructive wit
Deriding love, yet not with hearts
Accustomed….

6th Draft. (Consideration:—Yes, that’s a bit better. But now we have “*des*tructive” and “*der*iding” too close together. “Ingenious” is more the word I want. It has a long vowel, and suggests that it was a really witty performance. The two “in’s” are far enough separated. “Accorded” is better than “accustomed”; more accurate and sounds better. Now then:—)

In club or messroom let them sit
At skirmish of ingenious wit
Deriding love, yet not with hearts
Accorded etc.

(Consideration:—It may be rotten, but I’ve done my best.)

The discussion of more radical constructive faults is to be found in PUTTY and THE ART OF EXPRESSION.

XLV

LINKED SWEETNESS LONG DRAWN OUT

IN this last section, besides an attempt at a greater accuracy of meaning and implication than the first slap-dash arrangement of words had provided, there may have been noticed three other technical considerations which are especially exacting in this case, where I am intending by particularly careful craftsmanship to suggest the brilliance of the conversation I am reporting.

The first is a care to avoid unintentional echoes, as for example "*In* club or messroom … *in*dulging."

The second is a care which all song writers and singing masters understand, to keep apart words like "indulge salacious," where the j and s sound coming together interfere with easy breathing.

The third is an attempt to vary the vowel sounds so far as is consistent with getting the right shade of meaning; it pleases the mental ear like stroking pleases a cat (note the vowel sequence of the phrase that heads this section. John Milton knew a thing or two about texture, worth knowing). At the same time I am trying to arrange the position of consonants and open vowels with much the same care.

But all these three considerations, and even the consideration for lucidity of expression, can and must be modified where an emotional mood of obscurity, fear, difficulty or monotony will be better illustrated by so doing.

Keats was very conscious of the necessity of modification. Leigh Hunt recounts in his Autobiography:—

"I remember Keats reading to me with great relish and particularity, conscious of what he had set forth, the lines describing the supper[1] and ending with the words,

“ ‘And lucent syrups tinct with cinnamon.’ ”

[1] St. Agnes’ Eve.

Mr. Wordsworth would have said the vowels were not varied enough; but Keats knew where his vowels were *not* to be varied. On the occasion above alluded to, Wordsworth found fault with the repetition of the concluding sound of the participles in Shakespeare’s line about bees:—

“ ‘The *singing* masons *building* roofs of gold.’ ”

This, he said, was a line which Milton would never have written. Keats thought, on the other hand, that the repetition was in harmony with the continued note of the singers, and that Shakespeare’s negligence, if negligence it was, had instinctively felt the thing in the best manner.”

Keats here was surely intending with his succession of short i-sounds, a gourmet’s fastidious pursing of lips. Poets even of the Virgil-Milton-Tennyson-Longfellow metrical tradition will on occasion similarly break their strict metric form with an obviously imitative “quadrepedante putrem sonitu quatit ungula campum,” but the manipulation of vowels and consonants is for them rather a study in abstract grandeur of music than a relation with the emotional content of the poetry.

XLVI

THE FABLE OF THE IDEAL GADGET

NO poem can turn out respectably well unless written in the full confidence that this time at last the poet is going to attain perfect expression. So long as this confidence survives he goes on revising the poem at intervals for days or months until nothing more can be done, and the inevitable sense of failure is felt, leaving him at liberty to try again. It is on this inevitable failure that the practice of every art is made conditional.

… … … … … … … . .

A man once went into an ironmonger's shop and said hesitatingly, "Do you sell those gadgets for fixing on doors?"

"Well, sir," replied the assistant, "I am not quite sure if I understand your requirements, but I take it you are needing a patent automatic door-closer?"

"Exactly," said the customer. "One to fix on my pantry door which, by the way, contains a glass window."

"You will want a cheap one, sir?"

"Cheap but serviceable."

"You will prefer an English make, sir?"

"Indeed, that's a most important consideration."

"You will perhaps want one with ornamentations, scroll work and roses for instance?"

"Oh no, nothing of that sort, thank you. I want it as plain and unobtrusive as possible."

"You would like it made of some rustless metal, sir?"

"That would be very convenient."

“And with a strong spring?”

“Well, moderately strong.”

“To be fixed on which side, sir?”

“Let me see; the right-hand side.”

“Now, sir,” said the assistant, “I will go through each point, one by one. You want an efficient (but not too costly) English made, unobtrusive, rustless, unornamented, patent automatic door closer, to be fixed right-handed with a moderately strong spring to a pantry door with a glass window. Is there any further desideratum, sir?”

“Well, it’s very good of you to help me like this (“Not at all, sir”). I should like it easily adjusted and easily removed, and above all it must not squeak or need constant oiling.”

“In fact, sir, you want an apparatus combining a variety of qualities, in a word, an absolutely silent, efficient, economical, invisible, corrosive proof, unornamented, not-too-heavily-springed, easily adjustable, readily removable, British-made, right-handed, patent automatic door closer, ideally fitted in every possible respect for attaching to your pantry door which (I understand you to say) contains a glass window. How is that, sir?”

“Splendid, splendid.”

“Well, sir, I regret that there has never been any article of that description put on the market, but if you care to visit our wholesale department across the road, you may perhaps be able to make your choice from a reasonably large selection of our present imperfect models. Good day, sir.”

XLVII

SEQUELS ARE BARRED

IF you solve a problem to the best of your ability, it never bothers you again. Enough said: but the following emblem may be taken to heart: —

EPITAPH ON AN UNFORTUNATE ARTIST

He found a formula for drawing comic rabbits:
This formula for drawing comic rabbits paid.
So in the end he could not change the tragic habits
This formula for drawing comic rabbits made.

XLVIII

TOM FOOL

THERE is a saying that “More people know Tom Fool than Tom Fool knows”; that may be all right if it means recognizing him in the street, but he has to be a wonder before he can, without eccentricity, make his work immediately recognized in print and be even distinguishable from the best efforts of imitators. This proverb was obviously in the head of the man or woman who wrote the following sonnet, in the *Spectator* (I think) about a year ago; I have lost the cutting and the reference, and ask to be pardoned if I misquote:—

Cunning indeed Tom Fool must be to-day
  For us, who meet his verses in a book,
To cry “Tom Fool wrote that…. I know his way….
… Unsigned, yet eyed all over with Tom’s look….
  Why see! It’s pure Tom Fool, I’m not mistook….
Fine simple verses too; now who’s to say
How Tom has charmed these worn old words to obey
  His shepherd’s voice and march beneath his crook?
Instead we ponder “I can’t name the man,
  But he’s been reading Wilde,” or “That’s the school
Of Côterie…. Voices…. Pound … the Sitwell clan …”
  “*He* ‘knows his Kipling’ ” … “*he* accepts the rule
Of Monro … of Lord Tennyson … of Queen Anne”
  How seldom, “There, for a ducat, writes,
    TOM FOOL.

The writer evidently had a keen eye for the failings of others, but is convicted out of his own mouth, for I have met nobody who can identify this particular Tom Fool for me.

Hateful as is the art of the parodist when it spoils poems which have delighted and puzzled us, parody has its uses. A convincing parody is the

best possible danger signal to inform a poet that he is writing sequels, repeating his conjuring tricks until they can be seen through and ridiculously imitated. “That awkward fellow Ariphrades,” much as we dislike him, is one of the most useful members of our republic of letters.

XLIX

CROSS RHYTHM AND RESOLUTION

I HAVE already attempted to show Poetry as the Recorder's *précis* of a warm debate between the members of the poet's mental Senate on some unusually contraversial subject. Let the same idea be expressed less personally in the terms of coloured circles intersecting, the space cut off having the combined colour of both circles. In the Drama these circles represent the warring influences of the plot; the principal characters lie in the enclosed space and the interest of the play is to watch their attempts to return to the state of primary colouring which means mental ease; with tragedy they are eventually forced to the colourless blackness of Death, with comedy the warring colours disappear in white. In the lyrical poem, the circles are coinciding stereoscopically so that it is difficult to discover how each individual circle is coloured; we only see the combination.

If we consider that each influence represented by these circles has an equivalent musical rhythm, then in the drama these rhythms interact orchestrally, tonic theme against dominant; in lyrical poetry where we get two images almost fused into one, the rhythms interlace correspondingly closely. Of the warring influences, one is naturally the original steady-going conservative, the others novel, disquieting, almost accidental. Then in lyrical poetry the established influence takes the original metre as its expression, and the new influences introduce the cross rhythm modifying the metre until it is half submerged. Shakespeare's developments of blank verse have much distressed prosodists, but have these ever considered that they were not mere wantonness or lack of thought, that what he was doing was to send emotional cross-rhythms working against the familiar iambic five-stress line?

I remember "doing Greek iambics" at Charterhouse and being allowed as a great privilege on reaching the Upper School to resolve the usual short-long foot into a short-short-short or even in certain spots into

a long-short. These resolutions I never understood as having any reference to the emotional mood of the verse I was supposed to be translating, but they came in very conveniently when proper names had too many short syllables in them to fit otherwise.

A young poet showed me a set of English verses the other day which I returned him without taking a copy but I remember reading somewhat as follows:—

T-tum, t-tum, t-tum, t-tum, t-tum
A midnight garden, where as I went past
I saw the cherry's moonfrozen delicate ivory.

"Good heavens," I said, "what's that last line all about?"

"Oh, it's just an experiment in resolution."

"Take a pencil, like a good fellow, and scan it for me in the old fashioned way as we used to do at school together."

He did so:—

I sāw | thĕ cherr|(y's) moŏnfrōz|ĕn dĕl|ic(ate) īv|(ory)

"It's a sort of anapaestic resolution," he explained.

"Anapaestic resolution of what?"

"Of an iambic decasyllabic line."

"Excuse me, it's not. Since we're talking in that sort of jargon, it's a spondaic resolution of a dactylic line."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you've put in four extra syllables for your resolution. I'll put in a fifth, the word "in." Now listen!

Swimmery | floatery | bobbery | duckery | divery—
I saw the | cherries moon | frozen in | delicate | ivory

In this case the cross-rhythm, which my friend explained was meant to suggest the curious ethereal look of cherry blossoms in moonlight, had so swamped the original metre that it was completely stifled. The poet has a licence to resolve metre where the emotion demands it, and he is a poor poet if he daren’t use it; but there is commonsense in restraint.

L

MY NAME IS LEGION, FOR WE ARE MANY

ONE goes plodding on and hoping for a miracle, but who has ever recovered the strange quality that makes the early work (which follows a preliminary period of imitation) in a sense the best work? There is a fine single-heartedness, an economy of material, an adventurous delight in expression, a beginner's luck for which I suppose honest hard work and mature observation can in time substitute certain other qualities, but poetry is never the same again.

I will attempt to explain this feeling by an analogy which can be pressed as closely as any one likes: it is an elaboration of what has been said of the poet as a "peculiarly gifted witch doctor." Cases of multiple personality have recently been investigated in people who believed themselves to be possessed by spirits. Analysis has proved pretty conclusively that the mediums have originally mimicked acquaintances whom they found strange, persons apparently selected for having completely different outlooks on life, both from the medium and from each other, different religions, different emotional processes and usually different dialects. This mimicry has given rise to unconscious impersonations of these people, impersonations so complete that the medium is in a state of trance and unconscious of any other existence. Mere imitation changes to a synthetic representation of how these characters would act in given circumstances. Finally the characters get so much a part of the medium's self that they actually seem to appear visibly when summoned, and a sight of them can even be communicated to sympathetic bystanders. So the Witch of Endor called up Samuel for King Saul. The trances, originally spontaneous, are induced in later stages to meet the wishes of an inquisitive or devout séance-audience; the manifestations are more and more presented (this is no charge of charlatanism) with a view to their effect on the séance. It is the original unpremeditated trances, or rather the first ones that have the synthetic

quality and are no longer mere mimicry, which correspond to Early Work.

But it is hardly necessary to quote extreme cases of morbid psychology or to enter the dangerous arena of spiritualistic argument in order to explain the presence of subpersonalities in the poet's mind. They have a simple origin, it seems, as supplying the need of a primitive mind when confused. Quite normal children invent their own familiar spirits, their "shadows," "dummies" or "slaves," in order to excuse erratic actions of their own which seem on reflection incompatible with their usual habits or code of honour. I have seen a child of two years old accept literally an aunt's sarcasm, "Surely it wasn't my little girl who did that? It must have been a horrid little stranger dressed just like you who came in and behaved so badly. My little girl always does what she's told." The child divided into two her own identity of which she had only recently become conscious. She expected sympathy instead of scolding when the horrid little stranger reappeared, broke china and flung water all over the room. I have heard of several developments of the dummy, or slave idea; how one child used his dummy as a representative to send out into the world to do the glorious deeds which he himself was not allowed to attempt; on one occasion this particular dummy got three weeks' imprisonment after a collision with the police and so complete was his master's faith in the independent existence of the creature that he eagerly counted the days until the dummy's release and would not call on his services, however urgently needed, until the sentence had been completed. Another child, a girl, employed a committee of several dummies each having very different characteristics, to whom all social problems were referred for discussion.

Richard Middleton, the poet, in a short essay, "Harold," traces the development of a dummy of this sort which assumed a tyranny over his mind until it became a recurrent nightmare. Middleton says, and it immensely strengthens my contention if Middleton realized the full implications of the remark, that but for this dummy, Harold, he would never have become a poet.

Two or three poets of my acquaintance have admitted (I can confirm it from my own experience) that they are frequently conscious of their own divided personalities; that is, that they adopt an entirely different view of life, a different vocabulary, gesture, intonation, according as they

happen to find themselves, for instance, in clerical society, in sporting circles, or among labourers in inns. It is no affectation, but a *mimesis* or sympathetic imitation hardened into a habit; the sportsman is a fixed and definite character ready to turn out for every sporting or quasi-sporting emergency and has no interest outside the pages of the *Field*, the clerical dummy pops up as soon as a clergyman passes down the road and can quote scripture by the chapter; the rustic dummy mops its brow with a red pocket handkerchief and murmurs “keeps very dry.” These characters have individual tastes in food, drink, clothes, society, peculiar vices and virtues and even different handwriting.

The difficulty of remaining *loyal*, which I mention elsewhere, is most disastrously increased, but the poet finds a certain compensation in the excitement of doing the quick change. He also finds it amusing to watch the comments of reviews or private friends on some small batch of poems which appear under his name. Every poem though signed John Jones is virtually by a different author. The poem which comes nearest to the point of view of one critic may be obnoxious to another; and *vice versa*; but it all turns on which “dummy” or “sub-personality” had momentarily the most influence on the mental chairman.

In a piece which represents an interlude in a contemplated collection of poems, the following passage occurs to give the same thought from a different angle. I am asking a friend to overlook irreconcilabilities in my book and refer him to two or three poems which are particularly hostile to each other.

“Yet these are all the same stuff, really,
The obverse and reverse, if you look closely,
Of busy imagination’s new-coined money—
And if you watch the blind
Phototropisms of my fluttering mind,
Whether, growing strong, I wrestle Jacob-wise
With fiendish darkness blinking threatfully
Its bale-fire eyes,
Or whether childishly
I dart to Mother-skirts of love and peace
To play with toys until those horrors leave me,
Yet note, whichever way I find release,
By fight or flight,
By being wild or tame,
The Spirit’s the same, the Pen and Ink’s the same.”

LI

THE PIG BABY

"Multiple personality, perhaps," says some one. "But does that account for the stereoscopic process of which you speak, that makes two sub-personalities speak from a double head, that as it were prints two pictures on the same photographic plate?" The objector is thereupon referred to the dream-machinery on which poetry appears to be founded. He will acknowledge that in dreams the characters are always changing in a most sudden and baffling manner. He will remember for example that in "Alice in Wonderland," which is founded on dream-material, the Duchess' baby is represented as turning into a pig; in "Alice through the Looking Glass" the White Queen becomes an old sheep. That is a commonplace of dreams.

When there is a thought-connection of similarity or contrast between two concepts, the second is printed over the first on the mental photographic plate so rapidly that you hardly know at any given moment whether it is a pig or a baby you are addressing. "You quite make me giddy," said Alice to the Cheshire Cat who was performing similar evolutions. One image starts a sentence, another image succeeds and finishes it, almost, but the first reappears and has the last word. The result is poetry—or nonsense. With music much the same happens; I believe that those wonderful bursts of music heard in sleep are impossible to reproduce in a waking state largely because they consist of a number of melodies of different times and keys imposed on one another.

LII

APOLOGY FOR DEFINITIONS

IN my opening definition I have given rather an ideal of English Poetry than an analysis of the ruling poetics of this, that and the other century. If those who rally to the later Pope and those who find in the prophetic Blake the true standard of Poetry, equally deny that my definition covers their experience of the word, I admit that in an encyclopediac sense it is quite inadequate, and indeed a fusion of two contradictory senses; indeed, again, a typically poetic definition.

But how else to make it? Blake's poetry dictated by angels (a too-impulsive race) with its abstruse personal symbolism and tangled rhythms, and Pope's elegantly didactic generalizations, in rigidly metrical forms, on the nature of his fellow man, have a common factor so low as hardly to be worth recovering; my justification is based on the works of our everywhere acknowledged Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, Keats, Shelley and the rest, where the baffling Metamorphism of Romance and the formal Characterism of Classical Poetry, often reconcile their traditional quarrel and merge contentedly and inseparably as Jack Spratt and Mrs. Spratt, dividing the fat and the lean in equable portions.

… … … … … … … . .

Here let me then, for the scientific interest, summarize my conception of the typical poet:—

A poet in the fullest sense is one whom some unusual complications of early environment or mixed parentage develop as an intermediary between the small-group consciousnesses of particular sects, clans, castes, types and professions among whom he moves. To so many of these has he been formally enrolled as a member, and to so many more has he virtually added himself as a supernumerary member by showing a disinterested sympathy and by practising his exceptionally developed

powers of intuition, that in any small-group sense the wide diffusion of his loyalties makes him everywhere a hypocrite and a traitor.

But the rival sub-personalities formed in him by his relation to these various groups, constantly struggle to reconciliation in his poetry, and in proportion as these sub-personalities are more numerous more varied and more inharmonious, and his controlling personality stronger and quicker at compromise, so he becomes a more or less capable spokesman of that larger group-mind of his culture which we somehow consider greater than the sum of its parts: so that men of smaller scope and more concentrated loyalties swallow personal prejudices and hear at times in his utterances what seems to them the direct voice of God.

LIII

TIMES AND SEASONS

EACH poet finds that there are special times and seasons most suitable for his work; for times, I have heard mentioned with favour the hour before breakfast and the hour after the usual bed-time, for seasons, the pause between the exuberance of Spring and the heaviness of Summer seems popular, also the month of October. There are also places more free from interruption and distraction than others, such as caves, attics barely furnished, lonely barns, woods, bed, which make the hypnotic state necessary for poetry easier to induce. The poet has to be very honest with himself about only writing when he feels like it. To take pen in hand at the self-conscious hour of (say) nine A.M., for a morning's poetry, and with a mental arena free of combatants, is to be disappointed, and even "put off" poetry for some time to come.

I have often heard it said that a poet in intervals between inspirations should keep his hand in by writing verse-exercises, but that he should on such occasions immediately destroy what he has written.

That seems all wrong, it is an insult to the spontaneity of true poetry to go through a ritual farce of this sort and the poet will only be blunting his tools. He ought not to feel distressed at the passage of time as if it represented so many masterpieces unwritten. If he keeps mentally alive and has patience, the real stuff may arrive any moment; when it doesn't, it isn't his fault, but the harder he tries to force it, the longer will it be delayed.

LIV

TWO HERESIES

AMONG the most usual heresies held about poetry is the idea that the first importance of the poet is his “message”; this idea probably originated with the decline of polite sermon-writing, when the poet was expected to take on the double duty; but it is quite untenable. The poet is only concerned with reconciling certain impressions of life as they occur to him, and presenting them in the most effective way possible, without reference to their educational value. The cumulative effect of his work is to suggest a great number of personal obsessions the sum of which compose if you like his “message,” but the more definitely propagandist the poet, the less of a poet is the propagandist.

With this is bound up a heresy of about the same standing that poetry should only be concerned with presenting what is beautiful, beautiful in the limited sense of the picture-postcard. This romantic obsession (using the word “romantic” in the sense of optimistic loose thinking) is as absurd as that of the blood-and-guts realists. Poetry is no more a narcotic than a stimulant; it is a universal bitter-sweet mixture for all possible household emergencies, and its action varies according as it is taken in a wineglass or tablespoon, inhaled, gargled, or rubbed on the chest (like the literary Epic) by hard fingers covered with rings.

LV

THE ART OF EXPRESSION

IT is as foolish to sneer at the Very Wild Men as it is to assume that the Very Tame Men are all right because they are “in the tradition.” The Very Wild Men are at any rate likely to have done work which has explored the desert boundaries of the art they profess, and the Very Tame Men have never done anything worth doing at all. The only excusable quarrel is with the pretended Wild Men who persist in identically repeating the experiments in which their masters have already failed, and with those whose Very Wilderness is traceable to this—that they are satisfied with the original spontaneity of their work and do not trouble to test it in the light of what it will convey to others, whom they then blame for want of appreciation. What seems to be the matter with Blake’s Prophetic Books is just this, he connected his images by a system of free association the clue to which was lost by his death: for instance his enemy, Schofield, a soldier who informed against him, suddenly enters “Jerusalem” and its strange company of abstractions, in the guise of a universal devil “Skofeld.”

Suppose that one Hodge, a labourer, attempted in a fit of homicidal mania to split my skull with a spade, but that my faithful bloodhound sprang to the rescue and Hodge barely escaped with his life. In my imagination, Hodge’s spade might well come to symbolize murder and madness, while the bloodhound became an emblem of loyal assistance in the hour of discomfiture. With this experience in my mind I might be inclined to eulogize a national hero as

> “Bloodhound leaping at the throat of Hodge
> Who stands with lifted spade,”

and convey a meaning directly contrary to the one intended and having an apparent reference to agrarian unrest. But conscious reflection

would put my image into line with a more widely favoured conception of Man the Attacker, and Dog the Rescuer; I would rewrite the eulogy as

> "*Watchdog* leaping at the *burglar's* throat
> Who stands with *pistol aimed*."

One of the chief problems of the art of poetry is to decide what are the essentials of the image that has formed in your mind; the accidental has to be eliminated and replaced by the essential. There is the double danger of mistaking a significant feature of the image for an accident and of giving an accident more prominence than it deserves.

Too much modern country-side poetry is mere verbal photography, admirably accurate and full of observation but not excited by memories of human relationships, the emotional bias which could make Bunyan see the bee as an emblem of sin, and Blake the lion's loving-kindness.

Now, if Wordsworth had followed the poetical fashion of the day and told the world that when wandering lonely as a cloud he had seen a number of vernal flowers, the poem would have fallen pretty flat—if however, anticipating the present century he had quoted the order, the species and the subspecies and remarked on having found among the rest no fewer than five double blooms, we would almost have wished the vernal flowers back again.

Mr. Edmund Blunden lately called my attention to a message from Keats to John Clare sent through their common publisher, Taylor. Keats thought that Clare's "Images from Nature" were "too much introduced without being called for by a particular sentiment." Clare, in reply, is troubled that Keats shows the usual inaccuracies of the townsman when treating of nature, and that when in doubt he borrows from the Classics and is too inclined to see "behind every bush a thrumming Apollo."

LVI

GHOSTS IN THE SHELDONIAN

THE most popular theory advanced to account for the haunting of houses is that emanations of fear, hate or grief somehow impregnate a locality, and these emotions are released when in contact with a suitable medium. So with a poem or novel, passion impregnates the words and can make them active even divorced from the locality of creation.

An extreme instance of this process was claimed when Mr. Thomas Hardy came to Oxford to receive his honorary degree as Doctor of Literature, in the Sheldonian Theatre.

There were two very aged dons sitting together on a front bench, whom nobody in the assembly had ever seen before. They frowned and refrained from clapping Mr. Hardy or the Public Orator who had just described him as “Omnium poetarum Britannicorum necnon fabulatorum etiam facile princeps,” and people said they were certainly ghosts and identified them with those masters of colleges who failed to answer Jude the Obscure when he enquired by letter how he might become a student of the University. It seems one ought to be very careful when writing realistically.

LVII

THE LAYING ON OF HANDS

WHILE still in my perambulator about the year 1899,[2] I once received with great alarm the blessing of Algernon Charles Swinburne who was making his daily journey from “The Pines” in Putney to the *Rose and Crown* public house on the edge of Wimbledon Common. It was many years before I identified our nursery bogey man, “mad Mr. Swinburne,” with the poet. It interests me to read that Swinburne as a young man once asked and received the blessing of Walter Savage Landor who was a very old man indeed at the time, and that Landor as a child had been himself taken to get a blessing at the hand of Dr. Samuel Johnson, and that the great lexicographer in his childhood had been unsuccessfully “touched” by Queen Anne for the King’s Evil. And what the moral may be, I cannot say, but I have traced the story back to Queen Anne because I want to make my grimace at the sacerdotalists; for I must confess, I have been many times disillusioned over such “poetry in the great tradition” as Authority has put beyond criticism.

[2] See Mr. Max Beerbohm’s AND EVEN NOW, page 69.

In caution, and out of deference to my reader’s sensibilities I will only quote a single example. Before reading a line of Swinburne I had been frequently told that he was “absolutely wonderful,” I would be quite carried away by him. They all said that the opening chorus, for instance, of *Atalanta in Calydon* was the most melodious verse in the English language. I read:

> When the hounds of Spring are on Winter’s traces,
> The Mother of months in meadow and plain, …

and I was not carried away as far as I expected. For a time I persuaded myself that it was my own fault, that I was a Philistine and had no ear—but one day pride reasserted itself and I began asking myself

whether in the lines quoted above, the two “in’s” of *Spring* and *Winter* and the two “mo’s” of *Mother* and *Months* did not come too close together for euphony, and who exactly was the heroine of the second line, and whether the heavy alliteration in *m* was not too obvious a device, and whether *months* was not rather a stumbling-block in galloping verse of this kind, and would it not have been better….

Thereupon faith in the “great tradition” and in “Authority” waned.

Still, I would be hard-hearted and stiff-necked indeed if I did not wish to have had on my own head the blessing that Swinburne received.

LVIII

WAYS AND MEANS

IT is true that Genius can't lie hid in a garret nowadays; there are too many people eager to get credit for discovering and showing it to the world. But as most of the acknowledged best living poets find it impossible to make anything like a living wage from their poetry, and patronage has long gone out of fashion (a great pity I think) the poet after a little fuss and flattery is obliged to return disconsolately to his garret. The problem of an alternative profession is one for which I have never heard a really satisfactory solution. Even Coleridge (whose Biographia Literaria should be the poet's Bible) could make no more hopeful suggestion than that the poet should become a country parson.

Surely a most unhappy choice! The alternative profession should be as far as possible removed from, and subsidiary to, poetry. True priesthood will never allow itself to become subordinate to any other calling, and the dangerous consanguinity of poetry and religion has already been emphasized. It is the old difficulty of serving two masters; with the more orthodox poets Herbert and Vaughan, for example, poetry was all but always tamed into meek subjection to religious propaganda; with Skelton and Donne it was very different, and one feels that they were the better poets for their independence, their rebelliousness towards priestly conventions.

Schoolmastering is another unfortunate subsidiary profession, it is apt to give poetry a didactic flavour; journalism is too exacting on the invention, which the poet must keep fresh; manual labour wearies the body and tends to make the mind sluggish; office-routine limits the experience. Perhaps Chaucer as dockyard inspector and diplomat, Shakespeare as actor manager, and Blake as engraver, solved the problem at best.

These practical reflections may be supplemented by a paragraph lifted from the New York *Nation apropos* of a trans-Atlantic poet whose

works have already sold a million copies; a new volume of his poems has evidently broken the hearty muscular open-prairie tradition of the ’fifties and ’sixties and advanced forty years at a stride to the Parisian ecstasies of the naughty ’nineties;—

> “That verse is in itself a hopelessly unpopular form of literature is an error of the sophisticated but imperfectly informed. Every period has its widely read poets. Only, these poets rarely rise into the field of criticism since they always echo the music of the day before yesterday and express as an astonishing message the delusions of the huge rear-guard of civilization.”

LIX

POETRY AS LABOUR

A BOOK of verses must be either priceless or valueless and as the general reading public is never told which by the council of critics until fifty years at least after the first publication, poets can only expect payment at a nominal rate. If they complain that the labourer is worthy of his hire, the analogy is not admitted. The public denies poetry to be labour; it is supposed to be a gentle recreation like cutting out “Home Sweet Home” from three-ply wood with a fretsaw, or collecting pressed flowers.

LX

THE NECESSITY OF ARROGANCE

TO say of any poet that there is complete individuality in his poems combined with excellent craftsmanship amounts to a charge of arrogance. Craftsmanship in its present-day sense seems necessarily to imply acquaintance with other poetry; polish is only learned from the shortcomings and triumphs of others, it is not natural to the back-woodsman. A poet who after reading the work of those whom he recognizes as masters of the craft, does not allow himself to be influenced into imitation of peculiar technical tricks (as we often find ourselves unwittingly influenced to imitate the peculiar gestures of people we admire or love), that poet must have the arrogance to put his own *potential* achievements on a level with the work he most admires.

Then is asked the question, “But why *do* poets write? Why do they go on polishing the rough ideas which, once on paper, even in a crude and messy form, should give the mental conflict complete relief? Why, if the conflict is purely a personal one, do they definitely attempt to press the poem on their neighbour’s imagination with all the zeal of a hot-gospeller?”

There is arrogance in that, the arrogance of a child who takes for granted that all the world is interested in its doings and clever sayings. The emotional crises that make Poetry, imply suffering, and suffering usually humiliation, so that the poet makes his secret or open confidence in his poetic powers a set-off against a sense of alienation from society due to some physical deformity, stigma of birth or other early spite of nature, or against his later misfortunes in love.

The expectation and desire of a spurious immortality “fluttering alive on the mouths of men” is admitted by most poets of my acquaintance, both the good and the bad. This may be only a more definitely expressed form of the same instinct for self-perpetuation that makes the schoolboy cut his name on the leaden gutter of the church porch, or the rich man

give a college scholarship to preserve his name *in perpetuo*. But with the poet there is always the tinge of arrogance in the thought that his own poetry has a lasting quality which most of his contemporaries cannot claim.

The danger of this very necessary arrogance is that it is likely so to intrude the poet's personal eccentricities into what he writes that the reader recognizes them and does not read the "I" as being the voice of universality…. It was the first night of a sentimental play in an Early English setting; the crisis long deferred was just coming, the heroine and hero were on the point of reconciliation and the long embrace, the audience had lumps in their throats. At that actual instant of suspense, a man in evening-dress leaped down on the stage from a box, kicked the ruffed and doubleted hero into the orchestra, and began to embrace the lady. A moment's silence; then terrible confusion and rage. The stage manager burst into tears, attendants rushed forward to arrest the desperado.

"But, ladies and gentlemen, I am the author!! I have an artist's right to do what I like with my own play."

"Duck him! scratch his face! tar and feather him!"

… … … … … … … . .

Arrogance? Yes, but a self-contradictory arrogance that takes the form of believing that there is nobody beside themselves who could point out just where in a given poem they have written well, and where badly. They know that it contains all sorts of hidden lesser implications (besides the more important ones) which, they think, a few sensitive minds may feel, but none could analyze; they think that they have disguised this or that bit of putty (of which no poem is innocent) so that no living critic could detect it. They are arrogant because they claim to understand better than any rivals how impossible an art poetry is, and because they still have the courage to face it. They have most arrogance before writing their poem of the moment, most humility when they know that they have once more failed.

LXI

IN PROCESSION

THIS piece was written a few weeks after the remainder of the book: I had no cold-blooded intention of summarizing the paradox of poetic arrogance contained in the last section, but so it happened, and I print it here.

Donne (for example's sake)
Keats, Marlowe, Spenser, Blake,
Shelley and Milton,
Shakespeare and Chaucer, Skelton—
I love them as I know them,
But who could dare outgo them
At their several arts
At their particular parts
Of wisdom, power and knowledge?
In the Poet's College
Are no degrees nor stations,
Comparisons, rivals,
Stern examinations,
Class declarations,
Senior survivals;
No creeds, religions, nations
Combatant together
With mutual damnations.
Or tell me whether
Shelley's hand could take
The laurel wreath from Blake?
Could Shakespeare make the less
Chaucer's goodliness?

The poets of old
Each with his pen of gold
Gloriously writing
Found no need for fighting,
In common being so rich;
None need take the ditch,
Unless this Chaucer beats
That Chaucer, or this Keats
With other Keats is flyting:
See Donne deny Donne's feats,
Shelley take Shelley down,
Blake snatch at his own crown.
Without comparison aiming high,
Watching with no jealous eye,

A neighbour’s renown,
Each in his time contended
But with a mood late ended,
Some manner now put by,
Or force expended,
Sinking a new well when the old ran dry.
So, like my masters, I
Voice my ambition loud,
In prospect proud,
Treading the poet’s road,
In retrospect most humble
For I stumble and tumble,
I spill my load.

But often half-way to sleep,
On a mountain shagged and steep,
The sudden moment on me comes
With terrible roll of dream drums,
Reverberations, cymbals, horns replying,
When with standards flying,
A cloud of horsemen behind,
The coloured pomps unwind
The Carnival wagons
With their saints and their dragons
On the screen of my teeming mind,
The *Creation* and *Flood*
With our Saviour’s Blood
And fat Silenus’ flagons,
With every rare beast
From the South and East,
Both greatest and least,
On and on,
In endless variable procession.
I stand on the top rungs
Of a ladder reared in the air
And I speak with strange tongues
So the crowds murmur and stare,
Then volleys again the blare
Of horns, and Summer flowers

Fly scattering in showers,
And the Sun rolls in the sky,
While the drums thumping by
Proclaim me….
    Oh then, when I wake
Could I recovering take
And propose on this page
The words of my rage
And my blandishing speech
Steadfast and sage,
Could I stretch and reach
The flowers and the ripe fruit
Laid out at the ladder's foot,
Could I rip a silken shred
From the banner tossed ahead,
Could I call a double flam
From the drums, could the Goat
Horned with gold, could the Ram
With a flank like a barn-door
The dwarf and blackamoor,
Could *Jonah and the Whale*
And the *Holy Grail*
With the "*Sacking of Rome*"
And "*Lot at his home*"
The Ape with his platter,
Going clitter-clatter,
The Nymphs and the Satyr,
And every other such matter
Come before me here
Standing and speaking clear
With a "how do ye do?"
And "who are ye, who?"
Could I show them to you
That you saw them with me,
Oh then, then I could be
The Prince of all Poetry
With never a peer,
Seeing my way so clear
To unveil mystery.

Telling you of land and sea
Of Heaven blithe and free,
How I know there to be
Such and such Castles built in Spain,
Telling also of Cockaigne
Of that glorious kingdom, Cand
Of the Delectable Land,
The Land of Crooked Stiles,
The Fortunate Isles,
Of the more than three score miles
That to Babylon lead,
A pretty city indeed
Built on a foursquare plan,
Of the land of the Gold Man
Whose eager horses whinney
In their cribs of gold,
Of the lands of Whipperginny
Of the land where none grow old.

Especially I could tell
Of the Town of Hell,
A huddle of dirty woes
And houses in endless rows
Straggling across all space;
Hell has no market place,
Nor point where four ways meet,
Nor principal street,
Nor barracks, nor Town Hall,
Nor shops at all,
Nor rest for weary feet,
Nor theatre, square or park,
Nor lights after dark,
Nor churches nor inns,
Nor convenience for sins,
Hell nowhere begins,
Hell nowhere ends,
But over the world extends
Rambling, dreamy, limitless, hated well:
The suburbs of itself, I say, is Hell.

The suburbs of itself, I say, is Hell.

But back to the sweets
Of Spenser and Keats
And the calm joy that greets
The chosen of Apollo!
Here let me mope, quirk, holloa
With a gesture that meets
The needs that I follow
In my own fierce way,
Let me be grave-gay
Or merry-sad,
Who rhyming here have had
Marvellous hope of achievement
And deeds of ample scope,
Then deceiving and bereavement
Of this same hope.

APPENDIX:—THE DANGERS OF DEFINITION

The following letter I reprint from Tract No. 6 issued by the Society for Pure English, but put it as an appendix because it explains my attitude to the careful use of language by prose writers as well as by poets. It is intended to be read in conjunction with my section on *Diction*.

To the Editor of the S. P. E. tracts.

SIR,

As one rather more interested in the choice, use, and blending of words than in the niceties of historical grammar, and having no greater knowledge of etymology than will occasionally allow me to question vulgar derivations of place-names, I would like to sound a warning against the attempt to purify the language too much—"one word, one meaning" is as impossible to impose on English as "one letter, one sound." By all means weed out homophones, and wherever a word is overloaded and driven to death let another bear part of the burden; suppress the bastard and ugly words of journalese or commerce; keep a watchful eye on the scientists; take necessary French and Italian words out of their italics to give them an English spelling and accentuation; call a bird or a flower by its proper name, revive useful dialect or obsolescent words, and so on; that is the right sort of purification, but let it be tactfully done, let the Dictionary be a hive of living things and not a museum of minutely ticketed fossils. A common-sense precision in writing is clearly necessary; one has only to read a page or two of Nashe, Lyly, or (especially) the lesser Euphuists to come to this conclusion; their sentences often can have meant no more to themselves than a mere grimace or the latest sweep of the hat learned in Italy. A common-sense precision, yes, but when the pedantic scientist accuses the man in the street of verbal inexactitude the latter will do well to point out to the scientist that of all classes of writers, his is the least accurate of any in the use of ordinary words. Witness a typical sentence, none the better for being taken from a book which has made an extremely important contribution to modern psychological research, and is written by a

scientist so enlightened that, dispensing almost entirely with the usual scientific jargon, he has improvised his own technical terms as they are needed for the argument. Very good words they are, such as would doubtless be as highly approved by the Society for Pure English, in session, as they have been by the British Association. This Doctor X is explaining the unaccountable foreknowledge in certain insects of the needs they will meet after their metamorphosis from grub to moth. He writes:

… This grub, after a life completely spent within the channels in a tree-trunk which it itself manufactures….

"Yes," said Doctor X to me, "somehow the two it's coming together look a bit awkward, but I have had a lot of trouble with that sentence and I came to the conclusion that I'd rather have it clumsy than obscure." I pointed out have the "tree-trunk which" was surely not what he meant, but that the faults of the sentence lay deeper than that. He was using words not as winged angels always ready to do his command, but as lifeless counters, weights, measures, or automatic engines wrongly adjusted. A *grub* cannot *manufacture* a *channel*. Even a human being who can manufacture a boot or a box can only *scoop* or *dig* a channel. And you can only have a *channel* on the outer surface of a tree; inside a tree you have *tunnels*. A tunnel you *drive* or *bore*. A grub cannot be *within* either a channel or a tunnel (surely) in the same way as a fly is found *within* a piece of amber. Doctor X excused himself by saying that "scientists are usually functionally incapable of visualization," and that "normal mental visualization is dangerous, and abnormal visualization fatal to scientific theorizations, as offering tempting vistas of imaginative synthetical concepts unconfirmed by actual investigation of phenomena"—or words to that effect. Unaware of the beam in his own eye, our Doctor complains more than once in his book of the motes in the public eye, of the extended popular application of scientific terms to phenomena for which they were never intended, until they become like so many blunted chisels. On the other hand, he would be the first to acknowledge that over-nice definition is, for scientific purposes, just as dangerous as blurring of sense; Herr Einstein was saying only the other day that men become so much the slaves of words that the propositions of Euclid, for instance, which are abstract processes of reason only holding good in reference to one another, have been taken to apply

absolutely in concrete cases, where they do not. Over-definition, I am trying to show, discourages any progressive understanding of the idea for which it acts as hieroglyph. It even seems that the more precisely circumscribed a word, the less accurate it is in its relation to other closely-defined words.

There is a story of a governess who asked her charges what was the shape of the earth? “It may conveniently be described as an oblate spheroid” was the glib and almost mutinous answer. “Who told you girls that?” asked the suspicious Miss Smithson. A scientific elder brother was quoted as authority, but Miss Smithson with commendable common sense gave her ruling, “Indeed that may be so, and it may be not, but it certainly is *nicer* for little girls to say that the earth is more or less the shape of an orange.”

From which fruit, as conveniently as from anywhere else, can be drawn our homely moral of common sense in the use of words. As every schoolboy I hope doesn’t know, the orange is the globose fruit of that rutaceous tree the *citrus aurantium*, but as every schoolboy certainly is aware, there are several kinds of orange on the market, to wit the ordinary everyday sweet orange from Jaffa or Jamaica, the bitter marmalade orange that either comes or does not come from Seville, the navel orange, and the excellent “blood,” with several other varieties. Moreover the orange has as many *points* as a horse, and parts or processes connected with its dissection and use as a motor-bicycle. “I would I were an Orange Tree, that busie Plante,” sighed George Herbert once. I wonder how Herbert would have anatomized his Orange, then a rarer fruit than today when popular affection and necessary daily intercourse have wrapped the orange with a whole glossary of words as well as with tissue-paper. Old gentlemen usually *pare* their oranges, but the homophonic barrage of puns when Jones *père* prepares to pare a pair of—even oranges (let alone another English-grown fruit), has taught the younger generations either to peel a norange or skin their roranges. *Peel* (subst.) is ousting *rind*; a pity because there is also *peal* as a homophone; but I am glad to say that what used to be called *divisions* are now almost universally known as *fingers* or *pigs* (is the derivation from the tithe-or parson’s pig known by its extreme smallness?); the seeds are “pips,” and quite rightly too, because in this country they are seldom used for planting, and “pip” obviously means that when you squeeze them

between forefinger and thumb they are a useful form of minor artillery; then there is the white pithy part under the outer rind; I have heard this called *blanket*, and that is pretty good, but I have also heard it called *kill-baby*, and that is better; for me it will always remain *kill-baby*. On consulting *Webster's International Dictionary* I find that there is no authority or precedent for calling the withered calix on the orange the *kim*, but I have done so ever since I can remember, and have heard the word in many respectable nurseries (it has a fascination for children), and I can't imagine it having any other name. Poetical wit might call it "the beauty-patch on that fairy orange cheek"; heraldry might blazon it, on *tenne*, as a *mullet, vert, for difference*; and contemporary slang would probably explain it as that "rotten little star-shaped gadget at the place where you shove in your lump of sugar"; but *kim* is obviously the word that is wanted, it needs no confirmation by a Dictionary Revisal Committee or National Academy. There it is, you can hardly get away from it. Misguided supporters of the Society for Pure English, resisting the impulse to say casually "the yellow stuff round my yorange" and "the bits inside, what you eat," and knowing better than to give us *exocarp*, *carpel*, and *ovule*, will, however, perhaps misunderstand the aims of the Society by only using literary and semi-scientific language, by insisting on *paring* the *integument* and afterwards removing the *divisions* of their fruit for *mastication*. But pure English does not mean putting back the clock; or doing mental gymnastics. Let them rather (when they don't honestly push in that lump of sugar and suck) *skin* off the *rind*, ignoring the *kim* and scraping away the *kill-baby*, then pull out the *pigs*, *chew* them decently, and put the *pips* to their proper use.

Good English surely is clear, easy, unambiguous, rich, well-sounding, but not self-conscious; for too much pruning kills….

THE END

Typographical error corrected by the etext transcriber:

He fell in victory's pierce pursuit=> He fell in victory's fierce pursuit {pg 55}

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK ON ENGLISH POETRY ***

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