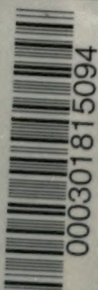

Colvin, (Sir) Sidney
On concentration and suggestion in poetry

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THE ENGLISH ASSOCIATION

Pamphlet No. 32

On Concentration and Suggestion in Poetry

By

Sir Sidney Colvin, D.Litt.

President, 1914

June, 1915

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ON CONCENTRATION AND SUGGESTION IN POETRY[1]

MR. PRESIDENT, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

Two things have chiefly influenced me in my choice of the subject on which I propose, as the retiring or rather the retired President of your Association, to offer some observations this afternoon. One is the recollection of what took place at our annual meeting last year. We had then the pleasure, the rare and stimulating pleasure as I am sure we all felt it to be, of hearing a great statesman who is also one of our subtlest critics in philosophy and theology, Mr. Arthur Balfour, thinking aloud for our benefit on a question lying outside the fields where we are accustomed to meet him, a question of pure literature. The question, you will remember, was why poetry might under certain conditions be, and had in fact in certain hands proved to be, the most effective and most enduring vehicle for argument. Mr. Balfour made it clear that by argument he meant not dramatic debate between antagonists under the sway of conflicting motives or passions, since in such uses of course the competence of poetry needs no proving, but abstract and speculative argument on points of doctrine, ritual, and belief. Mr. Balfour claimed that it is within the power of verse to give greater vitality, a firmer hold on the mind and memory, even to arguments of this class than prose can give them; nay, that verse is capable of keeping such arguments poetically alive long after they are dead intellectually. His great instance was *The Hind and the Panther* of Dryden. The qualities by which poetry like Dryden's justifies the claim thus made for it he defined as being before all the qualities of concentration and intensity. And he proceeded to throw out, without developing them very far, some considerations on the same or kindred qualities of concentration and intensity as they are found in poetry of a different order, the poetry not of argument and speculative debate but of imagination and emotion.

Coupled in my mind with this recollection is that of a conversation I once had with the late George Meredith. Meredith was fond,

[1] Address by Sir Sidney Colvin to the English Association, May 14, 1915.

especially in later years, of reading to any friend who might be with him the poetry he had last been writing. His tones in reading were impressively rotund, resonant, and masterful, but withal level and not much modulated. I have spent many hours with him listening to such reading, enjoying the rich roll of sound and the presence and atmosphere of his potent personality, but finding, as those familiar with his verse will easily imagine, the sense of what he read often hard to follow. As a rule he courted no criticism and allowed for no difficulty; but on the day of which I speak he was more indulgent than usual. He paused to say how he knew some people found his poetry obscure, and to ask whether I did, and where, and why? I tried to point out some puzzles in his printed poems which I had failed to solve, even with the page before me and full leisure to study it. But he simply could not see that they were puzzles at all, and closed the talk characteristically with a crow of exulting laughter over the sluggishness of my Saxon wits. In the course of it, defining his own aims and ideals in verse, he repeated several times with insistence, 'Concentration and suggestion, Colvin, concentration and suggestion, those are the things I care for and am always trying for in poetry'.

Well, the recollection of those words of Meredith's at his home, coupled with that of Mr. Balfour's words in his address last year, set me wondering whether it might interest you to-day if we tried to examine together, so far as may be possible within the time at our disposal, some of the different modes of concentration by which poetry works and obtains often its most signal effects of intensity and vitality: the poetry, I mean for our present purpose, of imagination and emotion, and if of intellect, then of impassioned intellect, intellect at a white or at least red heat, leaving aside the poetry of abstract argument and reasoning as sufficiently handled in Mr. Balfour's address. I propose that we should try and distinguish some of those modes—for they are not one but various—and test them with instances, and consider how their felicitous use may confer on poetry almost its very crowning glory, and whether their strained and excessive use, even in the hands of genius, does not sometimes tend to obscure that glory and confuse it. Of course for our present purpose I shall have to speak of English poetry only. Time would fail even to glance at the Latin poetry which has so profoundly influenced ours, at that quality of Roman brevity which so many English writers have toiled to imitate despite the difficulties of our uninflected language, with its necessary lumber of prepositions and auxiliary verbs, of pronouns

personal and possessive and articles definite and indefinite. Even the secret of Virgil, his incomparable blend of extreme condensation with enchanting grace—'all the charm of all the Muses often flowering in one lonely word'—even on that I must not touch, or we should hardly come even to the threshold of our subject.

Concentration, condensation, compression: all three of these nearly related words are needed, though all three together are not adequate, to convey an idea of the nature and results of the poetical process we propose to discuss. The essence of the process is that the poet should pack his meaning into the fewest words and also the fullest: by fullest I mean those which shall have in the fullest measure both the primary quality of expressing that meaning and the secondary quality of kindling the emotions and stimulating the imagination—and it may be also the intellect, though that is not so indispensable—of his hearer or reader.

Note well that this kind of suggestive concentration or intense focussing is not the same thing as mere simplicity, brevity, or austere restraint of utterance. Simplicity, brevity, austerity, restraint, may be the foundations of a very distinguished style in poetry: they are indeed the special notes of that which is commonly called the classical style. And there are instances where this classical style may attain the added power of concentrated and far-reaching suggestion which is our chief concern to-day; but on the other hand it may, and commonly does, subsist and thrive without that power and purely by dint of its own special virtues of economy and precision. By these words I mean a deliberate economy in the ideas chosen for expression, accompanied by a corresponding economy, and withal a clear-cut definiteness and completeness, 'as of carvings in ivory or in gems', in the words chosen to express them. If you desire typical examples from various kinds and periods of our poetry, think of Sir Henry Wotton's *Character of a Happy Life* or *On his Mistress, the Queen of Bohemia*, or of Johnson's lines on the death of Dr. Robert Levett or Peacock's on his infant daughter Margaret. Walter Savage Landor in his *Hellenics* (in *Artemidora* above all), and in many elegiac and epigrammatic pieces both grave and light, is a consistent master in this manner: Wordsworth furnishes plenty of fine examples, Matthew Arnold not a few. But Mr. Balfour did not for his purpose choose an example of this style, in which economy of ideas and images is matched and fitted by an equal economy of words: he chose one where there is on the contrary a notable disproportion between the fewness of the words used and the richness of the images and

associations they call up. He chose the celebrated four closing lines of Keats's sonnet on first reading Chapman's Homer:

> Or like stout Cortez, when with eagle eyes
> He stared at the Pacific, and all his men
> Looked at each other with a wild surmise,
> Silent, upon a peak in Darien.

And indeed those lines are hard to equal for the quality of double-distilled poetic concentration, first in the human vision of the explorer and his companions, with their looks and gestures, which they flash upon the mind's eye, next in the way they symbolically evoke, through that vision, a whole world-wide range of the emotions of discovery—sudden, thrilling discovery at once cosmical and spiritual.

Let us take for our present purpose another and to some of you possibly less familiar instance, also in four lines, from Shakespeare's sonnets. (The sonnet form, it should be noted, is or should be particularly conducive to these effects of concentration.) You know how large a place is taken in Shakespeare's early poetry by meditations on that stock Petrarchan theme, threadbare as one might have supposed it to be, the transforming and destroying power of Time. Besides the long apostrophe of the heroine to Time in *The Rape of Lucrece*, nearly a quarter of the whole number of Shakespeare's sonnets are full of this single theme. Both in *Lucrece* and the sonnets it inspires many splendid and pregnant phrases. But in one special sonnet Shakespeare, excusing himself for having declared some time before, falsely as he now finds, that his love for his friend was at its height and could not increase, says that he did so—

> reckoning Time, whose million'd accidents
> Creep in 'twixt vows, and change decrees of kings,
> Tan sacred beauty, blunt the sharp'st intents,
> Divert strong minds to the course of altering things.

There we have no visible picture conjured up to the mind's eye such as we had in the Keats example; but we have, crowded into four lines of perfectly simple and straightforward construction, a wonderful fullness of human and historical suggestion if only we will let it sink into us. Consider the quality of imagination which can thus electrically recharge, as it were, and revitalize a whole range of familiar ideas. 'Creep in 'twixt vows': what insidious loosening of solemn bonds and sapping of sworn purposes does not the phrase evoke, what tribulations of parted lovers, what stealth and gradualness in the forces that parted them? 'Change

decrees of kings': what despotic edicts have ever been cancelled, what armed and peremptory resolves abandoned, that are not here summed up? 'Tan sacred beauty': could any other three words thus resume all the worship paid to beauty in its prime, and all the individual tragedies of its decay, since the world began? 'Divert strong minds to the course of altering things': does not the line set us conning over all thwartings of stubborn will by more stubborn circumstance, all forced reversals of policy, all dissolutions and re-castings of alliance, that we have ever heard or read of? In English prose the nearest thing that can be found to such concentrated intensity and breadth of human and historic survey is in the *Essays and Counsels* of Francis Bacon. But turn to any of Bacon's richest and fullest sentences, and see by how much the player-poet, in a passage which is merely incidental to the main purport of his sonnet, can out-think and out-write the philosopher-statesman.

Now it is not by any means all poets who work, habitually or even occasionally, by the method or instinct—instinct is perhaps the better word—of concentration of which these are two diverse and striking examples. Some even of the greatest are born with the instinct to expand and expatiate rather than to condense and compress. Spenser, for instance, is by nothing so remarkable as by the inexhaustibly voluble and varied, unhurrying, unchecked abundance—if redundance is not rather the word—of the flow of his imagery and melody. When Spenser wishes to enforce on his reader's mind ideas of instability and mutation analogous to those which Shakespeare conveys in the four lines of his sonnet, he spreads and amplifies and embroiders them through two whole cantos, calling up the goddess Mutability in person and making her plead her own cause in a great rhetorical speech before the judgement-seat of Nature, and support her plea by ocular evidence in the shape of a succession of brilliant pageants of the changing Seasons, Months, and Hours.

That contrast, I grant you, is more pointed than it is fair, seeing that Spenser's poetic purpose and method in his allegoric narrative naturally invite to expansion and diffusion of a kind which Shakespeare's purpose and method in the single quatrain of a sonnet forbid. Still more pointed, and perhaps even less fair, is another comparison between the method of concentration and suggestion and the method of expansion and diffusion which I had thought of allowing myself to quote. Well, I will quote it nevertheless. You all know the famous line in another sonnet of Shakespeare's where he says of the nightingale that she sings only in the flush of spring and

is silent as summer advances, not because the season is less pleasant then,

> But that wild music burdens every bough,
> And sweets grown common lose their dear delight.

'But that wild music burdens every bough': do you not feel all the voices of spring, with all their magic, distilled into that single line? Compare it with the same theme as treated in thirty-odd lines at the beginning of Thomson's *Seasons*, which for almost a century counted as the one great English nature-poem:

> When first the soul of love is sent abroad
> Warm through the vital air, and on the heart
> Harmonious seizes, the gay troops begin
> In gallant thought to plume the painted wing;
> And try again the long-forgotten strain,
> At first faint-warbled. But no sooner grows
> The soft infusion prevalent and wide
> Than all alive at once their joy o'erflows
> In music unconfined. Up springs the lark,
> Shrill-voiced and loud, the messenger of morn;
> Ere yet the shadows fly, he mounted sings
> Amid the dawning clouds, and from their haunts
> Calls up the tuneful nations. Every copse
> Deep-tangled, tree irregular, and bush
> Bending with dewy moisture o'er the heads
> Of the coy quiristers that lodge within,
> Are prodigal of harmony. The thrush
> And wood-lark, o'er the kind-contending throng
> Superior heard, run through the sweetest length
> Of notes, when listening Philomela deigns
> To let them joy, and purposes, in thought
> Elate, to make her night excel their day.
> The blackbird whistles from the thorny brake,
> The mellow bullfinch answers from the grove;
> Nor are the linnets, o'er the flowering furze
> Poured out profusely, silent. Joined to these
> Innumerous songsters, in the freshening shade
> Of new-sprung leaves, their modulations mix
> Mellifluous. The jay, the rook, the daw,
> And each harsh pipe, discordant heard alone,
> Aid the full concert; while the stock-dove breathes
> A melancholy murmur through the whole.

The spring and its voices are there, but what has become of the magic? The difference, mark you, is not merely that between a general, inclusive phrase and a particular, detailed description. A phrase may be general but yet empty and unsuggestive, like that of Thomson about 'the soft infusion prevalent and wide': a descrip-

tion may be detailed and particular, and yet any one of its items may thrill us by concentration of musical effect and imaginative suggestion, as none of Thomson's lines has power to thrill us. Not that his stuff is bad in its own way: his metrical catalogue of songsters embodies a good deal of faithful observation and attentive listening, and a good deal of moved remembrance: there is a certain skill in the handling of the sub-Miltonic blank verse with its diversified breaks and pauses, there is a rather entertaining, conventional, sub-Miltonic pomposity in the turns of phrase and cadence, and one or two successful lines of studied melody like that about the stock-dove. And of course *The Seasons* could never have been written at all had the poet attempted it on the scale of compression used by Shakespeare in his sonnet.

But to return to the greater poets: Milton, again, is not one of those who work habitually by any of the modes of concentration or compression. He can be bare, he can be bald (as Matthew Arnold said of Wordsworth), as the mountain tops are bald, with a baldness full of grandeur: in the sonnets and in much of his latest work, in *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes,* he in fact is habitually so. But as I have already said, bareness and baldness are not the same things as imaginative concentration or compression: they come of a deliberate and self-denying economy of ideas and images as well as of the words conveying them. Examine any one of Milton's more austere and naked passages, and you will find that his chosen words convey the strictly sifted ideas which he permits to pass as fully, roundly, and completely, and bear the same proportion to the meaning, as do the chosen words in any of those other passages where he indulges himself by letting the full riches of his imagination and learning unroll themselves. In *Paradise Lost* his genius is continually ranging through the universe on flights of boundless imaginative sweep and survey, and his art has power to cast the whole profusion of images gathered on such flights into periods of the most sustained and intricately splendid verbal music ever framed in human language. When Milton takes us on one of his great exploratory sweeps through universal history and geography: when he tells how, in comparison with the army of the fallen angels, all earthly combatants were but as pigmies,—

> though all the giant brood
> Of Phlegra with th' heroic race were joined
> That fought at Thebes and Ilium, on each side
> Mixed with auxiliar gods: and what resounds
> In fable and romance of Uther's son

> Begirt with British and Armoric knights;
> And all who since, baptised or infidel,
> Jousted at Aspramont, or Montalban,
> Damasco or Morocco or Trebizond,
> Or whom Bizerta sent from Afric shore
> When Charlemain with all his peerage fell
> By Fontarabbia:

when Milton writes like this, his words carry and sustain our minds all the way with him and home again, enthralling our poetic sense and satisfying it, in their own way, triumphantly. But to enthral and satisfy are not quite the same things as to stimulate and enkindle. Milton rarely, to my sense, touches the spring which sets a reader's imagination delightedly adventuring for itself in the region of the uncharted and the undefined. For him no region is uncharted: he plumbs the realm of Chaos and old Night and the purposes and providence of God with the same majestic assurance and certainty. You may, perhaps, quote against me the world of vast and dim suggestion once conveyed by Milton in a single line,—

> These thoughts that wander through eternity.

But this, surely, is an exceptional note in Milton's style; and neither in his austere nor his sumptuous manner has he often the secret of thrilling us by that special sense of focussed or concentrated suggestion, of a magical disproportion between the fewness of the words used and the fullness of imaginative, emotional, and intellectual meaning from outside and beyond themselves with which they are charged.

Passing to those poets whose works abound in such effects, we shall find that most are content to obtain them occasionally, in brief passages or single lines or even sometimes in single phrases and epithets, which arrest us with the sense of a sudden fullness of delight and illumination; others strive for them habitually and continuously, so that the whole substance and tissue of their work are dense with them. To some, again, it is given to achieve these feats of poetic concentration with a manner of airy and effortless felicity, so that the consciousness of the reader is possessed instantaneously and almost passively with the magic of the result; while others (or sometimes the same in other moods or at other seasons) achieve similar feats more strenuously, with a roughness and vehemence of effort of which the results cannot be fully grasped or mastered without a corresponding effort on the part of the reader.

It is a property of all good poetry to say more in the same space, and to say it more rememberably, than prose. But it would be

a task of some interest, in re-reading any poetry we take up, to take note of special instances or feats of such poetic concentration as we are considering and try to distinguish and classify their kinds. You think that rather too mechanical and methodical a way of reading poetry? Well, it would have at any rate the virtue of compelling close attention to what you are reading, and as poetry is the best thing this distracted planet of ours produces, whatever fixes closer attention on it may be counted for good. If, then, we were to try and note and classify such special instances, we should, I think, find that some of them are effects for the eye only—and of these perhaps Tennyson is the greatest master of all, with his moonlit estuary picture of

> —the firths that branch and spread
> Their sleeping silver through the hills,

or his picture of the distant Alps at dawn:

> How faintly-flush'd, how phantom-fair,
> Was Monte Rosa, hanging there
> A thousand shadowy-pencill'd valleys
> And snowy dells in a golden air.

Others are for the eye first and the imagination next, like those famous lines at the end of Keats's Chapman sonnet; some are for the imagination without any picture previously evoked for the eye; some, like that Shakespeare quatrain about time and mutability, are for the imagination ranging over broad fields of history and human affairs; some are for the imagination penetrating into the secret processes of nature; others for it sympathizing with the tense and culminating moments of human passion. Some are for the imagination and intellect or for the eye, imagination, and intellect all together in different proportions—and in proportion as the intellect plays the greater part so is obscurity apt to come in, so is the degree of the mental effort needed to grasp the poetry and take it in. Then, in all these modes of poetical concentration alike, sudden or sustained, we shall find it interesting to watch the different degrees in which the effect is obtained or enhanced by that peculiar power of verbal magic which is the innermost secret of poetry—that mystery of melodious sound evoking intimate, intense, perhaps ante-natal associations which no criticism can analyse or attempt to analyse without breaking its spell.

Shakespeare, of course, affords the richest mine for instances of all kinds and varieties. I have quoted two from the sonnets. Even in his earliest plays we come every now and then upon a single

effortless-seeming line which in a moment launches the imagination to music on a voyage beyond the beyonds: as when the Ephesian wife in the *Comedy of Errors,* reminding her sister of the range of men's activity and dominion in contrast with the home-keeping duties of women, says men are

Lords of the wide world and wild watery seas:

or again in the *Midsummer Night's Dream,* where Theseus, warning Hermia of the penalties of filial disobedience, distils the quintessence of the cloistral life and its renunciations—evokes a vision of all vowed and pining virgins at their nightly orisons—in the line which pictures them

Chanting faint hymns to the cold fruitless moon.

In the ripe period of Shakespeare's middle comedies and histories, say between 1595 and 1599, the prevailing note of his style is less that of close packing or condensation than of golden fluency, fullness, and felicity. But with and after *Hamlet* there comes in a new note, the note of a frequent struggle of thought against the bonds of language, a wrestle of the intellect to pack into the clauses of a single sentence more matter and a quicker change and succession of images than it can well hold; and with this a breaking up of the earlier enchanting music and movement of verse. The note is apt to be strongest when Shakespeare cannot refrain from putting into the mouths of his characters reflections on human affairs and conduct, or social order and polity, outside the immediate dramatic scope of the situation. Great examples of this style will occur to all of you from *Measure for Measure,* from *Coriolanus,* perhaps most of all from those weighty speeches of the Greek warrior statesmen in *Troilus and Cressida.* But these are too long to quote, and the finest lines are not detachable. To illustrate the change I mean, let us turn to one or two instances relatively undistinguished, but I think also unhackneyed. These lines are from the scene in *Lear,* where Gloucester is moved by the misery of his disguised son to give him alms and to utter a very modern-sounding socialist wish for the redistribution of wealth:

Here, take this purse, thou whom the heavens' plagues
Have humbled to all strokes: that I am wretched
Makes thee the happier: heavens, deal so still!
Let the superfluous and lust-dieted man,
That slaves your ordinance, that will not see
Because he doth not feel, feel your power quickly;
So distribution should undo excess,
And each man have enough.

Here is another instance, again not first-rate, but again, I think, unhackneyed, where Rosencrantz, flattering the King, huddles up images to express the calamities attendant on a king's downfall:

> The cease of majesty
> Dies not alone; but, like a gulf, doth draw
> What 's near it with it: it is a massy wheel,
> Fix'd on the summit of the highest mount,
> To whose huge spokes ten thousand lesser things
> Are mortised and adjoin'd; which, when it falls,
> Each small annexment, petty consequence,
> Attends the boisterous ruin.

This in its way is the sort of thing Charles Lamb means when he says, 'Shakespeare mingles everything, runs line into line, embarrasses sentences and metaphors: before one idea has burst its shell, another is hatched and clamorous for disclosure'. As to another class of intense and overpowering feats of concentration in Shakespeare, it is perhaps doubtful if they come truly within the scope of our present study, which is concerned mainly with differences of poetic style and method: I mean those brief passionate cries of the heart, in each of which Shakespeare knows how to concentrate a thousand implications of character and a whole lifetime of emotion antecedent to the crisis which calls them out. Such cries are the 'What, have his daughters brought him to this pass?' of Lear when he meets the ragged madman who is Edgar in disguise: the 'He has no children' of Macduff when he hears of his babes murdered by Macbeth: the 'Am I that name, Iago?' of Desdemona: the 'This fellow had a Volscian for his mother' of Volumnia when her son has gone over to the enemies of his country: the 'What says the married woman?' of Cleopatra: and again, in the same play, those unfathomable, still intensities of pathos and passion that pass in half a dozen words each between Cleopatra and her handmaidens,—Iras with her

> Finish, good lady; the bright day is done,
> And we are for the dark,—

Charmian with her 'O eastern star!' and her mistress's reply,—

> Peace, peace!
> Dost thou not see my baby at my breast,
> That sucks the nurse asleep?

But truly Shakespeare is too vast altogether to come incidentally into an afternoon's study like this. Let us pass to more measurable and manageable poets, and take one or two of those of the rich period of English poetry a hundred years ago.

Wordsworth, I suppose, is generally thought of, especially by those unfamiliar with his work, as a diffuse and prolix rather than a concentrated poet. Well, no general statement about the style of Wordsworth can possibly be true, seeing that he has no fixed style: he has half a dozen styles that vary according to his theme or mood. Perhaps his very best is that in which, in poems like *Tintern Abbey* or the great passages of *The Prelude* and *The Excursion,* he combines impassioned description of the works, and workings, of nature as perceived by the external senses with impassioned interpretation of those inward and spiritual relations between nature and man which he felt more profoundly than any other poet. Often these passages of exposition, along with their high revealing power, attain a degree of verbal and metrical amplitude and sonority scarcely below the Miltonic. But their special note is not concentration. Still less, alas! is concentration the note of those other passages in which, coming down from such heights of inspired exposition, Wordsworth insists through page and page on trying to analyse in the chill light of reflection those operations and relations which he has just so nobly set forth in the glowing light of perception and intuition. Wordsworth has a second excellent style, the style which Matthew Arnold has described in words I have already quoted, 'bald as the mountain-tops are bald, with a baldness full of grandeur'—in this style are written many of the patriotic sonnets: and again a third, the style of strong homely plainness, 'relying for its effect', to quote Matthew Arnold again, 'solely on the weight and force of that which with entire fidelity it utters': such is the style of most of the narratives of Cumberland peasant life detached or embedded in the longer poems. Both in the bare grand style and in the plain homely style we find Wordsworth capable of striking an occasional unexpected note of intense concentration and far-reaching suggestion. Such a note is struck in the last two lines of the sonnet beginning 'The world is too much with us', where he suddenly calls up for his consolation a vision of the boisterous untroubled shapes of old Pagan sea-mythology:

> Great God! I'd rather be
> A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn;
> So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
> Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;
> Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;
> Or hear old Triton blow his wreathèd horn.

Such a note strikes us abruptly again in the middle of the plain narrative of the shepherd Michael and his son, in the lines which

tell how there came to the father from his son's companionship among the hills:

> Feelings and emanations—things which were
> Light to the sun and music to the wind.

Almost equally sudden, in a lyric of which the style is for the most part plain, is that question which the poet, listening to the song of the girl reaper in the Highlands, flings so piercingly into the legendary heart and history of her country—and of every country that has a heart and a history:

> Will no one tell me what she sings?
> Perhaps the plaintive numbers flow
> For old, unhappy far-off things
> And battles long ago.

Poetry scarcely offers an equal example, certainly none better, of the way in which the most simply classical style may be at the same moment the most intensely romantic. Again, remember how Wordsworth opens a brief lyric of which the main theme is human, and which has time to get a little commonplace before the close, with a verse or two of prodigious descriptive condensation and imaginative suggestion on effects of nature in his native country:

> Loud is the Vale! the Voice is up
> With which she speaks when storms are gone;
> A mighty Unison of streams!
> Of all her Voices, One!
>
> Loud is the Vale; this inland Depth
> In peace is roaring like the Sea;
> Yon star upon the mountain-top
> Is listening quietly.

Among that great group of a hundred years ago, Keats is the poet to whom lines and phrases of intense imaginative concentration came the most spontaneously, the most felicitously and without effort. Notwithstanding the Spenserian flow and sweetness of movement of his verse both in narrative and lyric work, you have only to be on the look-out for such lines and phrases and you will find them everywhere. Even in *Endymion*, a poem which some critics have fondly held to be all nerveless meandering and honeyed deliquescence, you will find the whole tragedy of the sack of Troy imaged in less than three lines:

> The woes of Troy, towers smothering o'er their blaze,
> Stiff-holden shields, far-piercing spears, keen blades,
> Struggling, and blood, and shrieks.

You will find half the romance of the *Odyssey,* with the spell that is in the sound of the vowelled place-names of Grecian story, and the breathing mystery of moonlight falling on magic islands of the sea, distilled into the one line—

> Aeaea's isle was wondering at the moon.

Passing to the daily life of nature, which every one acknowledges as Keats's special field, less than seven lines are enough for him to evoke all the essence of all pastoral dawns, all their refreshing uplifting power for sense and spirit, since pastoral life began :

> Rain-scented eglantine
> Gave temperate sweets to that well-wooing sun;
> The lark was lost in him; cold springs had run
> To warm their chilliest bubbles in the grass:
> Man's voice was on the mountains; and the mass
> Of nature's lives and wonders puls'd tenfold,
> To feel this sun-rise and its glories old.

No other nature-poet can get so much of the imagined delight and refreshment of natural things to the human senses into a single epithet or pair of epithets as Keats, for instance in the line—

> Mid hush'd, cool-rooted flowers fragrant-eyed.

No other could have invented a single epithet so vitalizing the imagined spiritual intercourse between the living growths of earth and the remote constellations as Keats with his

> Tall trees, branch-charmèd by the earnest stars.

Half the familiar lines and phrases in the famous odes are feats of similar felicitous imaginative concentration, the 'beaker full of the warm South', the 'magic casement', &c. In human narrative Lamb was the first to notice the intensely concentrated tragic anticipation in the Pot of Basil, 'the two brothers with their murdered man', a note stronger even than the 'moritura puella' in Virgil's tale of Orpheus and Eurydice. Lamb again, writing with the insight of genius, and still in the day of the scoffers, noticed and brought out a similar quality in the phrase of Keats's *Lamia* where the god Hermes coming on an errand into the underworld is called 'the star of Lethe': 'one of those prodigal phrases', says Lamb, 'which Mr. Keats abounds in, and which in this instance lays open to us at once all the dim regions and their inhabitants, and the sudden coming of the celestial among them.'

So much by way of instance and of indication, for what such summary finger-pointing may be worth, concerning those poets,

and they are the majority, who use the method of intense and suggestive concentration not continuously but by strokes and flashes, as the occasion or their inspiration bids them. Now for the minority who by principle or instinct pack and condense and concentrate and compress habitually and all the time. They are for the most part the same in whose poetry the element of intellect plays the largest and most restless part along with the elements of imagination and emotion. We have reminded ourselves how at a certain stage of Shakespeare's work the purely intellectual element thrust itself into a predominant place among his other tremendous gifts and faculties, and how it put into the mouths of his characters poetry of a more strenuous concentration, a denser imaginative and intellectual tissue, so to speak, than before. Among some poets of Shakespeare's generation and the next there existed both a passion and a fashion, much stimulated by the study of certain Spanish and Italian models, for intellectual athletics, sometimes of a highly fantastic kind. The most consistent and indefatigable of mental athletes in our Jacobean poetry was—it is needless to say so to such an audience as this—John Donne, the Dean of St. Paul's. From the range and depth both of his attainments and experiences, and the mingled elements of sensuality, cynicism, and intense brooding piety in his nature, the work of Donne derives a quality unique in our literature. In his hands poetry turned away from many of the pleasant conventions, pastoral, Petrarchan, and allegoric, beloved by Spenser and his followers, to concern itself with the hot and urgent realities both of earthly passion and spiritual travail and aspiration. At the same time he went beyond all his contemporaries in his love of acrobatic thought-play and of forcing together into strained imaginative relation ideas that naturally had none. No imagery was too rich or complicated for him, none too far-fetched and odd or too familiarly gross and common: no snag of thought was too stubbed or knotty, no clot of learning too stiff or insoluble: he grasped at all alike and flung them into the strong and chafing current of his verse, which runs turbid with all manner of substances and among them a high proportion of gold. Let us consider a passage in his characteristic though not at all in his extreme manner. He had written verses defying and belittling the power of death. Now, death having carried off a virtuous and excellent lady of his acquaintance, he recants and declares

> Spiritual treason, atheism 'tis to say
> That any can thy summons disobey.
> Th' earth's face is but thy table; there are set

Plants, cattle, men, dishes for death to eat.
In a rude hunger now he millions draws
Into his bloody, or plaguy, or starved jaws.

(Note how that single rough line crams into itself all the victims of war, pestilence, or famine since the world began.)

Now wantonly he spoils, and eats us not,
But breaks off friends, and lets us piecemeal rot.
Nor will this earth serve him; he sinks the deep
Where harmless fish monastic silence keep;
Who—were Death dead—by roes of living sand
Might sponge that element, and make it land.

Those last four lines illustrate well the far-fetched learned queerness of the ideas which often moved Donne to poetry. The silence or voicelessness of fish had struck the ancient Greeks as something almost uncanny. Hesiod and the tragedians have a special word for it; the Pythagoreans attached a kind of sacredness to it. Donne has all this in his mind as well as the rule and custom of monks in the refectory, when he talks about fish keeping monastic silence: and then the grotesque fancy strikes him that if fish didn't die, their roes would gradually accumulate at the bottom and fill up the sea like sandbanks. Then he goes on with more beauty and less eccentricity:

He rounds the air, and breaks the hymnic notes
In birds', heaven's choristers, organic throats;
Which, if they did not die, might seem to be
A tenth rank in the heavenly hierarchy.
O strong and long-lived death, how camest thou in?
And how without creation didst begin?
Thou hast, and shalt see dead, before thou diest,
All the four Monarchies, and Antichrist.
How could I think thee nothing, that see now
In all this All nothing else is, but thou?
Our births and lives, vices and virtues, be
Wasteful consumptions, and degrees of thee.
For we, to live, our bellows wear and breath,
Nor are we mortal, dying, dead, but death.

The poetry of Donne, slighted as intractably harsh and crabbed even by so illustrious a critic as Coleridge, is coming to its own again—has indeed among lovers of poetry in the young generation come into perhaps a little more than its own. Through the so-called 'metaphysical' group of seventeenth-century poets which followed him—poets most of them men of 'wit' as well as of ardent Christian devotion, and prone as such to weave into the fine tissue

of their religious rapture strands of glittering intellectual ingenuity, conceits no matter how far-fetched and discordant—through that school Donne handed down a kind of poetic tradition to the nineteenth century. The tradition is in various modes to be traced in the *Unknown Eros* of Coventry Patmore; in the work of Mrs. Meynell, subtle beyond most of our time in the interfusion of fastidiously distilled thought and feeling; above all in that of the late Francis Thompson, with its continual confluent rush of religious passion and vehement figurative thinking. Other younger writers not directly of the same lineage, as Mr. Lascelles Abercrombie and the late, untimely lost Rupert Brooke, have undergone the same influence.

But I shall not take any of these for my modern instances of the confirmed habit of concentration and condensation in poetry. More extreme and conspicuous instances will at once occur to you. Browning will most probably occur: Meredith, I should expect, certainly. Between these two masters there was in fact this in common, that each threw into his work an extraordinary amount of intellectual energy; each crowded his lines with meaning, and the result in both cases was frequent obscurity, or at least a heavy strain on what Macaulay, in that criticism of Dryden which Mr. Balfour quoted, calls 'the ductility of language'. Or shall we fall back on a more old-fashioned quotation, and say that each failed in his degree to combine with his other excellences the particular excellence which Shenstone attributes to Pope, that of 'consolidating or condensing sentences, yet preserving ease and perspicuity'. Browning, as we all know, commonly uses a hurried elliptical style of great compression, tacking clause on to clause in breathless, almost grammarless, apposition, throwing over the auxiliary parts of speech, discarding relative pronouns, skipping here and hinting there, and generally taking for granted that you follow the connexions and understand the implied situations without a word. In this characteristic manner he often keeps the reader bewildered, but often also, especially in the lyric form, achieves passages and phrases of true and admirable poetic concentration. Nevertheless, if one had to name the chief or dominating characteristic of Browning's work, it would not, I think you will agree, be the habitual summariness or capriciousness or compression of its poetic form, but its unflagging, indefatigable elaboration and determined elucidation of the matter whatever that may be. No poet shows such prodigious activity and staunchness in pursuing a subject to its last windings and recesses, and exhausting its uttermost psychological possibilities.

His uses of the methods of concentration and suggestion are relatively but accidental, are but tricks of style adopted for convenience in the course of this inveterate pursuit. Therefore I shall leave Browning out for the purpose of the present study, and go straight to Meredith, with whom concentration and suggestion were almost all in all. I have quoted his own words spoken to myself as evidence that he aimed at these effects consciously and of set purpose, though the purpose was no doubt in the first instance prompted and directed by natural instinct. We are too near as yet to be able to take the measure of such a man. But there can be no doubt that his mind and imagination were among the richest and most resourceful, and above all the most rapid in working, that have ever expressed themselves in literature. It interested me the other day to find a definition of genius in general quoted as thrown out by this man of genius in the course of conversation with a very straightforward and simple-minded witness, the American publisher Mr. S. S. McClure. 'As nearly as I can remember,' reports this gentleman, 'Meredith said: "genius is an extraordinary activity of mind in which all conscious and subconscious knowledge mass themselves without any effort of the will, and become effective. It manifests itself in three ways—in producing, in organizing, and in rapidity of thought".'

The actual words do not sound to my ear quite like Meredith's; but the definition fits at least his own genius accurately, except that 'extraordinary' is too weak a word to describe the activity of his mind. All its accumulated resources, conscious or subconscious, of human intuition, impassioned observation, and literary study; all its fruits of meditation on the processes of nature and the issues of life; all its unlimited energy in the clothing of intellectual ideas with figurative imagery, were spontaneously and instantly ready for use, nay, thrustingly and importunately ready, and by no means to be kept, supposing it had been in his nature to try and keep them, back. It may be regretted that his conscious artistic purpose was to encourage and spur rather than to bridle and restrain the exercise of all these faculties. He never fully realized the difference between his own mind and the minds of other people. He always seemed to me like one of those acrobats of the trapeze, less in vogue now than they were thirty years ago, whose gift and practice it was to hang by the hands and fling themselves through space, with what seemed the swiftness and certainty of actual flight, from one swinging bar suspended high overhead to another. To the spectator below, whose way of locomotion was by the humble means of his

footsoles on the floor, the thing seemed a miracle. To similar half-miraculous and not wholly human faculties are due the things that make Meredith's poetry so difficult at first to follow: the way of never describing an object as what it is but always by an image, or an action by its obvious verb, but always by some figurative substitute meant to strike the mind more vividly; the headlong leap from one image to another, each separate image in itself often too strained and too remote to be quickly apprehended: the trick of letting syntax and construction trail after this race of images as best it may or drop behind altogether; the habitual rejection, much more complete and scornful than Browning's, of the auxiliary and explanatory parts of speech; the passion for packing and plugging into five words the meaning and suggestive power of fifty. You all, I dare say, recognize the qualities in Meredith's works of which I speak. But to carry out my plan for to-day, let us read an example or two, and those not of the hardest, together. The first shall be the piece of his characteristic nature-philosophy called *Seed-Time.* Its moral, in itself an old and familiar one enough, is that man must not let himself be depressed by the gloom and decay of autumn and all that they symbolize, but in the darkest hour must remember that autumn is the season of sowing and look forward to spring-time and re-birth. The first stanza crowds the mind's eye with sights and images of autumn.

> Flowers of the willow-herb are wool;
> Flowers of the briar berries red;
> Speeding their seed as the breeze may rule,
> Flowers of the thistle loosen the thread.
> Flowers of the clematis drip in beard,
> Slack from the fir-tree youngly climbed;
> Chaplets in air, flies foliage seared;
> Heeled upon earth, lie clusters rimed.

That is plain enough except the last two lines, which mean that of the dead leaves some are blown in wreaths through the air and some are banked on the ground in heaps whitened with hoar frost.

> Where were skies of the mantle stained
> Orange and scarlet, a coat of frieze
> Travels from North till day has waned,
> Tattered, soaked in the ditch's dyes;
> Tumbles the rook under grey or slate;
> Else, enfolding us, damps to the bone;
> Narrows the world to my neighbour's gate;
> Paints me Life as a wheezy crone.

'Skies of the mantle stained orange and scarlet.' A trick of Mr. Meredith's style is, that 'of' is with him a preposition of all-work, standing at need for 'from' or 'through' or 'by', and especially for 'by help of' and 'by grace of', but here, of course, the use is clear enough. The image of the coat of frieze for the bank of cloud drawing over from the north runs plainly until the lines 'tumbles the rook under grey or slate; Else, enfolding us, damps to the bone', which mean that if the dark cloud-bank comes travelling high, with wind, we see the rooks blown about under and as if by it, and if it comes low and stilly, in the form of mist, it wraps us round and soaks us and blots from view all things but the nearest.

> Now seems none but the spider lord;
> Star in circle his web waits prey,
> Silvering bush-mounds, blue brushing sward;
> Slow runs the hour, swift flits the ray.
> Now to his thread-shroud is he nigh,
> Nigh to the tangle where wings are sealed,
> He who frolicked the jewelled fly;
> All is adroop on the down and the weald.

The description of the spider in his web as a star in a circle and of the bushes looking like mounds silvered over with spider webs or gossamer films, and of the sward that seems to be brushed blue by the multitude of such films, only need to be read with the attention which all concentrated work demands. But when we come to the line 'Now to his thread-shroud is he nigh', it is a little disconcerting to have to wait two more lines before we learn who 'he' is, namely not the spider but the bright-coloured insect, 'he who frolicked the jewelled fly', drawing near his fate in the spider's web.

> Mists more lone for the sheep-bell enwrap
> Nights that tardily let slip a morn
> Paler than moons, and on noontide's lap
> Flame dies cold, like the rose late born.
> Rose born late, born withered in bud!—
> I, even I, for a zenith of sun
> Cry, to fulfil me, nourish my blood:
> O for a day of the long light, one!

'Mists more lone for the sheep-bell" there speaks unmistakably the true great poet. I think there is nothing to stop any one in the rest of the stanza except perhaps that it may take a moment's thought to realize that the flame which dies cold on noontide's lap is the flame of the late and faint autumn sun.

Master the blood, nor read by chills,
Earth admonishes: Hast thou ploughed,
Sown, reaped, harvested grain for the mills,
Thou hast the light over shadow of cloud.
Steadily eyeing, before that wail,
Animal-infant, thy mind began,
Momently nearer me: should sight fail,
Plod in the track of the husbandman.

Here we learn how Earth rebukes her human offspring for giving way to momentary despondence under the autumn gloom and chill, and tells him that if he has done his duty by her, ploughing, sowing, and harvesting, he will never lose the promise of light behind the cloud. A true Meredithian puzzle is where she rebukes him as an 'animal-infant', meaning that before he gave way to discouragement he had been drawing nearer her by steadily facing and accepting her doings and meanings, and that by so giving way he has relapsed for the moment into a puling state only worthy of man before he had grown out of the animal stage.

Verily now is our season of seed,
Now in our Autumn; and Earth discerns
Them that have served her in them that can read,
Glassing, where under the surface she burns,
Quick at her wheel, while the fuel, decay,
Brightens the fire of renewal: and we?
Death is the word of a bovine day,
Know you the breast of the springing To-be.

This verse amplifies the last line of the preceding and in the phrase 'death is the word of a bovine day' indicates that man is no better than the beasts of the field when he broods on death and decay and not on the perpetually re-springing life of earth and of its creatures.

Now for a specimen in quite another vein, the vein of narrative concentrated and impassioned to lyric height or even above it. The passage I shall take is from 'The Nuptials of Attila', and flashes upon us the scene where the Huns force their way into the bridal chamber on the afternoon of the second day, and find their hero dead and his bride, whether his murderess or not, raving mad.

Square along the couch, and stark,
Like the sea-rejected thing
Sea-sucked white, behold their King.
        Attila, my Attila!
Beams that panted black and bright,
Scornful lightnings danced their sight:
Him they see an oak in bud,
Him an oaklog stripped of bark:

Him, their lord of day and night,
White, and lifting up his blood
Dumb for vengeance. Name us that,
Huddled in the corner dark,
Humped and grinning like a cat,
Teeth for lips!—'tis she! she stares,
Glittering through her bristled hairs.
Rend her! Pierce her to the hilt!
She is Murder: have her out!
What! this little fist, as big
As the southern summer fig!
She is Madness, none may doubt.
Death, who dares deny her guilt!
Death, who says his blood she spilt!
Make the bed for Attila!

There is what Keats somewhere calls 'fiery laconicism'; there is condensation or compression with a vengeance, there are visions focused for the eye and problems for the mind; there are fury and terror and debate, and all the mystery and passion of a great and ambiguous historical tragedy, crushed into words amazingly few and tense: with nothing, I think, to pull up any alert-minded reader except the two lines 'Beams that panted black and bright, Scornful lightnings danced their sight' which I take to mean that to the overwrought senses of the Huns as they rushed in the scene seemed to reel alternately in a horror of darkness and a dazzle of mocking light. The next couplet contrasts the vision they had last had of their leader erect in his prime with the vision of him that meets them now.

It seems certain that Meredith's name is still a rising name, and his poetry in especial a growing power, among the younger generation. How much, I ask myself, of this fact is due to the intrinsic value of the poetry itself when its full sense is mastered, and how much to the satisfaction which young and active minds take in mastering it? I feel a shyness in approaching this question when it has been treated with so much sense, sympathy, and penetration by Mr. George Macaulay Trevelyan in his admirable commentaries. Personally I can eagerly enjoy, when I am not too tired, grappling with poetry of this kind, and I hold much of it to be of the highest, or at any rate of very high, value. But I also feel that there is an insidious appeal to one's vanity in the sense of the labour spent and difficulties overcome in learning to understand it. And I am sure that the mental satisfaction of disentangling poetic knots and interpreting poetic riddles is one thing and the pure delight of poetry another, and it is not until the first phase of study is completed and

left behind that we can enter on the enjoyment of the second. Moreover I ask myself, what about the future? Will the minds of lovers of poetry gradually get used to such extremes of suggestive concentration, and growing in activity learn to follow these trapeze-flights of the mind easily and pleasurably from the first? Or will posterity, with a thousand new claims on its attention, find the effort necessary to follow them one too arduous for it to make? In other words, will men of athletic and irrepressible genius such as Browning and Meredith, men whose work has done so much to exercise the brain and enrich the blood of our world—that Victorian or immediately post-Victorian world for which a man of my age alone has the right to speak—will they, as to a large part of their work at any rate, become poets disused, rusted, and unread? Or will their poetry continue to exercise the brains and enrich the blood of future generations in that new world whose temper we cannot yet foresee, the world now in process of being forged in such fires of new discipline and sacrifice, amid such horrors of unimagined hell and hate, such glory of beautiful light-hearted valour and devotion?

I am sure I very earnestly hope and to some extent believe so. But even then I cannot but think that the readers of the future will sometimes give a gasp of joy, as I find myself giving, and as I dare say you also give, when at intervals ease and perspicuity are added to the other gifts of these great writers: when in reading Browning's *Sordello*, for instance, you come out from all that tangle and smother of elusive psychology and allusive history into a clearing of obvious and untrammelled poetry like the apostrophe to Dante,—

> Pacer of the shore
> Where glutted hell disgorgeth filthiest gloom,
> Unbitten by its whirring sulphur spume;
> Plucker of amaranths groan beneath God's eye
> In gracious twilights where His chosen lie,—

or when from straining at the leaps we have to take from one remote and questionable point of light to another in the course of one of Meredith's cosmical speculations, we find ourselves in a belt of encouraging and steadfast illumination where, after bidding us read the riddle of the stars in the confidence of Love and in the strength of Mind, he says:

> So may we read, and little find them cold:
> Not frosty lamps illumining dead space,
> Not distant aliens, not senseless Powers.

The fire is in them whereof we are born;
The music of their motion may be ours.
Spirit shall deem them beckoning Earth and voiced
Sisterly to her, in her beams rejoiced.

. . . .

Then at new flood of customary morn,
    Look at her through her showers,
    Her mists, her streaming gold,
A wonder edges the familiar face:
She wears no more that robe of printed hours;
Half strange seems Earth, and sweeter than her flowers.

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