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Poetry and fact

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POETRY AND FACT

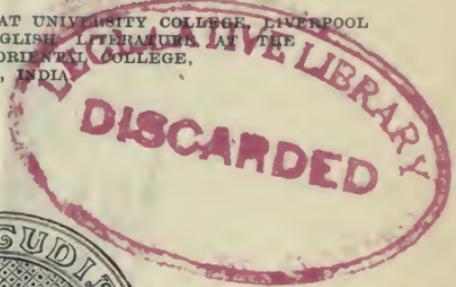
AN INAUGURAL ADDRESS DELIVERED AT
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POETRY AND FACT.

"I do not know what 'poetical' is ; is it honest in deed and word ? is it a true thing ?"—AS YOU LIKE IT.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

In one of the dialogues of Plato, Socrates is made to express his envy and admiration of the profession of a rhapsodist. "Your profession, O Ion," he says, "has often appeared to me an enviable one. For together with the nicest care of your person, and the most studied elegance of dress, it imposes upon you the necessity of a familiar acquaintance with many and excellent poets."

I do not know whether or not the nearest modern parallel to the profession of the itinerent rhapsodist is to be found in a Professorship of Literature, but it seems to me that, waiving the question of attire, at least they enjoy this advantage in common—on both is imposed "the necessity of a familiar acquaintance with many and excellent poets."

But this advantage has its corresponding duties. "He is no rhapsodist who does not understand the whole scope and intention of the poet, and is not capable of interpreting it to his audience." And not

of one poet only, for later on in the same dialogue Socrates sets himself to prove, in his own Socratic fashion, that he who is competent to expound and criticise Homer must of necessity be equally happy in his illustrations of Hesiod and all other poets, and, in short, must have made himself master of that subtlest of all essences, the essence of Poetry.

Now, in some respects, ladies and gentlemen, I am justly more diffident of my powers than the rhapsodist Ion. I sincerely do not share with him the belief that "it would be worth your while to hear me declaim upon Homer." But in other respects I am bolder than he, for I accept on behalf of my profession the conclusion from which he, on behalf of his, was so anxious to escape—and I intend to devote the time allotted me by your indulgence to-night to investigating the very question he shunned—the question in what consists the ultimate nature of Poetry.

I should hesitate perhaps to ask you to accompany me into this dim and difficult region, if I were not aware that in so doing I am following in the steps of my predecessor here. I could wish I had enjoyed, as so many of you have enjoyed, the benefit of hearing Professor Bradley at length upon this and kindred topics. This benefit having been denied me, I can only say that from all I can hear he has made this chair a "siege perilous" for after occupiers, and left, in his memory, a formidable rival. But, at least, I take courage from his example, for I believe he held, as I certainly hold, that a Professor of Literature is not

merely a taster or assayer of literary dishes, a ruthless deriver of words, or a metronomic expert in the conduct of rhythm, but that beyond these, and more than these, he ought to make some attempt at least to treat systematically what underlies all these, and to possess, if not to present, a consecutive theory of his subject matter.

To set forth such a theory complete would transcend my ability and your patience. So I have narrowed the field of my expatiation, by confining myself to the treatment of Literature in its highest and purest form—Poetry,—and further by discarding, for the time being, the more technical and formal aspects of the subject, and addressing myself more particularly to one problem—the endeavour to strip Poetry of its outward form, to peel off, as it were, the mummy-wrappings of verse, and see whether we can discover the trick of the embalmers.

It is a mistake, I think, to condemn such an investigation as an outrage done to Poetry—it is a mistake to insist on metre, music, and diction, as not only paramount, but despotic, in the determination of what is and what is not Poetry indeed. Anyone who makes of these the sole definition of Poetry will be apt, I fear, to fall into errors of judgment, such as might be involved (to use an illustration rather than an exact parallel) by a definition of man as an animal that wears clothing. So he does, generally; but the definition might compel us to refuse the name of humanity to some of the highly intelligent natives of

warmer climes, while conceding it, reluctantly but inevitably, to a swaddled lap-dog or an organ grinder's monkey. Or, to make my illustration more exact,—I refuse to refrain from speculation on the nature of disembodied spirits at the bidding of one who should point out to me, quite truly, that spirits are most conveniently and plentifully to be met with and studied in the embodied state.

What then is it that constitutes a statement or sentence, whether found in an ode or a scientific handbook, whether quoted almost at random from Milton, or with some care in selection from Eliza Cook, a distinctively poetic statement? Or, more familiarly, is Poetry a mere representation of fact, dressed up and decorated in this or that way; or is it based on fiction, and are the truest poets those who do the most pertinaciously feign?

Fifty years ago it would have been unnecessary and impertinent to disclaim the view that Poetry could ever be merely a minute and imitative rendering in language of the unsifted incidents of human life, garnished of course with the graces supplied by a metrical workman. But there are signs abroad that it is less superlatively unnecessary now to disclaim, if not to denounce, an opinion which would have incurred only the ridicule of the Romantic School at the period of its strength. I suppose there is no pair of boots dangling forlorn on a continental signpost that does not sooner or later find its Bombastes. This much is certain, the domain of prose fiction, con-

tiguous with that of poetry proper, is daily being more and more widely appropriated by the followers of imitative "Realism" who apportion the territory, and unmindful of the imaginative savages, their forerunners, fitly claim a squatter's right. And they are already sending their heralds and pioneers over the border, to spy the land of poetry, if it be good. In a recent number of a French literary periodical I find an account by an enthusiastic critic of a great movement that is taking place among the younger generation of French poets, who are it seems deserting Paris, which they have hitherto patronised almost exclusively, and domesticating themselves in the provinces, in order that they may imbue themselves with local influences, become "racy of the soil," and give a clearer voice to the Muses of Provence, Brittany, or the Vendôme. "*Vaste décentralisation littéraire!*" exclaims the rapt critic. And no one, I am sure, will grudge these gentlemen their rural dwellings and their varied experiences. So far as the decentralisation is local, no doubt it has its uses; so far as it is literary, it would seem to involve a corresponding decentralisation of the subject-matter of poetry. A sort of ordnance survey of the entire country is to be prepared, each poet is to describe or embody in graceful verse the spirit of his own particular province, and it is a pity that there is no French poet laureate to collate and publish the whole as a poetical blue-book. And yet whether the work of any one of these exiled writers shall contain the essentials of poetry or not will surely

depend not on what he finds in his adopted province, but on what he takes there with him. Diversity of point of view is easily obtained, it is harder to guarantee unity of inspiration. There is one Koran, but there may be many accurate washing-bills.

This movement among the writers of France may be taken then, not unfairly, as significant of a tendency, however ill-defined and wavering, to attempt to coerce French verse to follow in the wake of French novel-writing—to cultivate microscopic accuracy of description, and increasing range of subject, making nature's silences vocal, and illuminating her recesses with the electric light; in a word, to become naturalistic, or better, photographic. That the attempt must prove vain it would be a waste of time to demonstrate. The formal restraint imposed by verse on a minute and realistic account of things as they are would soon prove intolerable, the shackles would be broken and thrown away, and with them would go the one supposititious claim that such writings ever had to be called poetry.

But I prefer to quote the opinion of a writer who is himself a follower of the French Naturalistic School of novel-writers, and who at one time entertained the ambition of introducing the method into English verse. "The possibility of a Naturalistic Poetry," he says, "seemed to me not a little doubtful. I had clearly understood that the lyrical quality was to be for ever banished, . . . and the preservation of all the essentials of poetry by the simple enumera-

tion of the utensils to be found in a back-kitchen, did, I could not help thinking, sound not unlike rigmarole."

The soul of Poetry then, in search of which we have adventured, is not to be found in the representation through the medium of language of mere matter of fact. Matter of fact is not poetry, and all the borrowed finery it may be tricked in will only make it less valuable as matter of fact, while leaving it as unpoetic as ever.

Just as little does the essence of Poetry consist in what is properly called *feigning*. It is the conviction that Poetry is a kind of elegant make-believe, a falsifying of hard fact for the better indulgence of hope, a roseate vision purchased at the expense of candour and perspicacity—it is this view of the nature of Poetry which is perhaps responsible for the discredit under which it certainly lies with the majority of respectable persons. Poetry is a passion with the young, it is asserted, because youth is inexperienced; as life advances, the importunate onslaughts of reality assail on all sides the perishable vision, builded in quiet and idleness, and men grasp at the world when they find that the strength of the sun is melting the clouds whereon they had hoped to find a foothold.

There is no more fearful mistake in the world than this. The sanguine temper of youth may indeed tend to foster poetic susceptibility,

Yet for one sweet-strung soul the wires prolong
Even through all change the indomitable song.

If—to employ the figure of a poet whose indomitable song was prolonged until a month or two ago—if the bush that was once palpably fire-clothed is now outlined bare and hard against the sky, the flame has done its work in drawing attention to the voice that speaks, and in the voice lies its true import. It is sentimentalism, not poetry, that is evaporated by the fervours of mid-life—and sentimentalism is malarious.

There is one sense, indeed, in which the growing cares and claims of life do tend to impair the appreciation of poetry. “It is an awful truth,” Wordsworth writes to Lady Beaumont (and the words can hardly be over-quoted), “that there neither is nor can be any genuine enjoyment of poetry among nineteen out of twenty of those persons who live, or wish to live, in the broad light of the world,—among those who either are, or are striving to make themselves, people of consideration in society. This is a truth, and an awful one; because to be incapable of a feeling of poetry, in my sense of the word, is to be without love of human nature, and without reverence for God.”

But though the feeling for Poetry is a sense that may be lost, as hearing or sight may be lost, that does not justify us in defining it as proper especially to youth, and of a piece with youthful illusions. The thing has only to be stated to be known for stark nonsense. Is it credible that the great poets are weaker than the average of mankind,—more likely to be deceived, and to see life under false or exaggerated aspects? A great poet has just this advantage over

most of us, that he sees more of what is, and less,—a great deal less,—of what is not. It is not the great poets who have lent themselves to the self-delusion of weak-eyed visionaries. For the romance that blinds us to our surroundings we must go to the *Family Herald* and *Bow Bells*, not to Shakspeare and Milton. The Romanticism that goes through life performing the futile process fondly called “idealising,”—that is, attributing all predicable perfection to common clay, and founding all imaginable hopes on common sand,—the metrical raptures of the happy lover, who sees in a rain-storm (if ever lover did) the tears that are wept by a heaven jealous of the beauty of his mistress,—the dramatic ambition that vociferates destruction against the pantheon;—all these are conceits, bagatelles, counters with which it is possible to play a very interesting and complicated game, but not negotiable for bread.

On the other hand, take the great poets. Is their “feigning” a process of falsifying life and the world by attributing to the partial and transitory absolute and eternal perfection?

Browning is not deceived:—

All partial beauty was a pledge
 Of beauty in its plenitude,
 But since the pledge sufficed thy mood,
 Retain it; plenitude be theirs
 Who looked above.

Wordsworth is not deceived. After suffering deep

depression from the horrors and crimes which destroyed the high hopes he had formed for man from the French Revolution, he detached his idealism from the institutions that had nearly dragged it down with them in their fall, and

Evidence,
Safer of universal application, such
As could not be impeached, was sought elsewhere.

so that when the flags that were nailed to the mast went by the board, his still waved above, as broad as the heavens.

Shelley is not deceived. As a boy, it is true, he "sought for ghosts," he acted the part of his own Alastor, endeavouring to find a single image that should embody all he had dreamed. But in his maturer thought, and after the teaching of disaster, he gives utterance to the poetic faith in the "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" :—

Man were immortal and omnipotent,
Did'st thou, unknown and awful as thou art,
Keep with thy glorious train firm state within his heart.

Last of all, Shakspeare is not deceived, although he delighted in the game of euphuism, and could play it with the best. In the very remarkable sonnet beginning,—

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun,

he ridicules the hyperbole of the poets of the day, and

disclaims all such illusions for himself. Thus, although the juvenile Muse of a great poet is not always free from conceits and extravagant play of fancy, or euphuism; nor even from false heroics, and extravagant outbursts of emotion, or sentimentalism; yet it will be found, I think, that these errors are fostered mainly by ephemeral writers, and that no real countenance is lent by poets who are for all time, to a feigning which shall falsify our life for us, and make a fool's paradise out of a man's world.

And now, it may be objected, I have reached a pass where I can go neither back nor forward. The soul of Poetry consists not in representing life exactly as it is; neither in representing life as it is not;—is there a third course discoverable? For we have no tools at our disposal but words, expressive of ideas and images drawn from life, and with these, if at all, poetry must be made.

If I were laying a foundation, from the beginning, for a theory of poetry, I should be compelled to point out here that it is impossible ever to tell the truth, fully, literally, and accurately, by means of words. Look up “*Rose*” in a botanical dictionary, or try to describe your dearest friend for the purposes of the police, and you will be of my opinion. The complexity of things baffles us, and we are forced to go about with it. Now every word in a language has, over and above its primary *indicative* function, a host of powers in its train. There is its sound or melody, which we have agreed to neglect, but which cannot be neglected,

and there is its *suggestive* force, whereby it enlists in its service, by association of sound or sense, hundreds of followers of all ranks, a cloudy companionship, including not seldom some spectral crowned figures. It is this suggestive function of words that gives them most of their value; we can express far more with these instruments of our art than ever their makers dreamed of; we can create, by means of metaphor, a structure of ideas that is neither a true nor a false representation of anything in life, but transcends life; we can wrest words from their original humble uses, and storm Heaven, armed with our scythes and pruning-hooks. The words *East*, *West*, *South*, and *North*, denote the four cardinal points of the compass, a mere pair of cross lines, but it would take weeks to catalogue all the ideas they connote or suggest to the unchained imagination of the poet. "How could these money-bags," asks Keats, speaking of the rich Florentine brothers,

"How could these money-bags look East and West?"

To look East and West meant a great deal to Keats. You may box the compass for a century, that will not help you; it is only when you have freed your mind from all navigatorial pre-occupation that the curtains of the dawn and the twilight shall be lifted for you, and you will realise the fabulous magnificence of the imaginative structure that may be reared on a foundation of common words. And so, over against Science, the truth that man discovers and laboriously extracts

at infinite cost from the mine, stands Poetry, the truth that he creates, by the touch of the philosopher's stone.

But it is perhaps better to proceed by way of concrete example. Take the clever lines of Dryden written to welcome the exiled Charles II back to England :

And welcome now, great Monarch, to your own !
Behold the approaching cliffs of Albion.
It is no longer motion cheats your view ;
As you meet it the land approacheth you.
The land returns, and in the white it wears
The marks of penitence and sorrow bears.

That is a graceful conceit, but could the loyallest of Cavaliers be moved by it further than to smile with pleasure at the skilful juggling? Now take an instance of the employment of the same rhetorical figure by a greater poet :

Before him went the pestilence, the waters saw thee, O God, and were afraid, the mountains saw thee, and they trembled: the overflowing of the waters passed by,—the deep uttered his voice and lifted up his hands on high.

Compared with poetry of that stamp, it is impossible not to feel that the passage first quoted is little better than a pun. But what is the reason of the difference,—a difference which may well compel us to say that, while neither passage is true in any literal sense, the last does, and the first does not, contain the soul of Poetry? Is it the immense difference in

majesty between the two pictures,—the one of the ocean imploring aid of the Omnipotent, the other of the Dover cliffs, dressed in white for the occasion, setting to partners with a Stuart monarch in a ferry-boat? Is it that the Hebrew poet is expressing the dominant idea of his whole life, while the court poet has hardly had time to let his hair grow since he was lamenting the irreparable loss sustained by England in the death of the Protector? Is the one passage in good, and the other in bad, taste? Or what is the explanation?

No doubt an answer might be given involving all these considerations, by adducing proofs that the first quotation employs figures which would not naturally arise in the mind of a person welcoming King Charles except by dint of much brain-cudgelling, while the second is the spontaneous language of emotion:—I prefer to be briefer and bolder than this, and to say that the last passage is poetically true, the first poetically false. It is not true that the cliffs of England are or ever were white in sorrow for King Charles, any more than it is true that the sun rises because it is the anniversary of John Smith, senior's, birthday;—although I do not say that John Smith, junior, might not appropriately enough advance the statement in a filial ode.

The conclusion is inevitable, I think, that there is a truth of Poetry utterly distinct from truth of fact. And as the recognition of some such beacon of truth is necessary for avoiding the shifting sand-banks of

taste, it may be well to sketch concisely the characteristics of ultimate poetic truth.

Poetic truth is the truth that holds for me when I consider the world purely as my idea. It is truth from which there is no possible appeal to fact, which is careless of what answer may be given to the questions, "Did such and such events ever happen?" "Will such and such chances ever come about?" There is no external meting-rod by which it may be measured, it is vindicated by nothing but the inherent quality and force of its own conceptions. To ask whether it is the same for all persons is imperfectly to apprehend its definition,—it is prior to all persons; children are poets long before they dream of correcting their conceptions by comparing them with those of others. It contains nothing trivial, nothing irrelevant. How many puny truths are daily thrust home upon us at the point of the bayonet of fact! How many events lose all their inherent dignity and interest from the paltry reticulations of the circumstances in which they are enmeshed! Poetry sets aside these, and frees the universal.

For further, while independent of fact, Poetry is secured from being merely falsehood by the very nature of its conceptions. The truths of Poetry are conceived "*sub specie eternitatis*,"—they deal not with the accidental and phenomenal, but with the necessary and absolute, and so can never be disproved by any possible advance in human knowledge. Poetry suspects any truth which can ever be brought to the bar

of experience, and frankly prefers the impossible to what has been inductively established, or is liable to be inductively arraigned. Let an event once degrade itself by happening, and oblivion must sooner or later be its lot; but, as the German poet says:—

What has never anywhere come to pass, that alone never grows old.

On that alone is laid the ultimate and secure foundation of Poetry. The poetic domain can never be encroached on by the advance of the geographers, for it has its seat in

Some wild weird clime, that lieth sublime
Out of Space, out of Time.

And this is where Poetry differs finally and irreconcilably from the sentimentalism that apes the poetic inspiration. Poetry seeks the pure idea; sentimentalism busies itself about the individual, and is absorbed in the contemplation of petty personal vicissitudes—the sentimentalist is interested in persons and things, not at all as symbols, but as the material that supplies him with his pleasures and pains. His hyperbole is vanity, his metaphor decorative frilling. His thought is tied to the particular circumstances, never drawn onwards to the pure idea. He esteems Life, Youth, Hope, and Fame as conditions of happiness and love, but does not know, as the poet does, that

Love's throne is not with these, but far above
All passionate wind of welcome and farewell
He sits in breathless bowers they dream not of;

and accordingly the utterances of the sentimentalist, when they cease to be fact, become obvious falsehood, for he lives in the world of fact.

But, if this be the nature of poetic truth, it is hard to distinguish Poetry, it may be urged, from Religion and Philosophy. It is not always easy. Yet the substance of Poetry differs from Religion in this at least, that whereas most religious systems take their stand upon the demonstration of certain historic facts in the past, and devote themselves with some assiduity to establishing probabilities with regard to the future, for Poetry the past and future tenses do not exist. But how does Poetry differ from Philosophy or Metaphysic? Philosophy too devotes itself to the contemplation and elucidation of the pure idea, and to the exposition of truths amenable to no experience. If we are compelled to admit that these two, Poetry and Philosophy, are identical, is not all the argument invalidated from the beginning by a *reductio ad absurdum*? For all true Poetry, as a great poet has said, must be "simple, sensuous, and passionate." And although the same poet has also elsewhere given voice to the opinion that "divine Philosophy" is "not harsh and crabbed as dull fools suppose, but musical as is Apollo's lute," he remains alone in that opinion. Few persons could be induced to admit that Philosophy is either simple, sensuous, or passionate—it passes rather for a thing complex, intellectual, and cold.

It must be remembered that we have been dealing

only with the ultimate soul or essence of Poetry, and for that purpose have reft it violently from its embodiment. The differences between Philosophy and Poetry can be accounted for only by retracing our steps, and taking up for a moment the discarded considerations of method. It will then be seen that although Poetry and Metaphysic reach the same goal, they reach it by vastly different routes, although both deal with the pure idea, they deal with it in radically different ways.

Metaphysic possesses itself of a number of abstract conceptions, and affixing names to them, treats the names as counters, exactly denoting the conceptions to which they are attached. Poetry, on the other hand, is quite intolerant of the abstract, it deals in the concrete, and the better the poet the more infallibly will any abstract term which falls into his hands clothe itself in concrete images and expressions. Does any abstraction claim the right of entrance into the verse of Homer, Dante, Milton, or Spenser? It must first be personified or localised, furnished with concrete imaginative vesture; it must make that appeal to the senses which is forbidden in Metaphysic; before the poet can recognise it the forlorn spirit must furnish itself with a body, and do its work incarnate. Yet by this process its relations with the universal are not sacrificed, only altered. In the manner I have already noticed any concrete term commands an innumerable train of dim suggestion, just as an unfinished musical phrase suggests many

possible completions. A concrete term may thus be said to have many meanings, while an abstract term has but one. And considered as a vehicle for truth, which is complex, the concrete term is thus often preferable. At the root of the whole art of Poetry lies the fact that a metaphor often means more, and approximates nearer to the truth it represents, than any possible statement couched in abstract terms. There would be no purpose in metaphor if it only illustrated more faintly what had already been clearly laid down. But it adds richness of colour and depth of tone, and brings a whole retinue of luminous association, leading the eye on to the outer edge and verge of human thought. How beggarly does the statement of a philosopher appear beside the same statement transmuted and vivified by a poet! The philosopher will descant on the inalterable sequence of cause and effect, and the futility of regret,—but put the idea into the hands of a poet, and at once it lives :—

The moving finger writes, and having writ,
Moves on, nor all your piety and wit
Can lure it back to cancel half a line,
Nor all your tears wash out a word of it.

Poetry, then, differs from Philosophy, not in the ultimate truths with which they deal, but in the manner in which those truths are handled ; for whereas Philosophy works with a technical and specialised equipment directly on its subject-matter, Poetry approaches it by suggestion and indirection. But both deal with truths which are not, and never can be, facts.

This general conclusion makes clear, I think, several of the paradoxes of Poetry. I choose two among them for mention.

The first is, that for the poet the distinction between the natural and the supernatural does not exist, for it is purely a question of fact. To the vision of the poet the boundary line is so indistinct as often to become invisible. "There is but one Temple in the World," says Novalis, "and that is the body of Man. We touch Heaven when we lay our hand on a human body."

The second is that the poetry of desire and aspiration is greater and finer than the poetry of enjoyment and achievement. For what we are able to come up with, to bring to a realisation in fact, at once loses its consummate poetical value. I do not deny the name of poetry to that poem of Burns (the poet who has perhaps given the most lasting lyrical expression to the spirit of enjoyment) which celebrates the praises of Scotch Drink, although even here I might point out that the treatment he gives the subject is marked by an almost religious devoutness and aspiration. But in marking the essentials of the poetic method, I should prefer, as an illustration, that description by a poet whom I have already quoted more than once, of ideal Beauty, which, as has been sufficiently indicated, is one with ideal Truth. Now a feeble writer, in attempting to describe ideal Beauty, would no doubt ransack his store for ecstatic descriptive epithets and phrases, he would enumerate the noteworthy points

for particular inspection, and supply a very complete inventory, "as, item, two lips indifferent red; item, two grey eyes, with lids to them; item, one neck, one chin, and so forth." Rossetti proceeds by the much more powerful method of suggestion; he describes nothing but the life-long effect of one glimpse of the vision:—

This is that Lady Beauty, in whose praise
Thy voice and hand shake still, long known to thee
By flying hair and fluttering hem, the beat
Following her daily of thy heart and feet
How passionately and irretrievably,
In what fond flight, how many ways and days.

The passionate pursuit of the study of Poetry is sometimes so rewarded.

And now let me deal with one objection, and only one, to this view of Poetry. I select it because it is of all the most commonly, although by no means the most appositely, offered. "If Poetry," it is said, "deals with conceptions that have no kinship with fact, and takes its votary into a region apart from things as they are, it is mere idle dreaming. It may not involve falsehood, so long as it is carefully dissociated in thought from things as they are, but if not false, at least it is futile. Of what use is Poetry?"

The question must be answered fairly:—Poetry is of no use. It "bakes no bread," it is doubtful whether it has added in any calculable way to the accumulated capital of human comfort. "Canst thou draw out Leviathan with an hook? Will he

“speak soft words unto thee? Wilt thou take him for a servant for ever?” Poetry at least will not pull patiently in the yoke, and has probably upset quite as many chariots as it has furthered on their way, while those who have tried to ride it have not infrequently played the part of Mazeppa. And, indeed, it is difficult to see how Poetry could ever come to be of use, for other things are of use very largely as they tend towards Poetry. But to anyone who further argues that in that case the study of Poetry is unpractical, I reply that there is no study in the world that deserves to be called practical by the side of it. A study of Poetry is a study of the main-spring of human affairs, of the motive-power of all great and important human actions. There are a very large number of human actions, highly amenable to statistic, which are the outcome of the fact that every one of us seeks his own material well-being. These are undistinguished, normal, and sheep-like, and may be counted by the gross. But among these there intrudes itself now and again a deed at which the statistician bites his pen, and which plays havoc with the symmetry of the rest,—a deed inspired by an idea. If all our doings were determined by a calculation of the consequent balance of pleasure and pain, Poetry might be neglected without compunction. But are all our doings so determined? Everyone must have noticed, at some time or other, that curious tendency in the human mind which causes persons who gaze too long from the brink of a precipice to feel

an almost irresistible impulse to fling themselves over, which makes it dangerous for any one who is not entirely cool-headed to stand too near the track of an advancing railway train. Now this impulse arises from no desire for self-destruction, from no reasoned estimate of comparative loss or gain, it is due simply to the fact that any clearly conceived set of images, especially if accompanied by strong emotion, whether of liking or fear, has a tendency to carry itself out in action;—it is the elementary form of the attraction of the Poetic idea. The number of such ideas, ideas that fascinate men and make them bondslaves to the imperious compulsion of the thoughts to which they have given entertainment, is greater than we generally admit, and the entertainers of these ideas are so far poets.

The scholar is a poet when he consumes the midnight oil in the acquisition of useless knowledge.

The entomologist is a poet when he submits to the life of a dog in the thickets of Central Africa, in pursuit of the vagrant unnecessary beetle.

The miser is a poet when, careless of his own enjoyment, and forgetful of his originally reasonable aims, he follows the will-o'-the-wisp of wealth.

The duellist is a poet when, to vindicate his own notion of honour, he runs a risk for which there is no compensating advantage. Let anyone who prides himself on his common sense be asked what he thinks of duelling, and he will probably reply much in the sense of Falstaff, who debates the subject of military

glory with himself in a passage that gives an immortal picture, graven in brass, of the prose view of life.

Honour pricks me on. Yea, but how if honour prick me off when I come on? how then? Can honour set to a leg? No. Or an arm? No. Or take away the grief of a wound? No. Honour hath no skill in surgery, then? No. What is honour? A word. What is in that word honour? Air. A trim reckoning!—Who hath it? He that died o' Wednesday. Doth he feel it? No. Doth he hear it? No. Is it insensible, then? Yea, to the dead. But will it not live with the living? No. Why? Detraction will not suffer it:—therefore I'll none of it: Honour is a mere scutcheon, and so ends my catechism.

There is no flaw at all in this argument, it is the epitome of common sense. And yet most of us have a lurking preference for the soldier who “seeks the bubble reputation, even in the cannon's mouth.”

And besides learning wealth and honour, there are many others; in fact, all the greatest and most magnetic conceptions that sway men are poetic conceptions, of incalculable origin and effect. Such actions and such conceptions are exceptional, no doubt; so is the lightning exceptional. Out of the long dark thunder-cloud, familiar to the economist, composed of the organised satisfaction of average desires, there flashes a single sword-like idea, and human institutions crumble before it. It is only when men are moved by such conceptions that they are to be feared, or indeed to be reckoned with at all, the woolly-pated graminiverous wage-earner may easily be fobbed off with a bribe. But, as sound politicians know, the man with an idea is more trouble than he is worth.

And the pursuit of any such idea, whether it be Wealth or Knowledge, Virtue or Liberty, Charity or Revenge, raises life at once from littleness into an ampler ether by conferring on it an eternal interest. It has often been said that Life is the stuff out of which Poetry is made, but the converse is true too, Poetry is the stuff out of which Life is made—and any one who omits this main ingredient need not be at all surprised if he find his own particular concoction tasteless. If the world were all we wished it, no doubt we might be content to catalogue it, lest something should be lost; as it is, some of us get a little tired of this hand-to-mouth business; our interest flags; the pin-makers take themselves too seriously. Why should our squirrel-cage be smaller than the world? For such surely there is no fairer avocation and recreation than that voyage of discovery described by the Poet Laureate in verses with which I will conclude:—

We left behind the painted buoy,
 That tosses at the harbour mouth,
 And madly danced our hearts with joy
 As fast we fled to the South;
 How fresh was every sight or sound
 On open main, or winding shore!
 We knew the merry world was round
 And we might sail for evermore.

* * * *

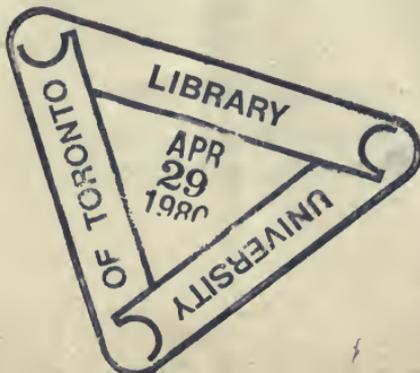
For one fair Vision ever fled
 Down the waste waters day and night,
 And still we followed where she led

In hope to gain upon her flight ;
 Her face was evermore unseen
 And fixed upon the far sea line ;
 And each man murmured, "O, my queen,
 I follow till I make thee mine !"

And now we lost her, now she gleamed
 Like Fancy made of golden air,
 Now nearer to the prow she seemed,
 Like Virtue firm, like Knowledge fair,
 Now high on waves that idly burst
 Like Heavenly Hope she crowned the sea,
 And now, the bloodless point reversed,
 She bore the blade of Liberty.

Does the chill of age and failure damp the ardo
 of such a quest ?

Again to colder climes we came,
 For still we followed where she led :
 Now mate is blind, and captain lame,
 And half the crew are sick or dead,
 But blind or lame, or sick or sound,
 We follow that which flies before :
 We know the merry world is round,
 And we may sail for evermore.



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