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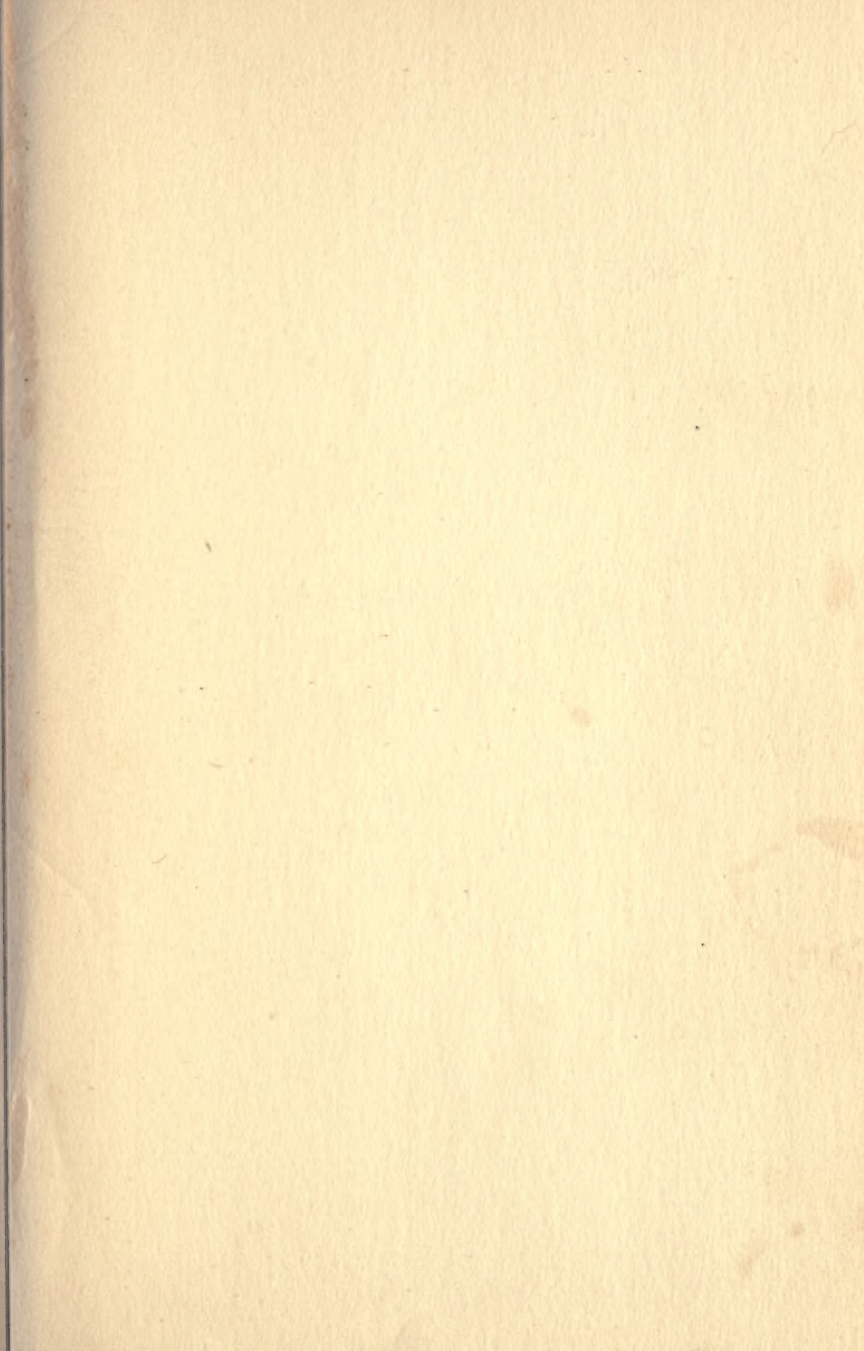
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THE POET'S POET





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# THE POET'S POET

ESSAYS ON THE CHARACTER AND MISSION OF  
THE POET AS INTERPRETED IN ENGLISH VERSE  
OF THE LAST ONE HUNDRED AND FIFTY YEARS

BY

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To  
HARTLEY AND NELLY ALEXANDER



## PREFACE

Utterances of poets regarding their character and mission have perhaps received less attention than they deserve. The tacit assumption of the majority of critics seems to be that the poet, like the criminal, is the last man who should pass judgment upon his own case. Yet it is by no means certain that this view is correct. Introspective analysis on the part of the poet might reasonably be expected to be as productive of æsthetic revelation as the more objective criticism of the mere observer of literary phenomena. Moreover, aside from its intrinsic merits, the poet's self-exposition must have interest for all students of Platonic philosophy, inasmuch as Plato's famous challenge was directed only incidentally to critics of poetry; primarily it was to Poetry herself, whom he urged to make just such lyrical defense as we are to consider.

The method here employed is not to present exhaustively the substance of individual poems treating of poets. Analysis of Wordsworth's *Prelude*,



Browning's *Sordello*, and the like, could scarcely give more than a re-presentation of what is already available to the reader in notes and essays on those poems. The purpose here is rather to pass in review the main body of such verse written in the last one hundred and fifty years. We are concerned, to be sure, with pointing out idiosyncratic conceptions of individual writers, and with tracing the vogue of passing theories. The chief interest, however, should lie in the discovery of an essential unity in many poets' views on their own character and mission.

It is true that there is scarcely an idea relative to the poet which is not somewhere contradicted in the verse of this period, and the attempt has been made to be wholly impartial in presenting all sides of each question. Indeed, the subject may seem to be one in which dualism is inescapable. The poet is, in one sense, a hybrid creature; he is the lover of the sensual and of the spiritual, for he is the revealer of the spiritual in the sensual. Consequently it is not strange that practically every utterance which we may consider,—even such as deal with the most superficial aspects of the poet, as his physical beauty or his health,—falls naturally into one of two divisions, accordingly as the poet feels the sensual or the spiritual aspect of his nature to be the more im-

portant. Yet the fact remains that the quest of unity has been the most interesting feature of this investigation. The man in whose nature the poet's two apparently contradictory desires shall wholly harmonize is the ideal whom practically all modern English poets are attempting to present.

Minor poets have been considered, perhaps to an unwarranted degree. In the Victorian period, for instance, there may seem something grotesque in placing Tupper's judgments on verse beside Browning's. Yet, since it is true that so slight a poet as William Lisle Bowles influenced Coleridge, and that T. E. Chivers probably influenced Poe, it seems that in a study of this sort minor writers have a place. In addition, where the views of one minor verse-writer might be negligible, the views of a large group are frequently highly significant, not only as testifying to the vogue of ephemeral ideas, but as demonstrating that great and small in the poetic world have the same general attitude toward their gift. It is perhaps true that minor poets have been more loquacious on the subject of their nature than have greater ones, but some attempt is here made to hold them within bounds, so that they may not drown out the more meaningful utterances of the master singers.

The last one hundred and fifty years have been chosen for discussion, since the beginning of the romantic movement marked the rise of a peculiarly self-conscious attitude in the poet, and brought his personality into new prominence. Contemporary verse seems to fall within the scope of these studies, inasmuch as the "renaissance of poetry" (as enthusiasts like to term the new stirring of interest in verse) is revealing young poets of the present day even more frank in self-revelment than were poets of twenty years ago.

The excursion through modern English poetry involved in these studies has been a pleasant one. The value and interest of such an investigation was first pointed out to me by Professor Louise Pound of the University of Nebraska. It is with sincere appreciation that I here express my indebtedness to her, both for the initial suggestion, and for the invaluable advice which I have received from her during my procedure. I owe much gratitude also to President William Allan Neilson of Smith College, who was formerly my teacher in Radcliffe College, and to Professor Hartley Burr Alexander, of the department of Philosophy at the University of Nebraska, who has given me unstinted help and generous encouragement.

ELIZABETH ATKINS.



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THE POET'S POET





# THE POET'S POET

## I

### *THE EGOCENTRIC CIRCLE*

**M**OST of us, mere men that we are, find ourselves caught in some entanglement of our mortal coil even before we have fairly embarked upon the enterprise of thinking our case through. The art of self-reflection which appeals to us as so eminent and so human, is it after all much more than a vaporous vanity? We name its subject "human nature"; we give it a raiment of timeless generalities; but in the end the show of thought discloses little beyond the obstreperous bit of a "me" which has blown all the fume. The "psychologist's fallacy," or again the "egocentric predicament" of the philosopher of the Absolute, these are but tagged examples of a type of futile self-return (we name it "discovery" to save our faces) which comes more or less to men of all kinds when they take honest-eyed measure of the consequences of their own valuations of themselves. We pose for the portrait; we admire the Lion; but we have only to turn our heads to catch-glimpse Punch with thumb to nose. And then, of course, we mock our own

humiliation, which is another kind of vanity; and, having done this penance, pursue again our self-returning fate. The theme is, after all, one we cannot drop; it is the mortal coil.

In the moment of our revulsion from the inevitable return upon itself of the human reason, many of us have clung with the greater desperation to the hope offered by poetry. By the way of intuition poets promise to carry us beyond the boundary of the vicious circle. When the ceaseless round of the real world has come to nauseate us, they assure us that by simply relaxing our hold upon actuality we may escape from the squirrel-cage. By consenting to the prohibition, "Bold lover, never, never canst thou kiss!" we may enter the realm of ideality, where our dizzy brains grow steady, and our pulses are calmed, as we gaze upon the quietude of transcendent beauty.

But what are we to say when, on opening almost any book of comparatively recent verse, we find, not the self-forgetfulness attendant upon an ineffable vision, but advertisement of the author's importance? His argument we find running somewhat as follows: "I am superior to you because I write poetry. What do I write poetry about? Why, about my superiority, of course!" Must we not conclude that the poet, with the rest of us, is speeding around the hippodrome of his own self-centered consciousness?

Indeed the poet's circle is likely to appear to us even more vicious than that of other men. To be sure, we remember Sir Philip Sidney's contention,

supported by his anecdote of the loquacious horseman, that men of all callings are equally disposed to vaunt themselves. If the poet seems especially voluble about his merits, this may be owing to the fact that, words being the tools of his trade, he is more apt than other men in giving expression to his self-importance. But our specific objection to the poet is not met by this explanation. Even the horseman does not expect panegyrics of his profession to take the place of horseshoes. The inventor does not issue an autobiography in lieu of a new invention. The public would seem justified in reminding the poet that, having a reasonable amount of curiosity about human nature, it will eagerly devour the poet's biography, properly labeled, but only after he has forgotten himself long enough to write a poem that will prove his genius, and so lend worth to the perusal of his idiosyncratic records, and his judgments on poetic composition.

The first impulse of our revulsion from the self-infatuated poet is to confute him with the potent name of Aristotle, and show him his doom fore-ordained in the book of poetic Revelations. "The poet should speak as little as possible in his own person," we read, "for it is not this that makes him an imitator."<sup>1</sup> One cannot too much admire Aristotle's canniness in thus nipping the poet's egotism in the bud, for he must have seen clearly that if the poet began to talk in his own person, he would soon lead the conversation around to himself, and that,

<sup>1</sup> *Poetics*, 1460 a.



once launched on that inexhaustible subject, he would never be ready to return to his original theme.

We may regret that we have not Aristotle's sanction for condemning also extra-poetical advertisements of the poet's personality, as a hindrance to our seeing the ideal world through his poetry. In certain moods one feels it a blessing that we possess no romantic traditions of Homer, to get in the way of our passing impartial judgment upon his works. Our intimate knowledge of nineteenth century poets has been of doubtful benefit to us. Wordsworth has shaken into what promises to be his permanent place among the English poets much more expeditiously than has Byron. Is this not because in Wordsworth's case the reader is not conscious of a magnetic personality drawing his judgment away from purely æsthetic standards? Again, consider the case of Keats. For us the facts of his life must color almost every line he wrote. How are we to determine whether his sonnet, *When I Have Fears*, is great poetry or not, so long as it fills our minds insistently with the pity of his love for Fanny Brawne, and his epitaph in the Roman graveyard?

Christopher North has been much upbraided by a hero-worshiping generation, but one may go too far in condemning the Scotch sense in his contention :

Mr. Keats we have often heard spoken of in terms of great kindness, and we have no doubt that his manners and feelings are calculated to make his friends love him. But what has all this to do with our opinion of their poetry? What, in the name of wonder, does it

concern us, whether these men sit among themselves with mild or with sulky faces, eating their mutton steaks, and drinking their porter? <sup>1</sup>

If we are reluctant to sponsor words printed in *Blackwoods*, we may be more at ease in agreeing with the same sentiments as expressed by Keats himself. After a too protracted dinner party with Wordsworth and Hunt, Keats gave vent to his feelings as follows:

Poetry should be great and unobtrusive, a thing that enters into one's soul, and does not startle or amaze it with itself, but with its subject. How beautiful are the retired flowers! How they would lose their beauty were they to throng into the highway crying out, "Admire me, I am a violet! Dote upon me, I am a primrose!" . . . I will cut all this—I will have no more of Wordsworth or Hunt in particular. . . . I don't mean to deny Wordsworth's grandeur and Hunt's merit, but I mean to say that we need not be teased with grandeur and merit when we can have them uncontaminated and unobtrusive.<sup>2</sup>

If acquaintance with a poet prevents his contemporaries from fixing their attention exclusively upon the merits of his verse, in how much better case is posterity, if the poet's personality makes its way into the heart of his poetry? We have Browning's dictum on Shakespeare's sonnets,

With this key

Shakespeare unlocked his heart. Once more  
Did Shakespeare? If so, the less Shakespeare he.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Sidney Colvin, *John Keats*, p. 478.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 253.

<sup>3</sup> *House*.

Did Browning mean that Shakespeare was less the poet, as well as less the dramatist, if he revealed himself to us in his poetry? And is this our contention?

It seems a reasonable contention, at least, the more so since poets are practically unanimous in describing inspiration as lifting them out of themselves, into self-forgetful ecstasy. Even that arch-egoist, Byron, concedes this point. "To withdraw myself from myself—oh, that accursed selfishness," he writes, "has ever been my entire, my sincere motive in scribbling at all."<sup>1</sup> Surely we may complain that it is rather hard on us if the poet can escape from himself only by throwing himself at the reader's head.

It would seem natural to conclude from the selflessness of inspiration that the more frequently inspired the poet is, the less will he himself be an interesting subject for verse. Again we must quote Keats to confute his more self-centered brothers. "A poet," Keats says, "is the most unpoetical of anything in existence, because he has no identity; he is continually in for, and filling, some other body. The sun, the moon, the stars, and men and women who are creatures of impulse are poetical and have about them an unchangeable attribute; the poet has none, no identity."<sup>2</sup> The same conviction is differently phrased by Landor. The poet is a luminous body, whose function is to reveal other objects, not

<sup>1</sup> Letters and Journals, ed. Rowland E. Prothero, November 26, 1813.

<sup>2</sup> Letter to Richard Woodhouse, October 27, 1818.

himself, to us. Therefore Landor considers our scanty knowledge of Shakespeare as compared with lesser poets a natural consequence of the self-obliterating splendor of his genius:

In poetry there is but one supreme,  
Though there are many angels round his throne,  
Mighty and beauteous, while his face is hid.<sup>1</sup>

But though an occasional poet lends his voice in support of our censure, the average poet would brush aside our complaints with impatience. What right have we to accuse him of swerving from the subject matter proper to poetry, while we appear to have no clear idea as to what the legitimate subject matter is? Precisely what are we looking for, that we are led to complain that the massive outlines of the poet's figure obscure our view?

Now just here we who assail the poet are likely to turn our guns upon one another, for we are brought up against the stone wall of age-old dispute over the function of the poet. He should hold up his magic mirror to the physical world, some of us declare, and set the charm of immortality upon the life about us. Far from it, others retort. The poet should redeem us from the flesh, and show us the ideal forms of things, which bear, it may be, very slight resemblance to their imitations in this world.

Now while we are sadly meditating our inability to batter our way through this obstacle to perfect clarity, the poets championing the opposing views,

<sup>1</sup> *On Shakespeare.*



like Plato's sophistic brothers, Euthydemus and Dionysodorus, proceed to knock us from one to the other side, justifying their self-centered verse by either theory. Do we maintain that the poet should reflect the life about him? Then, holding the mirror up to life, he will naturally be the central figure in the reflection. Do we maintain that the poet should reveal an ideal world? Then, being alone of all men transported by his vision into this ideal realm, he will have no competitors to dispute his place as chief character.

At first thought it may have appeared obvious to us that the idealistic poet, who claims that his art is a revelation of a transcendental entity, is soaring to celestial realms whither his mundane personality cannot follow. Leaving below him the dusty atmosphere of the actual world, why should he not attain to ideas in their purity, uncolored by his own individuality? But we must in justice remember that the poet cannot, in the same degree as the mathematician, present his ideals nakedly. They are, like the Phidian statues of the Fates, inseparable from their filmy veiling. Beauty seems to be differentiated from the other Platonic ideas by precisely this attribute, that it must be embodied. What else is the meaning of the statement in the *Phædrus*, "This is the privilege of beauty, that, being the loveliest (of the ideas) she is also the most palpable to sight?"<sup>1</sup> Now, whatever one's stand on the question of nature versus humanity in art, one must

<sup>1</sup> § 251.

admit that embodying ideals means, in the long run, personifying them. The poet, despising the sordid and unwieldy natures of men, may try, as Wordsworth did, to give us a purer crystallization of his ideas in nature, but it is really his own personality, scattered to the four winds, that he is offering us in the guise of nature, as the habiliments of his thought. Reflection leads us to agree with Coleridge:

In our life alone does nature live,  
Ours is her wedding garment, ours her shroud.<sup>1</sup>

The poet may not always be conscious of this, any more than Keats was; his traits may be so broadcast that he is in the position of the philosopher who, from the remote citadel of his head, disowns his own toes; nevertheless, a sense of tingling oneness with him is the secret of nature's attraction. Walt Whitman, who conceives of the poet's personality as the most pervasive thing in the universe, arrives at his conviction by the same reflection as that of Keats, telling us,

There was a child went forth every day,  
And the first object he looked upon, that object he  
became.

Perhaps Alice Meynell has best expressed the phenomenon, in a sonnet called *The Love of Narcissus*:

Like him who met his own eyes in the river,  
The poet trembles at his own long gaze

<sup>1</sup> *Ode to Dejection.*

That meets him through the changing nights and days  
From out great Nature; all her waters quiver  
With his fair image facing him forever:  
The music that he listens to betrays  
His own heart to his ears: by trackless ways  
His wild thoughts tend to him in long endeavor.  
His dreams are far among the silent hills;  
His vague voice calls him from the darkened plain;  
With winds at night vague recognition thrills  
His lonely heart with piercing love and pain;  
He knows again his mirth in mountain rills,  
His weary tears that touch him in the rain.

Possibly we may concede that his fusion with all nature renders the poet's personality so diaphanous that his presence is unobtrusive in poetry of ideas, but we may still object to his thrusting himself into realistic poetry. Shelley's poet-heroes we will tolerate, as translucent mediums of his thought, but we are not inclined to accept Byron's, when we seek a panoramic view of this world. Poetry gains manifold representation of life, we argue, in proportion as the author represses his personal bias, and approximates the objective view that a scientist gives. We cannot but sympathize with Sidney Lanier's complaint against "your cold jellyfish poets that wrinkle themselves about a pebble of a theme and let us see it through their substance, as if that were a great feat." <sup>1</sup>

In answer, champions of the ubiquitous poet in recent realistic verse may point to the *Canterbury Tales*, and show us Chaucer ambling along with the

<sup>1</sup> *Poem Outlines.*

other pilgrims. His presence, they remind us, instead of distorting his picture of fourteenth-century life, lends intimacy to our view of it. We can only feebly retort that, despite his girth, the poet is the least conspicuous figure in that procession, whereas a modern poet would shoulder himself ahead of the knight, steal the hearts of all the ladies, from Madame Eglantine to the Wife of Bath, and change the destinies of each of his rivals ere Canterbury was reached.

We return to our strongest argument for the invisible poet. What of Shakespeare? we reiterate. Well, the poets might remind us that criticism of late years has been laying more and more stress upon the personality of Shakespeare, in the spirit of Hartley Coleridge's lines,

Great poet, 'twas thy art  
To know thyself, and in thyself to be  
Whate'er love, hate, ambition, destiny,  
Or the firm, fatal purpose of the heart  
Can make of man.<sup>1</sup>

If this trend of criticism is in the right direction, then the apparent objectivity of the poet must be pure camouflage, and it is his own personality that he is giving us all the time, in the guise of one character and another. In this case, not his frank confession of his presence in his poetry, but his self-concealment, falsifies his representation of life. Since we have quoted Browning's apparent criticism

<sup>1</sup> *Shakespeare.*



of the self-revealing poet, it is only fair to quote some of his unquestionably sincere utterances on the other side of the question. "You speak out, you," he wrote to Elizabeth Barrett;<sup>1</sup> "I only make men and women speak—give you truth broken into prismatic hues, and fear the pure white light." Again he wrote, "I never have begun, even, what I hope I was born to begin and end,—'R.B.', a poem."<sup>2</sup> And Mrs. Browning, usually a better spokesman for the typical English poet than is Browning himself, likewise conceives it the artist's duty to show us his own nature, to be "greatly *himself always*, which is the hardest thing for a man to be, perhaps."<sup>3</sup>

"Art," says Aristotle, "is an imitation of life." "*L'art, mes enfants*," says the modern poet, speaking through the lips of Verlaine, "*c'est d'être absolument soi-même*." Of course if one concedes that the poet is the only thing in life worth bothering about, the two statements become practically identical. It may be true that the poet's universal sympathies make him the most complex type that civilization has produced, and consequently the most economical figure to present as a sample of humanity. But Taine has offered us a simpler way of harmonizing the two statements, not by juggling with Aristotle's word "life," but with the word "imitation." "Art," says Taine, "is nature seen through a temperament."

Now it may be that to Aristotle imitation, *Mime-*

<sup>1</sup> January 13, 1845.

<sup>2</sup> Letter to Elizabeth Barrett, February 3, 1845.

<sup>3</sup> Letter to Robert Browning, September 9, 1845.

*seis*, did mean "seing through a temperament." But certainly, had he used that phrase, he would have laid the stress on "seeing," rather than on "temperament." Aristotle would judge a man to have poetic temperament if his mind were like a telescope, sharpening the essential outlines of things. Modern poets, on the other hand, are inclined to grant that a person has poetic temperament only if his mind resembles a jeweled window, transforming all that is seen through it, if by any chance something *is* seen through it.

If the modern poet sees the world colored red or green or violet by his personality, it is well for the interests of truth, we must admit, that he make it clear to us that his nature is the transforming medium, but how comes it that he fixes his attention so exclusively upon the colors of things, for which his own nature is responsible, and ignores the forms of things, which are not affected by him? How comes it that the colored lights thrown on nature by the stained windows of his soul are so important to him that he feels justified in painting for us, not nature, but stained-glass windows?

In part this is, as has often been said, a result of the individualizing trend of modern art. The broad general outlines of things have been "done" by earlier artists, and there is no chance for later artists to vary them, but the play of light and shade offers infinite possibilities of variation. If one poet shows us the world highly colored by his personality, it is inevitable that his followers should

have their attention caught by the different coloring which their own natures throw upon it. The more acute their sense of observation, the more they will be interested in the phenomenon. "Of course you are self-conscious," Elizabeth Barrett wrote to Robert Browning. "How could you be a poet otherwise?"<sup>1</sup>

This modern individualizing trend appears equally in all the arts, of course. Yet the poet's self-consciousness appears in his work more plainly than does that of painters and sculptors and musicians. One wonders if this may not be a consequence of the peculiar nature of his inspiration. While all art is doubtless essentially alike in mode of creation, it may not be fanciful to conceive that the poet's inspiration is surrounded by deeper mystery than that of other geniuses, and that this accounts for the greater prominence of conscious self-analysis in his work. That such a difference exists, seems obvious. In spite of the lengths to which program music has been carried, we have, so far as I know, practically no music, outside of opera, that claims to have the musician, or the artist in general, for its theme. So sweeping an assertion cannot be made regarding painting and sculpture, to be sure. Near the beginning of the history of sculpture we are met by the legend of Phidias placing his own image among the gods. At the other extreme, chronologically, we are familiar with Daniel Chester French's group, *Death Staying the Hand of the Sculptor*.

<sup>1</sup> February 27, 1845.

Painters not infrequently portray themselves and their artist friends. Yet it is improbable that the mass of material concerned with the poet's view of the artist can be paralleled. This is due in part, obviously, to the greater plasticity to ideas of his medium, but may it not be due also to the fact that all other arts demand an apprenticeship, during which the technique is mastered in a rational, comprehensible way? Whereas the poet is apt to forget that he has a technique at all, since he shares his tool, language, with men of all callings whatever. He feels himself, accordingly, to be dependent altogether upon a mysterious "visitation" for his inspiration.

At least this mystery surrounding his creations has much to do with removing the artist from the comparative freedom from self-consciousness that we ascribe to the general run of men. In addition it removes him from the comparative humility of other thinkers, who are wont to think of their discoveries as following inevitably upon their data, so that they themselves deserve credit only as they are persistent and painstaking in following the clues. The genesis of Sir Isaac Newton's discovery has been compared to poetical inspiration; yet even in this case the difference is apparent, and Newton did not identify himself with the universe he conceived, as the poet is in the habit of doing.

Not being able to account for his inspirations, the poet seems to be driven inevitably either into excessive humility, since he feels that his words are not his own, or into inordinate pride, since he feels



that he is able to see and express without volition truths that other men cannot glimpse with the utmost effort. He may disclaim all credit for his performance, in the words of a nineteenth-century verse-writer :

This is the end of the book  
 Written by God.  
 I am the earth he took,  
 I am the rod,  
 The iron and wood which he struck  
 With his sounding rod,<sup>1</sup>

a statement that provokes wonder as to God's sensations at having such amateurish works come out under his name. But this sort of humility is really a protean manifestation of egotism, as is clear in the religious states that bear resemblance to the poet's. This the Methodist "experience meeting" abundantly illustrates, where endless loquacity is considered justifiable, because the glory of one's experience is due, not to one's self, but to the Almighty.

The minor American poets in the middle of the last century are often found exhorting one another to humility, quite after the prayer-meeting tradition. Bitter is their denunciation of the poet's arrogance :

A man that's proud—vile groveller in the dust,  
 Dependent on the mercy of his God  
 For every breath.<sup>2</sup>

Again they declare that the poet should be

Self-reading, not self-loving, they are twain,<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> L. E. Mitchell, *Written at the End of a Book*.

<sup>2</sup> B. Saunders, *To Chatterton*.

<sup>3</sup> Henry Timrod, *A Vision of Poesy*.



telling him,

Think not of thine own self,<sup>1</sup>

adding,

Always, O bard, humility is power.<sup>2</sup>

One is reminded of Mrs. Heep's repeated adjuration, "Be 'umble, Ury," and the likeness is not lessened when we find them ingratiatingly sidling themselves into public favor. We hear them timidly inquiring of their inspiration,

Shall not the violet bloom?<sup>3</sup>

and pleading with their critics,

Lightly, kindly deal,

My buds were culled amid bright dews

In morn of earliest youth.<sup>4</sup>

At times they resort to the mixed metaphor to express their innocuous unimportance, declaring,

A feeble hand essays

To swell the tide of song,<sup>5</sup>

and send out their ideas with fond insistence upon their diminutiveness:

Go, little book, and with thy little thoughts,

Win in each heart and memory a home.<sup>6</sup>

But among writers whose names are recognizable without an appeal to a librarian's index, precisely

<sup>1</sup> Richard Gilder, *To the Poet*.

<sup>2</sup> Henry Timrod, *Poet If on a Lasting Fame*.

<sup>3</sup> Mrs. Evans, *Apologetic*.

<sup>4</sup> Lydia M. Reno, *Preface to Early Buds*.

<sup>5</sup> C. H. Faimer, *Invocation*.

<sup>6</sup> C. Augustus Price, *Dedication*.

this attitude is not met with. It would be absurd, of course, to deny that one finds convincingly sincere expressions of modesty among poets of genuine merit. Many of them have taken pains to express themselves in their verse as humbled by the genius above their grasp.<sup>1</sup> But we must agree with their candid avowals that they belong in the second rank. The greatest poets of the century are not in the habit of belittling themselves. It is almost unparalleled to find so sweeping a revolutionist of poetic traditions as Burns saying of himself:

I am nae poet, in a sense,  
 But just a rhymer like, by chance,  
 And hae to learning nae pretense,  
 Yet what the matter?  
 Whene'er my muse does on me glance,  
 I jingle at her.<sup>2</sup>

Most of the self-depreciatory writers, by their very abnegation of the title, exalt the supreme poet. There are few indeed so unconcerned about the dignity of the calling as is Sir Walter Scott, who assigns to the minstrels of his tales a subordinate social position that would make the average bard depicted in literature gnash his teeth for rage, and who casually disposes of the poet's immortality:

Let but the verse befit a hero's fame;  
 Immortal be the verse, forgot the author's name.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See Emerson, *In a Dull Uncertain Brain*; Whittier, *To my Namesake*; Sidney Lanier, *Ark of the Future*; Oliver Wendell Holmes, *The Last Reader*; Bayard Taylor, *L'Envoi*; Robert Louis Stevenson, *To Dr. Hake*; Francis Thompson, *To My Godchild*.

<sup>2</sup> *Epistle to Lapraik*.

<sup>3</sup> *Introduction to Don Roderick*.

Mrs. Browning, to be sure, also tries to prick the bubble of the poet's conceit, assuring him:

Ye are not great because creation drew  
Large revelations round your earliest sense,  
Nor bright because God's glory shines for you.<sup>1</sup>

But in her other poetry, notably in *Aurora Leigh* and *A Vision of Poets*, she amply avows her sense of the preëminence of the singer, as well as of his song.

While it is easy to shake our heads over the self-importance of the nineteenth century, and to contrast it with the unconscious lyrical spontaneity of half-mythical singers in the beginning of the world, it is probable that some degree of egotism is essential to a poet. Remembering his statement that his name was written in water, we are likely to think of Keats as the humblest of geniuses, yet he wrote to a friend, "You will observe at the end of this, 'How a solitary life engenders pride and egotism!' True—I know it does: but this pride and egotism will enable me to write finer things than anything else could, so I will indulge it."<sup>2</sup> No matter how modest one may be about his work after it is completed, a sense of its worth must be with one at the time of composition, else he will not go to the trouble of recording and preserving it.

Unless the writer schools himself to keep this conviction out of his verse, it is likely to flower in

<sup>1</sup> *Mountaineer and Poet.*

<sup>2</sup> Letter to John Taylor, August 23, 1819.

self-confident poetry of the classic type, so characteristic of the Elizabethan age. This has such a long tradition behind it that it seems almost stereotyped, wherever it appears in our period, especially when it is promising immortality to a beloved one. We scarcely heed such verses as the lines by Landor,

Well I remember how you smiled  
 To see me write your name upon  
 The soft sea-sand, "O! what a child,  
 You think you're writing upon stone!"  
 I have since written what no tide  
 Shall ever wash away, what men  
 Unborn shall read, o'er ocean wide,  
 And find Ianthe's name again,

or Francis Thompson's sonnet sequence, *Ad Amicam*, which expresses the author's purpose to

Fling a bold stave to the old bald Time,  
 Telling him that he is too insolent  
 Who thinks to rase thee from my heart or rhyme,  
 Whereof to one because thou life hast given,  
 The other yet shall give a life to thee,  
 Such as to gain, the prowest swords have striven,  
 And compassed weaker immortality,

or Yeats' lines *Of Those Who Have Spoken Evil of His Beloved*, wherein he takes pride in the reflection:

Weigh this song with the great and their pride;  
 I made it out of a mouthful of air;  
 Their children's children shall say they have lied.



But a more vibrantly personal note breaks out from time to time in the most original verse of the last century, as in Wordsworth's testimony,

Yet to me I feel  
That an internal brightness is vouchsafed  
That must not die,<sup>1</sup>

or in Walt Whitman's injunction:

Recorders ages hence,  
Come, I will take you down underneath this impassive  
Exterior. I will tell you what to say of me.<sup>2</sup>

Nowadays, in fact, even minor poets for the most part frankly avow the importance of their works. We find George Edward Woodberry in the clutches of the old-fashioned habit of apology, to be sure,<sup>3</sup>—perhaps this is one reason the radicals are so opposed to him; but in the ranks of the radicals themselves we find very few retaining any doubt of themselves.<sup>4</sup> Self-assertion is especially characteristic of their self-appointed leader, Ezra Pound, in whose case it is undoubtedly an inheritance from Walt Whitman, whom he has lately acknowledged as his "pig-headed father."<sup>5</sup> A typical assertion is that in *Salutation the Second*,

How many will come after me,  
Singing as well as I sing, none better.

<sup>1</sup> *Home at Grasmere.*

<sup>2</sup> See also, *Long Long Hence.*

<sup>3</sup> See *My Country.*

<sup>4</sup> Exceptions are Jessie Rittenhouse, *Patrius*; Lawrence Houseman, *Mendicant Rhymes*; Robert Silliman Hillyer, *Poor Faltering Rhymes.*

<sup>5</sup> *Lustra.*

There is a delicate charm in the self-assurance appearing in some of the present verse, as Sara Teasdale's confidence in her "fragile immortality"<sup>1</sup> or James Stephens' exultation in *A Tune Upon a Reed*,

Not a piper can succeed  
When I lean against a tree,  
Blowing gently on a reed,

and in *The Rivals*, where he boasts over a bird,

I was singing all the time,  
Just as prettily as he,  
About the dew upon the lawn,  
And the wind upon the lea ;  
So I didn't listen to him  
As he sang upon a tree.

If one were concerned only with this "not marble nor the gilded monuments" theme, the sixteenth century would quite eclipse the nineteenth or twentieth. But the egoism of our writers goes much further than this parental satisfaction in their offspring. It seems to have needed the intense individualism of Rousseau's philosophy, and of German idealism, especially the conception of "irony," or the superiority of the soul over its creations, to bring the poet's egoism to flower. Its rankest blossoming, in Walt Whitman, would be hard to imagine in another century. Try to conceive even an Elizabethan beginning a poem after the fashion of *A Song of Myself*:

<sup>1</sup> *Refuge*.

I, now thirty-seven years old, in perfect health, begin,  
Hoping to cease not till death.

Whitman is conscious of—perhaps even exaggerates—the novelty of his task,

Pressing the pulse of the life that has seldom exhibited  
itself (the great pride of man in himself)  
Chanter of personality.

While our poets thus assert, occasionally, that the unblushing nudity of their pride is a conscious departure from convention, they would not have us believe that they are fundamentally different from older singers. One seldom finds an actual poet, of whatever period, depicted in the verse of the last century, whose pride is not insisted upon. The favorite poet-heroes, Æschylus, Michael Angelo, Tasso, Dante, Marlowe, Shakespeare, Milton, Chatterton, Keats, Byron, are all characterized as proud. The last-named has been especially kept in the foreground by following verse-writers, as a precedent for their arrogance. Shelley's characterization of Byron in *Julian and Maddalo*,

The sense that he was greater than his kind  
Had struck, methinks, his eagle spirit blind  
By gazing on its own exceeding light,

has been followed by many expressions of the same thought, at first wholly sympathetic, lately, it must be confessed, somewhat ironical.

Consciousness of partnership with God in com-

position naturally lifts the poet, in his own estimation, at least, to a super-human level. The myth of Apollo disguised as a shepherd strikes him as being a happy expression of his divinity.<sup>1</sup> Thus Emerson calls singers

Blessed gods in servile masks.<sup>2</sup>

The hero of John Davidson's *Ballad in Blank Verse on the Making of a Poet* soars to a monotheistic conception of his powers, asserting

Henceforth I shall be God, for consciousness  
Is God. I suffer. I am God.

Another poet-hero is characterized:

He would reach the source of light,  
And share, enthroned, the Almighty's might.<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, recent poets' hatred of orthodox religion has led them to idealize the Evil One, and regard him as no unworthy rival as regards pride. One of Browning's poets is "prouder than the devil."<sup>4</sup> Chatterton, according to Rossetti, was "kin to Milton through his Satan's pride."<sup>5</sup> Of another poet-hero one of his friends declares,

You would be arrogant, boy, you know, in hell,  
And keep the lowest circle to yourself.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See James Russell Lowell, *The Shepherd of King Admetus*.

<sup>2</sup> Saadi.

<sup>3</sup> Harvey Rice, *The Visionary* (1864). In recent years a few poets have modestly disclaimed equality with God. See William Rose Benét, *Imagination*, and Joyce Kilmer, *Trees*. The kinship of poets and the Almighty is the theme of *The Lonely Poet* (1919), by John Hall Wheelock.

<sup>4</sup> Waring.

<sup>5</sup> Sonnet, *To Chatterton*.

<sup>6</sup> Josephine Preston Peabody, *Marlowe* (1911).



There is bathos, after these claims, in the concern some poets show over the question of priority between themselves and kings. Yet one writer takes the trouble to declare,

Artists truly great  
Are on a par with kings, nor would exchange  
Their fate for that of any potentate.<sup>1</sup>

Stephen Phillips is unique in his disposition to ridicule such an attitude; in his drama on Nero, he causes this poet, self-styled, to say,

Think not, although my aim is art,  
I cannot toy with empire easily.<sup>2</sup>

Not a little American verse is taken up with this question,<sup>3</sup> betraying a disposition on the part of the authors to follow Walt Whitman's example and "take off their hats to nothing known or unknown."<sup>4</sup> In these days, when the idlest man of the street corner would fight at the drop of a hat, if his inferiority to earth's potentates were suggested to him, all the excitement seems absurdly antiquated. There is, however, something approaching modernity in Byron's disposal of the question, as he makes the hero of *The Lament of Tasso* express the pacifist sentiment,

No!—still too proud to be vindictive, I  
Have pardoned princes' insults, and would die.

<sup>1</sup> Longfellow, *Michael Angelo*.

<sup>2</sup> *Nero*.

<sup>3</sup> See Helen Hunt Jackson, *The King's Singer*; E. L. Sprague, *A Shakespeare Ode*; Eugene Field, *Poet and King*.

<sup>4</sup> Walt Whitman, *Collect*.

It is clear that his creations are the origin of the poet's pride, yet, singularly enough, his arrogance sometimes reaches such proportions that he grows ashamed of his art as unworthy of him. Of course this attitude harks back to Shakespeare's sonnets. The humiliation which Shakespeare endured because his calling was despised by his aristocratic young friend is largely the theme of a poem, *Ben Jonson Entertains a Man from Stratford*, by Edwin Arlington Robinson. Such a sense of shame seems to be back of the dilettante artist, wherever he appears in verse. The heroes of Byron's and Praed's poems generally refuse to take their art seriously.<sup>1</sup> A few of Tennyson's characters take the same attitude.<sup>2</sup> Again and again Byron gives indication that his own feeling is that imputed to him by a later poet:

He, from above descending, stooped to touch  
The loftiest thought; and proudly stooped, as though  
It scarce deserved his verse.<sup>3</sup>

After Byron's vogue died out, this mood slept for a time. It is only of late years that it is showing symptoms of waking. It harries Cale Young Rice:

I have felt the ineffable sting  
Of life, though I be art's valet.  
I have painted the cloud and the clod,  
Who should have possessed the earth.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See W. M. Praed, *Lillian*, *How to Rhyme for Love*, *The Talented Man*; Byron, *Childe Harold*, *Don Juan*.

<sup>2</sup> See Eleanor, in *Becket*; and the Count, in *The Falcon*.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Pollock, *The Course of Time*.

<sup>4</sup> *Limitations*.

It depressed Alan Seeger :

I, who, conceived beneath another star,  
Had been a prince and played with life,  
Have been its slave, an outcast exiled far  
From the fair things my faith has merited.<sup>1</sup>

It characteristically stings Ezra Pound to expletive :

Great God! if we be damned to be not men but only  
dreams,  
Then let us be such dreams the world shall tremble at,  
And know we be its rulers, though but dreams.<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps, indeed, judging from contemporary tendencies, this study is made too early to reflect the poet's egoism at its full tide.

The poet's overweening self-esteem may well be the hothouse atmosphere in which alone his genius can thrive, but from another point of view it seems a subtle poison gas, engendering all the ills that differentiate him from other men. Its first effect is likely to be the reflection that his genius is judged by a public that is vastly inferior to him. This galling thought usually drives him into an attitude of indifference or of openly expressed contempt for his audience. The mood is apparent at the very beginning of the romantic period. The germ of such a feeling is to be found even in so modest a poet as Cowper, who maintains that his brother poets, rather than the unliterary public, should pass upon his worth.<sup>3</sup> But the average poet of the last cen-

<sup>1</sup> *Liebestod.*

<sup>2</sup> *Revolt Against the Crepuscular Spirit in Modern Poetry.*

<sup>3</sup> *See To Darwin.*

ture and a half goes a step beyond this attitude, and appears to feel that there is something contemptible about popularity. Literary arrogance seems far from characteristic of Burns, yet he tells us how, in a mood of discouragement,

I backward mused on wasted time,  
How I had spent my youthful prime,  
And done naething  
But stringin' blithers up in rhyme  
For fools to sing.<sup>1</sup>

Of course it is not till we come to Byron that we meet the most thoroughgoing expression of this contempt for the public. The sentiment in *Childe Harold* is one that Byron never tires of harping on:

I have not loved the world, nor the world me;  
I have not flattered its rank breath, nor bowed  
To its idolatries a patient knee.

And this attitude of Byron's has been adopted by all his disciples, who delight in picturing his scorn:

With terror now he froze the cowering blood,  
And now dissolved the heart in tenderness,  
Yet would not tremble, would not weep, himself,  
But back into his soul retired alone,  
Dark, sullen, proud, gazing contemptuously  
On hearts and passions prostrate at his feet.<sup>2</sup>

Of the other romantic poets, Sir Walter Scott alone remains on good terms with the public, expressing a child's surprise and delight over the substantial

<sup>1</sup> *The Vision.*

<sup>2</sup> Robert Pollock, *The Course of Time.*



checks he is given in exchange for his imaginings. But Shelley starts out with a chip on his shoulder, in the very advertisements of his poems expressing his unflattering opinion of the public's judgment, and Keats makes it plain that his own criticisms concern him far more than those of other men.

The consciously aristocratic, sniffing attitude toward the public, which ran its course during Victoria's reign, is ushered in by Landor, who confesses,

I know not whether I am proud,  
But this I know, I hate the crowd,  
Therefore pray let me disengage  
My verses from the motley page,  
Where others, far more sure to please  
Pour forth their choral song with ease.

The same gentlemanly indifference to his plebeian readers is diffused all through Matthew Arnold's writing, of course. He casually disposes of popularity:

Some secrets may the poet tell  
For the world loves new ways;  
To tell too deep ones is not well,—  
It knows not what he says.<sup>1</sup>

Mrs. Browning probably has her own success in mind when she makes the young poetess, Aurora Leigh, recoil from the fulsome praise of her readers. Browning takes the same attitude in *Sordello*, contrasting Eglamor, the versifier who servilely con-

<sup>1</sup> See *In Memory of Obermann*.

formed to the taste of the mob, with Sordello, the true poet, who despised it. In *Popularity*, Browning returns to the same theme, of the public's misplaced praises, and in *Pacchiarotto* he outdoes himself in heaping ridicule upon his readers. Naturally the coterie of later poets who have prided themselves on their unique skill in interpreting Browning have been impressed by his contempt for his readers. Perhaps they have even exaggerated it. No less contemptuous of his readers than Browning was that other Victorian, so like him in many respects, George Meredith.

It would be interesting to make a list of the zoological metaphors by which the Victorians expressed their contempt for the public. Landor characterized their criticisms as "asses' kicks aimed at his head."<sup>1</sup> Browning alternately represented his public cackling and barking at him.<sup>2</sup> George Meredith made a dichotomy of his readers into "summer flies" and "swinish grunTERS."<sup>3</sup> Tennyson, being no naturalist, simply named the public the "many-headed beast."<sup>4</sup>

In America there has been less of this sort of thing openly expressed by genuine poets. Emerson is fairly outspoken, telling us, in *The Poet*, how the public gapes and jeers at a new vision. But one must go to our border-line poets to find the feeling most candidly put into words. Most of them spurn popularity, asserting that they are too worth

<sup>1</sup> Edmund Gosse, *Life of Swinburne*, p. 103.

<sup>2</sup> See Thomas J. Wise, *Letters*, Second Series, Vol. 2, p. 52.

<sup>3</sup> *My Theme*.

<sup>4</sup> *In Memoriam*.

while to be appreciated. They may be even nauseated by the slight success they manage to achieve, and exclaim,

Yet to know  
That we create an Eden for base worms!

If the consciousness of recent writers is dominated by contempt for mankind at large, such a mood is expressed with more caution than formerly. Kipling takes men's stupidity philosophically.<sup>1</sup> Edgar Lee Masters uses a fictional character as a mask for his remarks on the subject.<sup>2</sup> Other poets have expressed themselves with a degree of mildness.<sup>3</sup> But of course Ezra Pound is not to be suppressed. He inquires,

Will people accept them?  
(i.e., these songs)  
As a timorous wench from a centaur  
(or a centurion)  
Already they flee, howling in terror  
.  
.  
.  
Will they be touched with the verisimilitude?  
Their virgin stupidity is untemptable.

He adds,

I beg you, my friendly critics,  
Do not set about to procure me an audience.

<sup>1</sup> See *The Story of Ung*.

<sup>2</sup> See *Having His Way*.

<sup>3</sup> See Watts-Dunton, *Apollo in Paris*; James Stephens, *The Market*; Henry Newbolt, *An Essay in Criticism*; William Rose Benét, *People*.

Again he instructs his poems, when they meet the public,

Salute them with your thumbs to your noses.

It is very curious, after such passages, to find him pleading, in another poem,

May my poems be printed this week?

The naïveté of this last question brings up insistently a perplexing problem. If the poet despises his readers, why does he write? He may perhaps evade this question by protesting, with Tennyson,

I pipe but as the linnets do,  
And sing because I must.

But why does he publish? If he were strictly logical, surely he would do as the artist in Browning's *Pictor Ignotus*, who so shrank from having his pictures come into contact with fools, that he painted upon hidden, moldering walls, thus renouncing all possibility of fame. But one doubts whether such renunciation has been made often, especially in the field of poetry. Rossetti buried his poems, of course, but their resurrection was not postponed till the Last Judgment. Other writers have coyly waved fame away, but have gracefully yielded to their friends' importunities, and have given their works to the world. When one reads such expressions as Byron's:



Fame is the thirst of youth,—but I am not  
 So young as to regard men's frown or smile  
 As loss or guerdon of a glorious lot,<sup>1</sup>

one wonders. Perhaps the highest genius takes absolutely no account of fame, as the sun-god asserts in Watts-Dunton's poem, *Apollo in Paris*:

I love the song-born poet, for that he  
 Loves only song—seeks for love's sake alone  
 Shy Poesie, whose dearest bowers, unknown  
 To feudaries of fame, are known to thee.<sup>2</sup>

But other poets, with the utmost inconsistency, have admitted that they find the thought of fame very sweet.<sup>3</sup> Keats dwells upon the thought of it.<sup>4</sup> Browning shows both of his poet heroes concerned over the question. In *Pauline* the speaker confesses,

I ne'er sing  
 But as one entering bright halls, where all  
 Will rise and shout for him.

In *Sordello*, again, Browning analyzes the desire for fame:

Souls like Sordello, on the contrary,  
 Coerced and put to shame, retaining will,  
 Care little, take mysterious comfort still,  
 But look forth tremblingly to ascertain

<sup>1</sup> *Childe Harold*.

<sup>2</sup> See also Coventry Patmore, from *The Angel in the House*, "I will not Hearken Blame or Praise"; Francis Carlin, *The Home Song* (1918).

<sup>3</sup> See Edward Young, *Love of Fame*; John Clare, *Song's Eternity, Idle Fame, To John Milton*; Bulwer Lytton, *The Desire of Fame*; James Gates Percival, *Sonnet 379*; Josephine Preston Peabody, *Marlowe*.

<sup>4</sup> See the *Epistle to My Brother George*.

If others judge their claims not urged in vain,  
 And say for them their stifled thoughts aloud.  
 So they must ever live before a crowd:  
 —“Vanity,” Naddo tells you.

Emerson's Saadi is one who does not despise fame,

Nor can dispense  
 With Persia for an audience.<sup>1</sup>

Can it be that when the poet renounces fame, we  
 must concur with Austin Dobson's paraphrase of  
 his meaning,

But most, because the grapes are sour,  
 Farewell, renown?<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps the poet is saved from inconsistency by his touching confidence that in other times and places human nature is less stupid and unappreciative than it proves itself in his immediate audience. He reasons that in times past the public has shown sufficient insight to establish the reputation of the master poets, and that history will repeat itself. Several writers have stated explicitly that their quarrel with humanity is not to be carried beyond the present generation. Thus Arnold objects to his time because it is æsthetically dead.<sup>3</sup> But elsewhere he objects because it shows signs of coming to life,<sup>4</sup> so it is hard to determine how our grandfathers could have pleased him. Similarly unreasonable dis-

<sup>1</sup> *Saadi.*

<sup>2</sup> *Farewell Renown.*

<sup>3</sup> See *Persistency of Poetry.*

<sup>4</sup> See *Bacchanalia.*

content has been expressed by later poets with our own time.<sup>1</sup> Only occasionally a poet rebukes his brethren for this carping attitude. Mrs. Browning protests, in *Aurora Leigh*,

'Tis ever thus  
 With times we live in,—evermore too great  
 To be apprehended near. . . .  
 I do distrust the poet who discerns  
 No character or glory in his times,  
 And trundles back his soul five hundred years.<sup>2</sup>

And Kipling is a notorious defender of the present generation, but these two stand almost alone.<sup>3</sup>

Several mythical explanations for the stupidity of the poet's own times have been offered in verse. Browning says that poetry is like wine; it must age before it grows sweet.<sup>4</sup> Emerson says the poet's generation is deafened by the thunder of his voice.<sup>5</sup> A minor writer says that poetry must be written in one's life-blood, so that it necessarily kills one before it is appreciated.<sup>6</sup> Another suggests that a subtle electric change is worked in one's poems by death.<sup>7</sup> But the only reasonable explanation of the failure of the poet's own generation to appreciate

<sup>1</sup> See William Ernest Henley, *The Gods are Dead*; Edmund Gosse, *On Certain Critics*; Samuel Waddington, *The Death of Song*; John Payne, *Double Ballad of the Singers of the Time* (1906).

<sup>2</sup> See Robert Browning, Letter to Elizabeth Barrett, March 12, 1845.

<sup>3</sup> See also James Elroy Flecker, *Oak and Olive*; Max Ehrmann, *Give Me Today*.

<sup>4</sup> *Epilogue to the Pacchiarotto Volume*.

<sup>5</sup> *Solution*.

<sup>6</sup> William Reed Dunroy, *The Way of the World* (1897).

<sup>7</sup> Richard Gilder, *A Poet's Question*.

him seems to be that offered by Shelley, in the *Defense of Poetry*:

No living poet ever arrived at the fullness of his fame; the jury which sits in judgment upon a poet, belonging as he does to all time, must be composed of his peers.

Of course the contempt of the average poet for his contemporaries is not the sort of thing to endear him to them. Their self-respect almost forces them to ignore the poet's talents. And unfortunately, in addition to taking a top-lofty attitude, the poet has, until recently, gone much farther, and while despising the public has tried to improve it. Most nineteenth century poetry might be described in Mrs. Browning's words, as

Antidotes

Of medicated music, answering for  
Mankind's forlornest uses.<sup>1</sup>

And like an unruly child the public struggled against the dose. Whereupon the poet was likely to lose his temper, and declare, as Browning did,

My Thirty-four Port, no need to waste  
On a tongue that's fur, and a palate—paste!  
A magnum for friends who are sound: the sick—  
I'll posset and cosset them, nothing loath,  
Henceforward with nettle-broth.<sup>2</sup>

Yes, much as we pity the forlorn poet when his sensitive feelings are hurt by the world's cruelty,

<sup>1</sup> *Sonnets from the Portuguese.*

<sup>2</sup> *Epilogue to the Pacchiarotto Volume.*



we must still pronounce that he is partly to blame. If the public is buzzing around his head like a swarm of angry hornets, he must in most cases admit that he has stirred them up with a stick.

The poet's vilified contemporaries employ various means of retaliating. They may invite him to dinner, then point out that His Omniscience does not know how to manage a fork, or they may investigate his family tree, and then cut his acquaintance, or, most often, they may listen to his fanciful accounts of reality, then brand him as a liar. So the vicious circle is completed, for the poet is harassed by this treatment into the belief that he is the target for organized persecution, and as a result his egotism grows more and more morbid, and his contempt for the public more deliberately expressed.

At the beginning of the period under discussion the social snubs seem to have rankled most in the poet's nature. This was doubtless a survival from the times of patronage. James Thomson<sup>1</sup> and Thomas Hood<sup>2</sup> both concerned themselves with the problem. Kirke White appears to have felt that patronage of poets was still a live issue.<sup>3</sup> Crabbe, in a narrative poem, offered a pathetic picture of a young poet dying of heartbreak because of the malicious cruelty of the aristocracy toward him, a farmer's son.<sup>4</sup> Later on Mrs. Browning took up the

<sup>1</sup> See the *Castle of Indolence*, Canto II, stanzas XXI-III. See also *To Mr. Thomson, Doubtful to What Patron to Address the Poem*, by H. Hill.

<sup>2</sup> See *To the Late Lord Mayor*.

<sup>3</sup> See the *Ode Addressed to the Earl of Carlisle*.

<sup>4</sup> *The Patron*.

cudgels for the poet, in *Lady Geraldine's Courtship*, and upheld the nobility of the untitled poet almost too strenuously, for his morbid pride makes him appear by all odds the worst snob in the poem.

The less dignified contingent of the public annoys the poet by burlesquing the grandiose manners and poses to which his large nature easily lends itself. People are likely to question the poet's powers of soul because he forgets to cut his hair, or to fasten his blouse at the throat. And of course there have been rhymsters who have gone over to the side of the enemy, and who have made profit from exhibiting their freakishness, after the manner of circus monstrosities. Thomas Moore sometimes takes malicious pleasure in thus showing up the oddities of his race.<sup>1</sup> Later libelers have been, usually, writers of no reputation. The literary squib that made most stir in the course of the century was not a poem, but the novel, *The Green Carnation*, which poked fun at the mannerisms of the 1890 poets.<sup>2</sup> Oddly, American poets betray more indignation than English ones over such lampoons. Longfellow makes Michael Angelo exclaim,

I say an artist  
Who does not wholly give himself to art,  
Who has about him nothing marked or strange,  
But tries to suit himself to all the world  
Will ne'er attain to greatness.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See *Common Sense and Genius*, and *Rhymes by the Road*.

<sup>2</sup> Gilbert and Sullivan's *Patience* made an even greater sensation.

<sup>3</sup> *Michael Angelo*.

Sometimes an American poet takes the opposite tack, and denies that his conduct differs from that of other men. Thus Richard Watson Gilder insists that the poet has "manners like other men" and that on this account the world that is eagerly awaiting the future poet will miss him. He repeats the world's query:

How shall we know him?  
Ye shall know him not,  
Till, ended hate and scorn,  
To the grave he's borne.<sup>1</sup>

Whitman, in his defense, goes farther than this, and takes an original attitude toward his failure to keep step with other men, declaring

Of these states the poet is the equable man,  
Not in him but off him things are grotesque, eccentric,  
fail of their full returns.<sup>2</sup>

As for the third method employed by the public in its attacks upon the poet,—that of making charges against his truthfulness,—the poet resents this most bitterly of all. Gray, in *The Bard*, lays the wholesale slaughter of Scotch poets by Edward I, to their fearless truth telling. A number of later poets have written pathetic tales showing the tragic results of the unimaginative public's denial of the poet's delicate perceptions of truth.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *When the True Poet Comes.*

<sup>2</sup> *By Blue Ontario's Shore.*

<sup>3</sup> See Jean Ingelow, *Gladys and her Island*; Helen Hunt Jackson, *The Singer's Hills*; J. G. Holland, *Jacob Hurd's Child.*

To the poet's excited imagination, it seems as if all the world regarded his race as a constantly increasing swarm of flies, and had started in on a systematic course of extirpation.<sup>1</sup> As for the professional critic, he becomes an ogre, conceived of as eating a poet for breakfast every morning. The new singer is invariably warned by his brothers that he must struggle for his honor and his very life against his malicious audience. It is doubtful if we could find a poet of consequence in the whole period who does not somewhere characterize men of his profession as the martyrs of beauty.<sup>2</sup> Shelley is particularly wrought up on the subject, and in *The Woodman and the Nightingale* expresses through an allegory the murderous designs of the public.

A salient example of more vicarious indignation is Mrs. Browning, who exposes the world's heartlessness in a poem called *The Seraph and the Poet*. In *A Vision of Poets* she betrays less indignation, apparently believing that experience of undeserved suffering is essential to the maturing of genius. In this poem the world's greatest poets are described:

<sup>1</sup> See G. K. Chesterton, *More Poets Yet*.

<sup>2</sup> Examples of abstract discussions of this sort are: Burns, *The Poet's Progress*; Keats, *Epistle to George Felton Matthew*; Tennyson, *To — After Reading a Life and Letters*; Longfellow, *The Poets*; Thomas Buchanan Read, *The Master Poets*; Paul Hamilton Hayne, *Though Dowered with Instincts*; Henry Timrod, *A Vision of Poesy*; George Meredith, *Bellerophon*; S. L. Fairfield, *The Last Song* (1832); S. J. Cassells, *A Poet's Reflections* (1851); Richard Gilder, *The New Poet*; Richard Realf, *Advice Gratis* (1898); James Whitcomb Riley, *An Outworn Sappho*; Paul Laurence Dunbar, *The Poet*; Theodore Watts-Dunton, *The Octopus of the Golden Isles*; Francis Ledwidge, *The Coming Poet*.



Where the heart of each should beat,  
 There seemed a wound instead of it,  
 From whence the blood dropped to their feet.

The young hero of the poem, to whom the vision is given, naturally shrinks from the thought of such suffering, but the attendant spirit leads him on, nevertheless, to a loathsome pool, where there are bitter waters,

And toads seen crawling on his hand,  
 And clinging bats, but dimly scanned,  
 Full in his face their wings expand.  
 A paleness took the poet's cheek;  
 "Must I drink here?" He seemed to seek  
 The lady's will with utterance meek:  
 "Ay, ay," she said, "it so must be:"  
 (And this time she spoke cheerfully)  
 Behooves thee know world's cruelty.

The modern poet is able to bring forward many historical names by which to substantiate the charges of cruelty which he makes against society. From classic Greece he names Æschylus<sup>1</sup> and Euripides.<sup>2</sup> From Latin writers our poets have chosen as favorite martyr Lucan, "by his death approved."<sup>3</sup> Of the great renaissance poets, Shakespeare alone has usually been considered exempt from the general persecution, though Richard Garnett humorously represents even him as suffering triple punishment,—

<sup>1</sup> R. C. Robbins, *Poems of Personality* (1909); Cale Young Rice, *Æschylus*.

<sup>2</sup> Bulwer Lytton, *Euripides*; Browning, *Balaustion's Adventure*; Richard Burton, *The First Prize*.

<sup>3</sup> *Adonais*. See also Robert Bridges, *Nero*.

flogging, imprisonment and exile,—for his offense against Sir Thomas Lucy, aggravated by poetical temperament.<sup>1</sup> Of all renaissance poets Dante<sup>2</sup> and Tasso<sup>3</sup> have received most attention on account of their wrongs.<sup>4</sup>

Naturally the adversities which touch our writers most nearly are those of the modern English poets. It is the poets of the romantic movement who are thought of as suffering greatest injustice. Chatterton's extreme youth probably has helped to incense many against the cruelty that caused his death.<sup>5</sup> Southey is singled out by Landor for especial commiseration; *Who Smites the Wounded* is an indignant uncovering of the world's cruelty in exaggerating Southey's faults. Landor insinuates that this persecution is extended to all geniuses:

Alas! what snows are shed  
Upon thy laurelled head,  
Hurtled by many cares and many wrongs!  
Malignity lets none  
Approach the Delphic throne;

<sup>1</sup> See *Wm. Shakespeare, Pedagogue and Poacher*, a drama (1904).

<sup>2</sup> See G. L. Raymond, *Dante*; Sarah King Wiley, *Dante and Beatrice*; Rossetti, *Dante at Verona*; Oscar Wilde, *Ravenna*.

<sup>3</sup> Byron, *The Lament of Tasso*; Shelley, *Song for Tasso*; James Thomson, B. V., *Tasso to Leonora*.

<sup>4</sup> The sufferings of several French poets are commented upon in English verse. Swinburne's poetry on Victor Hugo, Bulwer Lytton's *Andre Chenier*, and Alfred Lang's *Gerard de Nerval* come to mind.

<sup>5</sup> See Shelley, *Adonais*; Coleridge, *Monody on the Death of Chatterton*; Keats, *Sonnet on Chatterton*; James Montgomery, *Stanzas on Chatterton*; Rossetti, *Sonnet to Chatterton*; Edward Dowden, *Prologue to Maurice Gerotzwohl's Version of Vigny's Chatterton*; W. A. Percy, *To Chatterton*.

A hundred lane-fed curs bark down Fame's  
hundred tongues.<sup>1</sup>

The ill-treatment of Burns has had its measure of denunciation. The centenary of his birth brought forth a good deal of such verse.

Of course Byron's sufferings have had their share of attention, though, remembering his enormous popularity, the better poets have left to the more gullible rhymsters the echo of his tirades against persecution,<sup>2</sup> and have conceived of the public as beaten at its own game by him. Thus Shelley exults in the thought,

The Pythian of the age one arrow drew  
And smiled. The spoilers tempt no second blow,  
They fawn on the proud feet that laid them low.<sup>3</sup>

The wrongs of Keats, also, are not so much stressed in genuine poetry as formerly, and the fiction that his death was due to the hostility of his critics is dying out, though Shelley's *Adonais* will go far toward giving it immortality. Oscar Wilde's characterization of Keats as "the youngest of the martyrs"<sup>4</sup> brings the tradition down almost to the present in British verse, but for the most part its popularity is now limited to American rhymes. One is rather indignant, after reading Keats' own manly words about hostile criticism, to find a nondescript

<sup>1</sup> *To Southey, 1833.*

<sup>2</sup> See T. H. Chivers, *Lord Byron's Dying Words to Ada*, and *Byron* (1853); Charles Soran, *Byron* (1842); E. F. Hoffman, *Byron* (1849).

<sup>3</sup> *Adonais.*

<sup>4</sup> *At the Grave of Keats.*

verse-writer putting the puerile self-characterization into his mouth :

I, the Boy-poet, whom with curse  
They hounded on to death's untimely doom.<sup>1</sup>

In even less significant verse the most maudlin sympathy with Keats is expressed. One is tempted to feel that Keats suffered less from his enemies than from his admirers, of the type which Browning characterized as "the foolish crowd of rushers-in upon genius . . . never content till they cut their initials on the cheek of the Medicean Venus to prove they worship her."<sup>2</sup>

With the possible exception of Chatterton, the poet whose wrongs have raised the most indignant storm of protest is Shelley. Several poets, as the young Browning, Francis Thompson, James Thomson, B. V., and Mr. Woodberry, have made a chivalrous championing of Shelley almost part of their poetical platform. No doubt the facts of Shelley's life warrant such sympathy. Then too, Shelley's sense of injustice, unlike Byron's, is not such as to seem weak to us, though it is so freely expressed in his verse. In addition one is likely to feel particular sympathy for Shelley because the recoil of the public from him cannot be laid to his scorn. His enthusiasms were always for the happiness of the entire human race, as well as for himself. Everything in his unfortunate life vouches for the sin-

<sup>1</sup> T. L. Harris, *Lyrics of the Golden Age* (1856).

<sup>2</sup> Letter to Elizabeth Barrett, November 17, 1845.



cerity of his statement, in the *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty*:

Never joy illumed my brow  
Unlinked with hope that thou wouldst free  
This world from its dark slavery.

Accordingly Shelley's injuries seem to have affected him as a sudden hurt does a child, with a sense of incomprehensibility, and later poets have rallied to his defense as if he were actually a child.<sup>1</sup>

The vicariousness of the nineteenth century poet in bewailing the hurts of his brethren is likely to have provoked a smile in us, as in the mourners of Adonais, at recognizing one

Who in another's fate now wept his own.

Of course a suppressed personal grudge may not always have been a factor in lending warmth to these defenses. Mrs. Browning is an ardent advocate of the misunderstood poet, though she herself enjoyed a full measure of popularity. But when Landor so warmly champions Southey, and Swinburne springs to the defense of Victor Hugo, one cannot help remembering that the public did not show itself wildly appreciative of either of these defenders. So, too, when Oscar Wilde works himself up over the persecutions of Dante, Keats and Byron, we are minded of the irreverent crowds that followed

<sup>1</sup> See E. C. Stedman, *Ariel*; James Thomson, B. V., *Shelley*; Alfred Austin, *Shelley's Death*; Stephen Vincent Benét, *The General Public*.

Wilde and his lily down the street. When the poet is too proud to complain of his own wrongs at the hands of the public, it is easy for him to strike in defense of another. As the last century wore on, this vicarious indignation more and more took the place of a personal outcry. Comparatively little has been said by poets since the romantic period about their own persecutions.<sup>1</sup>

Occasionally a poet endeavors to placate the public by assuming a pose of equality. The tradition of Chaucer, fostered by the *Canterbury Tales*, is that by carefully hiding his genius, he succeeded in keeping on excellent terms with his contemporaries. Percy Mackaye, in the *Canterbury Pilgrims*, shows him obeying St. Paul's injunction so literally that the parson takes him for a brother of the cloth, the plowman is surprised that he can read, and so on, through the whole social gamut of the Pilgrims. But in the nineteenth century this friendly attitude seldom works out so well. Walt Whitman flaunts his ability to fraternize with the man of the street. But the American public has failed "to absorb him as affectionately as he has absorbed it."<sup>2</sup> Emerson tries to get on common ground with his audience by asserting that every man is a poet to some extent,<sup>3</sup> and it is consistent with the poetic theory of Yeats that he makes the same assertion as Emerson:

<sup>1</sup> See, however, Joaquin Miller, *I Shall Remember*, and *Vale*; Francis Ledwidge, *The Visitation of Peace*.

<sup>2</sup> *By Blue Ontario's Shore*.

<sup>3</sup> See *The Enchanter*.

There cannot be confusion of sound forgot,  
A single soul that lacks a sweet crystalline cry.<sup>1</sup>

But when the mob jeers at a poet, it does not take kindly to his retort, "Poet yourself." Longfellow, J. G. Holland and James Whitcombe Riley have been warmly commended by some of their brothers<sup>2</sup> for their promiscuous friendliness, but on the whole there is a tendency on the part of the public to sniff at these poets, as well as at those who commend them, because they make themselves so common. One may deride the public's inconsistency, yet, after all, we have not to read many pages of the "homely" poets before their professed ability to get down to the level of the "common man" begins to remind one of pre-campaign speeches.

There seems to be nothing for the poet to do, then, but to accept the hostility of the world philosophically. There are a few notable examples of the poet even welcoming the solitude that society forces upon him, because it affords additional opportunity for self-communion. Everyone is familiar with Wordsworth's insistence that uncompanionableness is essential to the poet. In the *Prelude* he relates how, from early childhood,

I was taught to feel, perhaps too much,  
The self-sufficing power of solitude.

<sup>1</sup> *Pandeen*.

<sup>2</sup> See O. W. Holmes, *To Longfellow*; P. H. Hayne, *To Henry W. Longfellow*; T. B. Read, *A Leaf from the Past*; E. C. Stedman, *J. G. H.*; P. L. Dunbar, *James Whitcombe Riley*; J. W. Riley, *Rhymes of Ironquill*.

Elsewhere he disposes of the forms of social intercourse :

These all wear out of me, like Forms, with chalk  
Painted on rich men's floors, for one feast night.<sup>1</sup>

So he describes the poet's character :

He is retired as noontide dew  
Or fountain in a noonday grove.<sup>2</sup>

In American verse Wordsworth's mood is, of course, reflected in Bryant, and it appears in the poetry of most of Bryant's contemporaries. Longfellow caused the poet to boast that he "had no friends, and needed none."<sup>3</sup> Emerson expressed the same mood frankly. He takes civil leave of mankind :

Think me not unkind and rude  
That I walk alone in grove and glen;  
I go to the god of the wood,  
To fetch his word to men.<sup>4</sup>

He points out the idiosyncrasy of the poet :

Men consort in camp and town,  
But the poet dwells alone.<sup>5</sup>

Thus he works up to his climactic statement regarding the amplitude of the poet's personality :

I have no brothers and no peers  
And the dearest interferes;  
When I would spend a lonely day,  
Sun and moon are in my way.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Personal Talk.*

<sup>2</sup> *The Poet's Epitaph.*

<sup>3</sup> *Michael Angelo.*

<sup>4</sup> *The Apology.*

<sup>5</sup> *Saadi.*

<sup>6</sup> *The Poet.*



Although the poet's egotism would seem logically to cause him to find his chief pleasure in undisturbed communion with himself, still this picture of the poet delighting in solitude cannot be said to follow, usually, upon his banishment from society. For the most part the poet is characterized by an insatiable yearning for affection, and by the stupidity and hostility of other men he is driven into proud loneliness, even while his heart thirsts for companionship.<sup>1</sup> One of the most popular poet-heroes of the last century, asserting that he is in such an unhappy situation, yet declares :

For me, I'd rather live  
With this weak human heart and yearning blood,  
Lonely as God, than mate with barren souls.  
More brave, more beautiful than myself must be  
The man whom I can truly call my friend.<sup>2</sup>

So the poet is limited to the companionship of rare souls, who make up to him for the indifference of all the world beside. Occasionally this compensation is found in romantic love, which flames all the brighter, because the affections that most people expend on many human relationships are by the poet turned upon one object. Apropos of the world's

<sup>1</sup> See John Clare, *The Stranger, The Peasant Poet, I Am*; James Gates Percival, *The Bard*; Joseph Rodman Drake, *Brorix* (1847); Thomas Buchanan Read, *My Heritage*; Whittier, *The Tent on the Beach*; Mrs. Frances Gage, *The Song of the Dreamer* (1867); R. H. Stoddard, *Utopia*; Abram J. Ryan, *Poets*; Richard H. Dana, *The Moss Supplicateth for the Poet*; Frances Anne Kemble, *The Fellowship of Genius* (1889); F. S. Flint, *Loneliness* (1909); Lawrence Hope, *My Paramour was Loneliness* (1905); Sara Teasdale, *Alone*.

<sup>2</sup> Alexander Smith, *A Life Drama*.

indifference to him, Shelley takes comfort in the assurance of such communion, saying to Mary,

If men must rise and stamp with fury blind  
On his pure name who loves them—thou and I,  
Sweet friend! can look from our tranquillity  
Like lamps into the world's tempestuous night,—  
Two tranquil stars, while clouds are passing by,  
That burn from year to year with inextinguished  
light.<sup>1</sup>

But though passion is so often the source of his inspiration, the poet's love affairs are seldom allowed to flourish. The only alleviation of his loneliness must be, then, in the friendship of unusually gifted and discerning men, usually of his own calling. Doubtless the ideal of most nineteenth century writers would be such a jolly fraternity of poets as Herrick has made immortal by his *Lines to Ben Jonson*.<sup>2</sup> A good deal of nineteenth century verse shows the author enviously dwelling upon the ideal comradeship of Elizabethan poets.<sup>3</sup> But multiple friendships did not flourish among poets of the last century,—at least they were overhung by no glamor of

<sup>1</sup> Introduction to *The Revolt of Islam*.

<sup>2</sup> The tradition of the lonely poet was in existence even at this time, however. See Ben Jonson, *Essay on Donne*.

<sup>3</sup> Keats' *Lines on the Mermaid Tavern*, Browning's *At the Mermaid*, Watts-Dunton's *Christmas at the Mermaid*, E. A. Robinson's *Ben Jonson Entertains a Man from Stratford*, Josephine Preston Peabody's *Marlowe*, and Alfred Noyes' *Tales of the Mermaid Inn* all present fondly imagined accounts of the gay intimacy of the master dramatists. Keats, who was so generous in acknowledging his indebtedness to contemporary artists, tells, in his epistles, of the envy he feels for men who created under these ideal conditions of comradeship.

romance that lured the poet to immortalize them in verse. The closest approximation to such a thing is in the redundant complimentary verse, with which the New England poets showered each other to such an extent as to arouse Lowell's protest.<sup>1</sup> Even they, however, did not represent themselves as living in Bohemian intimacy. Possibly the temperamental jealousy that the philistine world ascribes to the artist, causing him to feel that he is the one elect soul sent to a benighted age, while his brother-artists are akin to the money-changers in the temple, hinders him from unreserved enjoyment even of his fellows' society. Tennyson's and Swinburne's out-breaks against contemporary writers appear to be based on some such assumption.<sup>2</sup>

Consequently the poet is likely to celebrate one or two deep friendships in an otherwise lonely life. A few instances of such friendships are so notable, that the reader is likely to overlook their rarity. Such were the friendships of Wordsworth and Coleridge, and of Wordsworth and his sister Dorothy, also that recorded in Landor's shaken lines :

Friends! hear the words my wandering thoughts would  
say,  
And cast them into shape some other day;  
Southey, my friend of forty years, is gone,  
And shattered with the fall, I stand alone.

<sup>1</sup> See *A Fable for Critics*.

<sup>2</sup> See Tennyson, *The New Timon and the Poet*; Bulwer Lytton, *The New Timon*; Swinburne, *Essay on Whitman*. For more recent manifestation of the same attitude see John Drinkwater, *To Alice Meynell* (1911); Shaemas O'Sheel, *The Poets with the Sounding Gong* (1912); Robert Graves, *The Voice of Beauty Drowned* (1920).

The intimacy of Shelley and Byron, recorded in *Julian and Maddalo*, was of a less ardent sort. Indeed Byron said of it, "As to friendship, it is a propensity in which my genius is very limited. . . . I did not even feel it for Shelley, however much I admired him."<sup>1</sup> Arnold's *Thyrsis*, Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, and more recently, George Edward Woodberry's *North Shore Watch*, indicate that even when the poet has been able to find a human soul which understood him, the friendship has been cut short by death. In fact, the premature close of such friendships has usually been the occasion for their celebration in verse, from classic times onward.

Such friendships, like happy love-affairs, are too infrequent and transitory to dissipate the poet's conviction that he is the loneliest of men. "Thy soul was like a star and dwelt apart," might have been written by almost any nineteenth century poet about any other. Shelley, in particular, in spite of his not infrequent attachments, is almost obsessed by melancholy reflection upon his loneliness. In *To a Skylark*, he pictures the poet "hidden in the light of thought." Employing the opposite figure in the *Defense of Poetry*, he says, "The poet is a nightingale who sits in darkness and sings to cheer his own solitude." Of the poet in *Alastor* we are told,

He lived, he died, he sung, in solitude.

Shelley's sense of his personal loneliness is recorded

<sup>1</sup> Letter to Mrs. (Shelley?) undated.



in *Stanzas Written in Dejection*, and also in *Adonais*. In the latter poem he says of himself,

He came the last, neglected and apart,

and describes himself as

companionless  
As the last cloud of an expiring storm,  
Whose thunder is its knell.

Victorian poets were not less depressed by reflection upon the poet's lonely life. Arnold strikes the note again and again, most poignantly in *The Buried Life*, of the poet's sensitive apprehension that all human intercourse is mockery, and that the gifted soul really dwells in isolation. *Sordello* is a monumental record of a genius without friends. Francis Thompson, with surface lightness, tells us, in *A Renegade Poet on the Poet*:

He alone of men, though he travel to the pit, picks up no company by the way; but has a contrivance to avoid scripture, and find a narrow road to damnation. Indeed, if the majority of men go to the nether abodes, 'tis the most hopeful argument I know of his salvation, for 'tis inconceivable that he should ever do as other men.

One might imagine that in the end the poet's poignant sense of his isolation might allay his excessive conceit. A yearning for something beyond himself might lead him to infer a lack in his own nature. Seldom, however, is this the result of the poet's loneliness. Francis Thompson, indeed, does

feel himself humbled by his spiritual solitude, and characterizes himself,

I who can scarcely speak my fellows' speech,  
Love their love or mine own love to them teach,  
A bastard barred from their inheritance,

In antre of this lowly body set,  
Girt with a thirsty solitude of soul.<sup>1</sup>

But the typical poet yearns not downward, but upward, and above him he finds nothing. Therefore reflection upon his loneliness continually draws his attention to the fact that his isolation is an inevitable consequence of his genius,—that he

Spares but the cloudy border of his base  
To the foiled searching of mortality.<sup>2</sup>

The poet usually looks for alleviation of his loneliness after death, when he is gathered to the company of his peers, but to the supreme poet he feels that even this satisfaction is denied. The highest genius must exist absolutely in and for itself, the poet-egoist is led to conclude, for it will "remain at heart unread eternally."<sup>3</sup>

Such is the self-perpetuating principle which appears to insure perennial growth of the poet's egoism. The mystery of inspiration breeds introspection; introspection breeds egoism; egoism breeds pride; pride breeds contempt for other men; contempt for other men breeds hostility and persecution; perse-

<sup>1</sup> *Sister Songs.*

<sup>2</sup> Matthew Arnold, Sonnet, *Shakespeare.*

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Hardy, *To Shakespeare.*

cution breeds proud isolation. Finally, isolation breeds deeper introspection, and the poet is ready to start on a second revolution of the egocentric circle.

## II

### *THE MORTAL COIL*

**I**F I might dwell where Israfel  
Hath dwelt, and he where I,  
He might not sing so wildly well  
A mortal melody,

sighs Poe, and the envious note vibrates in much of modern song. There is an inconsistency in the poet's attitude,—the same inconsistency that lurks in the most poetical of philosophies. Like Plato, the poet sees this world as the veritable body of his love, Beauty,—and yet it is to him a muddy vesture of decay, and he is ever panting for escape from it as from a prison house.

One might think that the poet has less cause for rebellion against the flesh than have other men, inasmuch as the bonds that enthrall feebler spirits seem to have no power upon him. A blind Homer, a mad Tasso, a derelict Villon, an invalid Pope, most wonderful of all—a woman Sappho, suggest that the differences in earthly tabernacles upon which most of us lay stress are negligible to the poet, whose burning genius can consume all fetters of heredity, sex, health, environment and material endowment. Yet in his soberest moments the poet is wont to



confess that there are varying degrees in the handicap which genius suffers in the mid-earth life; in fact ever since the romantic movement roused in him an intense curiosity as to his own nature, he has reflected a good deal on the question of what earthly conditions will least cabin and confine his spirit.

Apparently the problem of heredity is too involved to stir him to attempted solution. If to make a gentleman one must begin with his grandfather, surely to make a poet one must begin with the race, and in poems even of such bulk as the *Prelude* one does not find a complete analysis of the singer's forbears. In only one case do we delve far into a poet's heredity. He who will, may perchance hear Sordello's story told, even from his remote ancestry, but to the untutored reader the only clear point regarding heredity is the fusion in Sordello of the restless energy and acumen of his father, Taurello, with the refinement and sensibility of his mother, Retrude. This is a promising combination, but would it necessarily flower in genius? One doubts it. In *Aurora Leigh* one might speculate similarly about the spiritual æstheticism of Aurora's Italian mother, balanced by the intellectual repose of her English father. Doubtless the Brownings were not working blindly in giving their poets this heredity, yet in both characters we must assume, if we are to be scientific, that there is a happy combination of qualities derived from more remote ancestors.

The immemorial tradition which Swinburne followed in giving his mythical poet the sun as father

and the sea as mother is more illuminating,<sup>1</sup> since it typifies the union in the poet's nature of the earthly and the heavenly. Whenever heredity is lightly touched upon in poetry it is generally indicated that in the poet's nature there are combined, for the first time, these two powerful strains which, in mysterious fusion, constitute the poetic nature. In the marriage of his father and mother, delight in the senses, absorption in the turbulence of human passions, is likely to meet complete otherworldliness and unusual spiritual sensitiveness.

There is a tradition that all great men have resembled their mothers; this may in part account for the fact that the poet often writes of her. Yet in poetical pictures of the mother the reader seldom finds anything patently explaining genius in her child. The glimpse we have of Ben Jonson's mother is an exception. A twentieth century poet conceives of the woman who was "no churl" as

A tall, gaunt woman, with great burning eyes,  
And white hair blown back softly from a face  
Ethereally fierce, as might have looked  
Cassandra in old age.<sup>2</sup>

In the usual description, however, there is none of this dynamic force. Womanliness, above all, and sympathy, poets ascribe to their mothers.<sup>3</sup> A little

<sup>1</sup> See *Thalassius*.

<sup>2</sup> Alfred Noyes, *Tales of the Mermaid Inn*.

<sup>3</sup> See Beattie, *The Minstrel*; Wordsworth, *The Prelude*; Cowper, *Lines on his Mother's Picture*; Swinburne, *Ode to his Mother*; J. G. Holland, *Kathrina*; William Vaughan Moody, *The Daguerreotype*; Anna Hempstead Branch, *Her Words*.

poem by Sara Teasdale, *The Mother of a Poet*, gives a poetical explanation of this type of woman, in whom all the turbulence of the poet's spiritual inheritance is hushed before it is transmitted to him. Such a mother as Byron's, while she appeals to certain novelists as a means of intensifying the poet's adversities,<sup>1</sup> is not found in verse. One might almost conclude that poets consider their maternal heritage indispensable. Very seldom is there such a departure from tradition as making the father bequeather of the poet's sensitiveness.<sup>2</sup>

The inheritance of a specific literary gift is almost never insisted upon by poets,<sup>3</sup> though some of the verse addressed to the child, Hartley Coleridge, possibly implies a belief in such heritage. The son of Robert and Mrs. Browning seems, strangely enough, considering his chance of a double inheritance of literary ability, not to have been the subject of versified prophecies of this sort. One expression by a poet of belief in heredity may, however, detain us. At the beginning of Viola Meynell's career, it is interesting to notice that as a child she was the subject of speculation as to her inheritance of her mother's genius. It was Francis Thompson, of course, who, musing on Alice Meynell's poetry, said to the little Viola,

<sup>1</sup> See H. E. Rives, *The Castaway* (1904); J. D. Bacon, *A Family Affair* (1900).

<sup>2</sup> *A Ballad in Blank Verse*, by John Davidson, is a rare exception.

<sup>3</sup> See, however, Anna Hempstead Branch, *Her Words*.

If angels have hereditary wings,  
If not by Salic law is handed down  
The poet's laurel crown,  
To thee, born in the purple of the throne,  
The laurel must belong.<sup>1</sup>

But these lines must not be considered apart from the fanciful poem in which they grow.

What have poets to say on the larger question of their social inheritance? This is a subject on which, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, at least, poets should have had ideas, and the varying rank given to their lyrical heroes is not without significance. The renaissance idea, that the nobleman is framed to enjoy, rather than to create, beauty,—that he is the connoisseur rather than the genius,—seems to have persisted in the eighteenth century, and at the beginning of the romantic movement to have combined with the new exaltation of the lower classes to work against the plausible view that the poet is the exquisite flowering of the highest lineage.

Of course, it is not to be expected that there should be unanimity of opinion among poets as to the ideal singer's rank. In several instances, confidence in human egotism would enable the reader to make a shrewd guess as to a poet's stand on the question of caste, without the trouble of investigation. Gray, the gentleman, as a matter of course consigns his "rustic Milton" to oblivion. Lord Byron follows

<sup>1</sup> *Sister Songs.*



the fortunes of "Childe" Harold. Lord Tennyson usually deals with titled artists.<sup>1</sup> Greater significance attaches to the gentle birth of the two prominent fictional poets of the century, Sordello and Aurora Leigh, yet in both poems the plot interest is enough to account for it. In Sordello's case, especially, Taurello's dramatic offer of political leadership to his son suffices to justify Browning's choice of his hero's rank.<sup>2</sup>

None of these instances of aristocratic birth are of much importance, and wherever there is a suggestion that the poet's birth represents a tenet of the poem's maker, one finds, naturally, praise of the singer who springs from the masses. The question of the singer's social origin was awake in verse even before Burns. So typical an eighteenth century poet as John Hughes, in lines *On a Print of Tom Burton, a Small Coal Man*, moralizes on the phenomenon that genius may enter into the breast of one quite beyond the social pale. Crabbe<sup>3</sup> and Beattie,<sup>4</sup> also, seem not to be departing from the Augustan tradition in treating the fortunes of their peasant bards. But with Burns, of course, the question comes into new prominence. Yet he spreads no propaganda. His statement is merely personal:

<sup>1</sup> See *Lord Burleigh*, Eleanore in *A Becket*, and the Count in *The Falcon*.

<sup>2</sup> Other poems celebrating noble poets are *The Troubadour*, Praed; *The King's Tragedy*, Rossetti; *David*, Charles di Trocca, Cale Young Rice.

<sup>3</sup> See *The Patron*.

<sup>4</sup> See *The Minstrel*.

Gie me ae spark of nature's fire!  
 That's a' the learning I desire.  
 Then, though I drudge through dub and mire  
 At plough or cart,  
 My muse, though homely in attire,  
 May touch the heart.<sup>1</sup>

It is not till later verse that poets springing from the soil are given sweeping praise, because of the mysterious communion they enjoy with "nature."<sup>2</sup> Obviously the doctrine is reinforced by Wordsworth, though few of his farmer folk are geniuses, and the closest illustration of his belief that the peasant, the child of nature, is the true poet, is found in the character of the old pedlar, in the *Excursion*. The origin of Keats might be assumed to have its share in molding poets' views on caste, but only the most insensitive have dared to touch upon his Cockney birth. In the realm of Best Sellers, however, the hero of May Sinclair's novel, *The Divine Fire*, who is presumably modeled after Keats, is a lower class Londoner, presented with the most unflinching realism that the author can achieve. Consummate indeed is the artistry with which she enables him to keep the sympathy of his readers, even while he commits the unpardonable sin of dropping his h's.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Epistle to Lapraik*.

<sup>2</sup> For verse glorifying the peasant aspect of Burns see Thomas Campbell, *Ode to Burns*; Whittier, *Burns*; Joaquin Miller, *Burns and Byron*; William Bennett, *To the Memory of Burns*; A. B. Street, *Robbie Burns* (1867); O. W. Holmes, *The Burns Centennial*; Richard Realf, *Burns*; Simon Kerl, *Burns* (1868); Shelley Halleck, *Burns*.

<sup>3</sup> Another historical poet whose lowly origin is stressed in poetry is Marlowe, the son of a cobbler. See Alfred Noyes, *At the Sign of the Golden Shoe*; Josephine Preston Peabody, *Marlowe*.

Here and there, the poet from the ranks lifts his head in verse, throughout the last century.<sup>1</sup> And at present, with the penetration of the "realistic" movement into verse, one notes a slight revival of interest in the type, probably because the lower classes are popularly conceived to have more first hand acquaintance with sordidness than those hedged about by family tradition.<sup>2</sup> Still, for the most part, the present attitude of poets toward the question seems to be one of indifference, since they feel that other factors are more important than caste in determining the singer's genius. Most writers of to-day would probably agree with the sentiment of the lines on Browning,

What if men have found  
Poor footmen or rich merchants on the roll  
Of his forbears? Did they beget his soul?<sup>3</sup>

If poets have given us no adequate body of data by which we may predict the birth of a genius, they have, on the other hand, given us most minute descriptions whereby we may recognize the husk containing the poetic gift. The skeptic may ask, What has the poet to do with his body? since singers tell

<sup>1</sup> For poet-heroes of this sort see John Clare, *The Peasant Poet*; Mrs. Browning, *Lady Geraldine's Courtship*; Robert Buchanan, *Poet Andrew*; T. E. Browne, *Tommy Big Eyes*; Whittier, *Eliot*; J. G. Saxe, *Murillo and his Slave*.

<sup>2</sup> See John Davidson, *A Ballad in Blank Verse*; Vachel Lindsay, *The North Star Whispers to the Blacksmith's Son*; John Masefield, *Dauber*; Francis Carlin, *MacSweeney the Rhymers* (1918).

<sup>3</sup> Henry van Dyke, *Sonnet*.

us so repeatedly that their souls are aliens upon earth,

Clothed in flesh to suffer: maimed of wings to soar,<sup>1</sup>  
 as Swinburne phrases it. Yet, mysteriously, the artist's soul is said to frame a tenement for its brief imprisonment that approximately expresses it, so that it is only in the most beautiful bodies that we are to look for the soul that creates beauty. Though poets of our time have not troubled themselves much with philosophical explanations of the phenomenon, they seem to concur in the Platonic reasoning of their father Spenser, who argues,

So every spirit, as it is most pure,  
 And hath in it the more of heavenly light,  
 So it the fairer body doth procure  
 To habit in, and it more fairly dight  
 With cheerful grace, and amiable sight;  
 For of the soul the body form doth take,  
 For soul is form, and doth the body make.<sup>2</sup>

What an absurd test! one is likely to exclaim, thinking of a swarthy Sappho, a fat Chaucer, a bald Shakespeare, a runt Pope, a club-footed Byron, and so on, almost *ad infinitum*. Would not a survey of notable geniuses rather indicate that the poet's dreams arise because he is like the sensitive plant of Shelley's allegory, which

Desires what it hath not, the beautiful?<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *The Centenary of Shelley.*

<sup>2</sup> *Hymn in Honour of Beauty.*

<sup>3</sup> *The Sensitive Plant.*



Spenser himself foresaw our objections and felt obliged to modify his pronouncement, admitting—

Yet oft it falls that many a gentle mind  
 Dwells in deformed tabernacle drownd,  
 Either by chance, against the course of kind,  
 Or through unaptness of the substance found,  
 Which it assumed of some stubborn ground  
 That will not yield unto her form's direction,  
 But is preformed with some foul imperfection.

But the modern poet is not likely to yield his point so easily as does Spenser. Rather he will cast aside historical records as spurious, and insist that all genuine poets have been beautiful. Of the many poems on Sappho written in the last century, not one accepts the tradition that she was ill-favored, but restores a flower-like portrait of her from Alcæus' line,

Violet-weaving, pure, sweet-smiling Sappho.

As for Shakespeare, here follows a very characteristic idealization of his extant portrait:

A pale, plain-favored face, the smile where-of  
 Is beautiful; the eyes gray, changeful, bright,  
 Low-lidded now, and luminous as love,  
 Anon soul-searching, ominous as night,  
 Seer-like, inscrutable, revealing deeps  
 Where-in a mighty spirit wakes or sleeps.<sup>1</sup>

The most unflattering portrait is no bar to poets' confidence in their brother's beauty, yet they are happiest when fashioning a frame for geniuses of

<sup>1</sup> C. L. Hildreth, *At the Mermaid* (1889).

whom we have no authentic description. "The love-dream of his unrecorded face,"<sup>1</sup> has led to many an idealized portrait of such a long-dead singer. Marlowe has been the favorite figure of this sort with which the fancies of our poets have played. From the glory and power of his dramas their imaginations inevitably turn to

The gloriole of his flame-coloured hair,  
The lean, athletic body, deftly planned  
To carry that swift soul of fire and air;  
The long, thin flanks, the broad breast, and the grand  
Heroic shoulders!<sup>2</sup>

It is no wonder that in the last century there has grown up so firm a belief in the poet's beauty, one reflects, remembering the seraphic face of Shelley, the Greek sensuousness of Keats' profile, the romantic fire of Byron's expression.<sup>3</sup> Yet it is a belief that must have been sorely tried since the invention of the camera has brought the verse-writer's countenance, in all its literalness, before the general public. Was it only an accident that the popularity of current poetry died just as cameras came into existence? How many a potential admirer has been lost by a glance at the frontispiece in a book of verse! In recent years, faith in soul-made beauty seems again to have shown itself jus-

<sup>1</sup> Rossetti, *Sonnet on Chatterton*.

<sup>2</sup> Alfred Noyes, *At the Sign of the Golden Shoe*.

<sup>3</sup> Browning in his youth must have encouraged the tradition. See Macready's Diary, in which he describes Browning as looking "more like a youthful poet than any man I ever saw."

tified. Likenesses of Rupert Brooke, with his "angel air,"<sup>1</sup> of Alan Seeger, and of Joyce Kilmer in his undergraduate days, are perhaps as beautiful as any the romantic period could afford. Still the young enthusiast of the present day should be warned not to be led astray by wolves in sheep's clothing, for the spurious claimant of the laurel is learning to employ all the devices of the art photographer to obscure and transform his unæsthetic visage.

We have implied that insistence upon the artist's beauty arose with the romantic movement, but a statement to that effect would have to be made with reservations. The eighteenth century was by no means without such a conception, as the satires of that period testify, being full of allusions to poetsasters' physical defects, with the obvious implication that they are indicative of spiritual deformity, and of literary sterility. Then, from within the romantic movement itself, a critic might exhume verse indicating that faith in the beautiful singer was by no means universal;—that, on the other hand, the interestingly ugly bard enjoyed considerable vogue. He would find, for example, Moore's *Lines on a Squinting Poetess*, and Praed's *The Talented Man*. In the latter verses the speaker says of her literary fancy,

He's hideous, I own it; but fame, Love,  
Is all that these eyes can adore.  
He's lame,—but Lord Byron was lame, Love,  
And dumpy, but so is Tom Moore.

<sup>1</sup> See W. W. Gibson, *Rupert Brooke*.

Still, rightly interpreted, such verse on poetasters is quite in line with the poet's conviction that beauty and genius are inseparable. So, likewise, is the more recent verse of Edgar Lee Masters, giving us the brutal self-portrait of Minerva Jones, the poetess of Spoon River,

Hooted at, jeered at by the Yahoos of the street  
For my heavy body, cock eye, and rolling walk,<sup>1</sup>

for she is only a would-be poet, and the cry, "I yearned so for beauty!" of her spirit, baffled by its embodiment, is almost insupportable.

Walt Whitman alludes to his face as "the heart's geography map," and assures us,

Here the idea, all in this mystic handful wrapped,<sup>2</sup>

but one needs specific instructions for interpretation of the poetic topography to which Whitman alludes. What are the poet's distinguishing features?

Meditating on the subject, one finds his irreverent thoughts inevitably wandering to hair, but in verse taken up with hirsute descriptions, there is a false note. It makes itself felt in Mrs. Browning's picture of Keats,

The real Adonis, with the hymeneal  
Fresh vernal buds half sunk between  
His youthful curls.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Spoon River Anthology.*

<sup>2</sup> *Out from Behind This Mask.*

<sup>3</sup> *A Vision of Poets.*



It is obnoxious in Alexander Smith's portrait of his hero,

A lovely youth,  
With dainty cheeks, and ringlets like a girl's.<sup>1</sup>

And in poorer verse it is unquotable.<sup>2</sup> Someone has pointed out that decadent poetry is always distinguished by over-insistence upon the heroine's hair, and surely sentimental verse on poets is marked by the same defect. Hair is doubtless essential to poetic beauty, but the poet's strength, unlike Samson's, emphatically does not reside in it.

"Broad Homeric brows,"<sup>3</sup> poets invariably possess, but the less phrenological aspect of their beauty is more stressed. The differentiating mark of the singer's face is a certain luminous quality, as of the soul shining through. Lamb noticed this peculiarity of Coleridge, declaring, "His face when he repeats his verses hath its ancient glory; an archangel a little damaged."<sup>4</sup> Francis Thompson was especially struck by this phenomenon. In lines *To a Poet Breaking Silence*, he asserts,

Yes, in this silent interspace  
God sets his poems in thy face,

and again, in *Her Portrait*, he muses,

<sup>1</sup> *A Life Drama*.

<sup>2</sup> See Henry Timrod, *A Vision of Poesy* (1898); Frances Fuller, *To Edith May* (1851); Metta Fuller, *Lines to a Poetess* (1851).

<sup>3</sup> See Wordsworth, *On the Death of James Hogg*; Browning, *Sordello*, *By the Fireside*; Mrs. Browning, *Aurora Leigh*; Principal Shairp, *Balliol Scholars*; Alfred Noyes, *Tales of the Mermaid Inn*.

<sup>4</sup> E. V. Lucas, *The Life of Charles Lamb*, Vol. I., p. 500.

How should I gage what beauty is her dole,  
 Who cannot see her countenance for her soul,  
 As birds see not the casement for the sky.

It is through the eyes, of course, that the soul seems to shine most radiantly. Through them, Rupert Brooke's friends recognized his poetical nature, —through his

Dream dazzled gaze  
 Aflame and burning like a god in song.<sup>1</sup>

Generally the poet is most struck by the abstracted expression that he surprises in his eyes. Into it, in the case of later poets, there probably enters unconscious imitation of Keats's gaze, that "inward look, perfectly divine, like a Delphian priestess who saw visions."<sup>2</sup> In many descriptions, as of "the rapt one—the heaven-eyed"<sup>3</sup> Coleridge, or of Edmund Spenser,

With haunted eyes, like starlit forest pools<sup>4</sup>

one feels the æsthetic possibilities of an abstracted expression. But Mrs. Browning fails to achieve a happy effect. When she informs us of a fictitious poet that

His steadfast eye burnt inwardly  
 As burning out his soul,<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> W. W. Gibson, *To E. M., In Memory of Rupert Brooke.*

<sup>2</sup> The words are Benjamin Haydn's. See Sidney Colvin, *John Keats*, p. 79.

<sup>3</sup> Wordsworth, *On the Death of James Hogg.*

<sup>4</sup> Alfred Noyes, *Tales of the Mermaid Inn.*

<sup>5</sup> *The Poet's Vow.*

we feel uneasily that someone should rouse him from his revery before serious damage is done.

The idealistic poet weans his eyes from their pragmatic character in varying degree. Wordsworth, in poetic mood, seems to have kept them half closed.<sup>1</sup> Mrs. Browning notes his

Humble-lidded eyes, as one inclined  
Before the sovran-thought of his own mind.<sup>2</sup>

Clough, also, impressed his poetic brothers by "his bewildered look, and his half-closed eyes."<sup>3</sup>

But the poet sometimes goes farther, making it his ideal to

See, no longer blinded with his eyes,<sup>4</sup>

and may thus conceive of the master-poet as necessarily blind. Milton's noble lines on blindness in *Samson Agonistes* have had much to do, undoubtedly, with the conceptions of later poets. Though blindness is seldom extended to other than actual poets, within the confines of verse having such a poet as subject it is referred to, often, as a partial explanation of genius. Thus Gray says of Milton,

The living throne, the sapphire blaze  
Where angels tremble while they gaze  
He saw, but blasted with excess of light,  
Closed his eyes in endless night,<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See *A Poet's Epitaph*, and *Sonnet: Most Sweet it is with Unuplifted Eyes*.

<sup>2</sup> *On a Portrait of Wordsworth*.

<sup>3</sup> The quotation is by Longfellow. See J. I. Osborne, *Arthur Hugh Clough*.

<sup>4</sup> See Rupert Brooke, *Not With Vain Tears*.

<sup>5</sup> *Progress of Poesy*.

and most other poems on Milton follow this fancy.<sup>1</sup> There is a good deal of verse on P. B. Marston, also, concurring with Rossetti's assertion that we may

By the darkness of thine eyes discern  
How piercing was the light within thy soul.<sup>2</sup>

Then, pre-eminently, verse on Homer is characterized by such an assertion as that of Keats,

There is a triple sight in blindness keen.<sup>3</sup>

Though the conception is not found extensively in other types of verse, one finds an admirer apostrophizing Wordsworth,

Thou that, when first my quickened ear  
Thy deeper harmonies might hear,  
I imaged to myself as old and blind,  
For so were Milton and Mæonides,<sup>4</sup>

and at least one American writer, Richard Gilder, ascribes blindness to his imaginary artists.<sup>5</sup>

But the old, inescapable contradiction in æsthetic philosophy crops up here. The poet is concerned only with ideal beauty, yet the way to it, for him, must be through sensuous beauty. So, as opposed to the picture of the singer blind to his surroundings,

<sup>1</sup> See John Hughes, *To the Memory of Milton*; William Lisle Bowles, *Milton in Age*; Bulwer Lytton, *Milton*; W. H. Burleigh, *The Lesson*; R. C. Robbins, *Milton*.

<sup>2</sup> See Rossetti, *P. B. Marston*; Swinburne, *Transfiguration, Marston, Light*; Watts-Dunton, *A Grave by the Sea*.

<sup>3</sup> See Keats, *Sonnet on Homer*; Landor, *Homer, Laertes, Agatha*; Joyce Kilmer, *The Proud Poet, Vision*.

<sup>4</sup> Wm. W. Lord, *Wordsworth* (1845).

<sup>5</sup> See *The Blind Poet*, and *Lost*. See also Francis Carlin, *Blind O'Cahan* (1918.)



we have the opposite picture—that of a singer with every sense visibly alert. At the very beginning of a narrative and descriptive poem, the reader can generally distinguish between the idealistic and the sensuous singer. The more spiritually minded poet is usually characterized as blond. The natural tendency to couple a pure complexion and immaculate thoughts is surely aided, here, by portraits of Shelley, and of Milton in his youth. The brunette poet, on the other hand, is perforce a member of the fleshly school. The two types are clearly differentiated in Bulwer Lytton's *Dispute of the Poets*. The spiritual one

Lifted the azure light of earnest eyes,

but his brother,

The one with brighter hues and darker curls  
Clustering and purple as the fruit of the vine,  
Seemed like that Summer-Idol of rich life  
Whom sensuous Greece, inebriate with delight  
From orient myth and symbol-worship wrought.

The decadents favor swarthy poets, and, in describing their features, seize upon the most expressive symbols of sensuality. Thus the hero of John Davidson's *Ballad in Blank Verse on the Making of a Poet* is

A youth whose sultry eyes  
Bold brow and wanton mouth were not all lust.

But even the idealistic poet, if he be not one-sided, must have sensuous features, as Browning conceives him. We are told of Sordello,

Yourselves shall trace  
 (The delicate nostril swerving wide and fine,  
 A sharp and restless lip, so well combine  
 With that calm brow) a soul fit to receive  
 Delight at every sense; you can believe  
 Sordello foremost in the regal class  
 Nature has broadly severed from her mass  
 Of men, and framed for pleasure . . .

You recognize at once the finer dress  
 Of flesh that amply lets in loveliness  
 At eye and ear.

Perhaps it is with the idea that the flesh may be shuffled off the more easily that poets are given "barely enough body to imprison the soul," as Mrs. Browning's biographer says of her.<sup>1</sup> The imaginary bard is so inevitably slender that allusion to "the poet's frame" needs no further description. Yet, once more, the poet may seem to be deliberately blinding himself to the facts. What of the father of English song, who, in the *Canterbury Tales*, is described by the burly host,

He in the waast is shape as wel as I;  
 This were a popet in an arm tenbrace  
 For any woman, smal and fair of face?<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Mrs. Anna B. Jameson. George Stillman Hilliard says of Mrs. Browning, "I have never seen a human frame which seemed so nearly a transparent veil for a celestial and immortal spirit." Shelley, Keats, Clough and Swinburne undoubtedly helped to strengthen the tradition.

<sup>2</sup> *Prologue to Sir Thopas*.

Even here, however, one can trace the modern æsthetic aversion to fat. Chaucer undoubtedly took sly pleasure in stressing his difference from the current conception of the poet, which was typified so well by the handsome young squire, who

Coude songes make, and wel endyte.<sup>1</sup>

Such, at least, is the interpretation of Percy Mackaye, who in his play, *The Canterbury Pilgrims*, derives the heartiest enjoyment from Chaucer's woe lest his avoirdupois may affect Madame Eglantine unfavorably. The modern English poet who is oppressed by too, too solid flesh is inclined to follow Chaucer's precedent and take it philosophically. James Thomson allowed the stanza about himself, interpolated by his friends into the *Castle of Indolence*, to remain, though it begins with the line,

A bard here dwelt, more fat than bard beseems.

And in these days, the sentimental reader is shocked by Joyce Kilmer's callous assertion, "I am fat and gross. . . . In my youth I was slightly decorative. But now I drink beer instead of writing about absinthe."<sup>2</sup>

Possibly it would not be unreasonable to take difference in weight as another distinction between idealistic and sensuous poets. Of one recent realistic poet it is recorded, "How a poet could *not* be a glori-

<sup>1</sup> *Prologue.*

<sup>2</sup> Letter to Father Daly, November, 1914.

ous eater, he said he could not see, for the poet was happier than other men, by reason of his acuter senses." <sup>1</sup> As a rule, however, decadent and spiritual poets alike shrink from the thought of grossness, in spite of the fact that Joyce Kilmer was able to win his wager, "I will write a poem about a delicatessen shop. It will be a high-brow poem. It will be liked." <sup>2</sup> Of course Keats accustomed the public to the idea that there are æsthetic distinctions in the sense of taste, but throughout the last century the idea of a poet enjoying solid food was an anomaly. Whitman's proclamation of himself, "Turbulent, fleshy, sensual, eating and drinking and breeding" <sup>3</sup> automatically shut him off, in the minds of his contemporaries, from consideration as a poet.

It is a nice question just how far a poet may go in ignoring the demands of the flesh. Shelley's friends record that his indifference reached the stage of forgetting, for days at a time, that he was in a body at all. Even more extreme was the attitude of Poe, as it is presented at length in Olive Dargan's drama, *The Poet*. So cordial is his detestation of food and bed that he not only eschews them himself, but withholds them from his wife, driving the poor woman to a lingering death from tuberculosis, while he himself succumbs to delirium tremens. In fact, excessive abstemiousness, fostering digestive disorders, has been alleged to be the

<sup>1</sup> Richard Le Gallienne, *Joyce Kilmer*.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Cortez Holliday, *Memoir of Joyce Kilmer*, p. 62.

<sup>3</sup> *Song of Myself*.



secret of the copious melancholy verse in the last century. It is not the ill-nourished poet, however, but enemies of the melancholy type of verse, who offer this explanation. Thus Walt Whitman does not hesitate to write poetry on the effect of his digestive disorders upon his gift,<sup>1</sup> and George Meredith lays the weakness of *Manfred* to the fact that it was

Projected from the bilious Childe.<sup>2</sup>

But to all conscious of possessing poetical temperament in company with emaciation, the explanation has seemed intolerably sordid.

To be sure, the unhealthy poet is not ubiquitous. Wordsworth's *Prelude* describes a life of exuberant physical energy. Walt Whitman's position we have quoted, and after him came a number of American writers, assigning a football physique to their heroes. J. G. Holland's poet was the superior of his comrades when brawn as well as brain, contended.<sup>3</sup> William Henry Burleigh, also, described his favorite poet as

A man who measured six feet four:  
Broad were his shoulders, ample was his chest,  
Compact his frame, his muscles of the best.<sup>4</sup>

With the recent revival of interest in Whitman, the brawny bard has again come into favor in certain quarters. Joyce Kilmer, as has been noted, was

<sup>1</sup> See *As I Sit Writing Here*.

<sup>2</sup> George Meredith, *Manfred*.

<sup>3</sup> *Kathrina*.

<sup>4</sup> *A Portrait*.

his strongest advocate, inveighing against weakly verse-writers,

A heavy handed blow, I think,  
Would make your veins drip scented ink.<sup>1</sup>

But the poet hero of the Harold Bell Wright type is receiving his share of ridicule, as well as praise, at present. A farce, *Fame and the Poet*, by Lord Dunsany, advertises the adulation by feminine readers resulting from a poet's pose as a "man's man." And Ezra Pound, who began his career as an exemplar of virility,<sup>2</sup> finds himself unable to keep up the pose, and so resorts to the complaint,

We are compared to that sort of person  
Who wanders about announcing his sex  
As if he had just discovered it.<sup>3</sup>

The most sensible argument offered by the advocate of better health in poets is made by the chronic invalid, Mrs. Browning. She causes Aurora Leigh's cousin Romney to argue,

Reflect; if art be in truth the higher life,  
You need the lower life to stand upon  
In order to reach up unto that higher;  
And none can stand a tip-toe in that place  
He cannot stand in with two stable feet.<sup>4</sup>

Mrs. Browning's theory is not out of key with a professedly scientific account of genius, not unpopular

<sup>1</sup> *To Certain Poets.*

<sup>2</sup> See *The Revolt against the Crepuscular Spirit in Modern Poetry.*

<sup>3</sup> *The Condolence.*

<sup>4</sup> *Aurora Leigh.* See also the letter to Robert Browning, May 6, 1845.

nowadays, which represents art as the result of excess vitality.<sup>1</sup>

Yet, on the whole, the frail poet still holds his own; how securely is illustrated by the familiarity of the idea as applied to other artists, outside the domain of poetry. It is noteworthy that in a recent book of essays by the painter, Birge Harrison, one runs across the contention :

In fact, as a noted painter once said to me: These semi-invalids neither need nor deserve our commiseration, for in reality the beggars have the advantage of us. *Their* nerves are always sensitive and keyed to pitch, while we husky chaps have to flog ours up to the point. We must dig painfully through the outer layers of flesh before we can get at the spirit, while the invalids are all spirit.<sup>2</sup>

That such a belief had no lack of support from facts in the last century, is apparent merely from naming over the chief poets. Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, Keats, Mrs. Browning, Rossetti, all publish their ill-health through their verse. Even Browning, in whose verse, if anywhere, one would expect to find the virile poet, shows Sordello turned to poetry by the fact of his physical weakness.<sup>3</sup>

Obviously, if certain invalids possess a short-cut to their souls, as Birge Harrison suggests, the nature

<sup>1</sup> See R. C. Robbins, *Michael Angelo* (1904).

<sup>2</sup> From *Landscape Painters*, p. 184.

<sup>3</sup> So nearly ubiquitous has ill-health been among modern poets, that Max Nordau, in his widely read indictment of art, *Degeneration*, was able to make out a plausible case for his theory that genius is a disease which is always accompanied by physical stigmata.

of their complaint must be significant. A jumping toothache would hardly be an advantage to a sufferer in turning his thoughts to poesy. Since verse writers recoil from the suggestion that dyspepsia is the name of their complaint, let us ask them to explain its real character to us. To take one of our earliest examples, what is the malady of William Lisle Bowles' poet, of whom we learn,

Too long had sickness left her pining trace  
With slow still touch on each decaying grace;  
Untimely sorrow marked his thoughtful mien;  
Despair upon his languid smile was seen.<sup>1</sup>

We can never know. But with Shelley, it becomes evident that tuberculosis is the typical poet's complaint. Shelley was convinced that he himself was destined to die of it. The irreverent Hogg records that Shelley was also afraid of death from elephantiasis,<sup>2</sup> but he keeps that affliction out of his verse. So early as the composition of the *Revolt of Islam*, Shelley tells us of himself, in the introduction,

Death and love are yet contending for their prey,  
and in *Adonais* he appears as

A power  
Girt round with weakness.  
.  
A light spear . . .  
Vibrated, as the everbeating heart  
Shook the weak hand that grasped it.

<sup>1</sup> *Monody on Henry Headley*.

<sup>2</sup> T. J. Hogg, *Life of Shelley*, p. 458.



Shelley's imaginary poet, Lionel, gains in poetical sensibility as consumption saps his strength:

You might see his colour come and go,  
 And the softest strain of music made  
 Sweet smiles, yet sad, arise and fade  
 Amid the dew of his tender eyes;  
 And the breath with intermitting flow  
 Made his pale lips quiver and part.<sup>1</sup>

The deaths from tuberculosis of Kirke White<sup>2</sup> and of Keats, added to Shelley's verse, so affected the imagination of succeeding poets that for a time the cough became almost ubiquitous in verse. In major poetry it appears for the last time in Tennyson's *The Brook*, where the young poet hastens to Italy, "too late," but in American verse it continued to rack the frame of geniuses till the germ theory robbed it of romance and the anti-tuberculosis campaign drove it out of existence.

Without the aid of physical causes, the exquisite sensitiveness of the poet's spirit is sometimes regarded as enough to produce illness. Thus Alexander Smith explains his sickly hero:

More tremulous  
 Than the soft star that in the azure East  
 Trembles with pity o'er bright bleeding day  
 Was his frail soul.<sup>3</sup>

Arnold, likewise, in *Thyrsis*, follows the poetic tradition in thus vaguely accounting for Clough's death:

<sup>1</sup> *Rosalind and Helen.*

<sup>2</sup> See Kirke White, *Sonnet to Consumption.*

<sup>3</sup> *A Life Drama.*

Some life of men unblest  
 He knew, which made him droop, and filled his head.  
 He went, his piping took a troubled sound  
 Of storms that rage outside our happy ground.  
 He could not wait their passing; he is dead.

In addition, the intense application that genius demands leaves its mark upon the body. Recognition of this fact has doubtless been aided by Dante's portrait, which Wilde has repainted in verse:

The calm, white brow, as calm as earliest morn,  
 The eyes that flashed with passionate love and scorn,  
 The lips that sang of Heaven and of Hell,  
 The almond face that Giotto drew so well,  
 The weary face of Dante.<sup>1</sup>

Rossetti repeats the tradition that the composition of the *Inferno* so preyed upon Dante that the superstitious believed that he had actually visited Hades, and whispered to one another,

Behold him, how Hell's reek  
 Has crisped his beard and singed his cheek.<sup>2</sup>

A similar note is in Francis Thompson's description of Coventry. Patmore:

And lo! that hair is blanched with travel-heats of hell.<sup>3</sup>

In this connection one thinks at once of Shelley's prematurely graying hair, reflected in description of

<sup>1</sup> *Ravenna.*

<sup>2</sup> *Dante at Verona.*

<sup>3</sup> *A Captain of Song.*

his heroes harried by their genius into ill health.  
Prince Athanase is

A youth who as with toil and travel  
Had grown quite weak and gray before his time.<sup>1</sup>

In *Alastor*, too, we see the hero wasting away  
until

His limbs were lean; his scattered hair,  
Sered by the autumn of strange suffering,  
Sung dirges in the wind: his listless hand  
Hung like dead bone within his withered skin;  
Life, and the lustre that consumed it, shone  
As in a furnace burning secretly  
From his dark eyes alone.

The likeness of Sordello to Shelley<sup>2</sup> is marked in the ravages of his genius upon his flesh, so that at the climax of the poem he, though still a young man, is gray and haggard and fragile.

Though ill-health is a handicap to him, the poet's subjection to the mutability that governs the mundane sphere is less important, some persons would declare, in the matter of beauty and health than in the matter of sex. Can a poetic spirit overcome the calamity of being cast by Fate into the body of a woman?

As the battle of feminism dragged its bloody way through all fields of endeavor in the last century,

<sup>1</sup> *Prince Athanase*, a fragment.

<sup>2</sup> Browning himself pointed out a similarity between them, in the opening of Book I.

it of course has left its traces in the realm of poetry. But here the casualties appear to be light,—in fact, it is a disappointment to the suffragist to find most of the blows struck by the female aspirant for glory, with but few efforts to parry them on the part of the male contingent. Furthermore, in verse concerned with specific woman poets, men have not failed to give them their due, or more. From Miriam<sup>1</sup> and Sappho,<sup>2</sup> to the long list of nineteenth century female poets—Mrs. Browning,<sup>3</sup> Christina Rossetti,<sup>4</sup> Emily Brontë,<sup>5</sup> Alice Meynell,<sup>6</sup> Felicia Hemans,<sup>7</sup> Adelaide Proctor,<sup>8</sup> Helen Hunt,<sup>9</sup> Emma Lazarus<sup>10</sup>—one finds woman the subject of complimentary verse from their brothers. There is nothing to complain of here, we should say at first, and yet, in the unreserved praise given to their greatest is a note that irritates the feminists. For men have made it plain that Sappho was not like other women;

<sup>1</sup> See Barry Cornwall, *Miriam*.

<sup>2</sup> Southey, *Sappho*; Freneau, *Monument of Phaon*; Kingsley, *Sappho*, Swinburne, *On the Cliffs, Sapphics, Anactoria*; Cale Young Rice, *Sappho's Death Song*; J. G. Percival, *Sappho*; Percy Mackaye, *Sappho and Phaon*; W. A. Percy, *Sappho in Lenkos*.

<sup>3</sup> Browning, *One Word More, Preface to The Ring and the Book*; James Thomson, B. V., *E. B. B.*; Sidney Dobell, *On the Death of Mrs. Browning*.

<sup>4</sup> Swinburne, *Ballad of Appeal to Christina Rossetti, New Year's Eve, Dedication to Christina Rossetti*.

<sup>5</sup> Stephen Phillips, *Emily Brontë*.

<sup>6</sup> Francis Thompson, *Sister Songs, On her Photograph, To a Poet Breaking Silence*.

<sup>7</sup> L. E. Maclean, *Felicia Hemans*.

<sup>8</sup> Edwin Arnold, *Adelaide Anne Proctor*.

<sup>9</sup> Richard Watson Gilder, *H. H.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, *To E. Lazarus*.



it is the "virility" of her style that appeals to them; they have even gone so far as to hail her "manlike maiden."<sup>1</sup> So the feminists have been only embittered by their brothers' praise.

As time wears on, writers averse to feminine verse seem to be losing the courage of their convictions. At the end of the eighteenth century, woman's opponent was not afraid to express himself. Woman writers were sometimes praised, but it was for one quality alone, the chastity of their style. John Hughes<sup>2</sup> and Tom Moore<sup>3</sup> both deplored the need of such an element in masculine verse. But Moore could not resist counteracting the effect of his chary praise by a play, *The Blue Stocking*, which burlesques the literary pose in women. He seemed to feel, also, that he had neatly quelled their poetical aspirations when he advertised his aversion to marrying a literary woman.<sup>4</sup> Despite a chivalrous sentimentality, Barry Cornwall took his stand with Moore on the point, exhorting women to choose love rather than a literary career.<sup>5</sup> More seriously, Landor offered the same discouragement to his young friend with poetical tastes.<sup>6</sup> On the whole the prevalent view expressed early in the nineteenth century is the considerate one that while women lack a literary gift, they have, none the less, sweet poetical

<sup>1</sup> Swinburne, *On the Cliffs*.

<sup>2</sup> See *To the Author of "A Fatal Friendship."*

<sup>3</sup> See *To Mrs. Henry Tighe*.

<sup>4</sup> See *The Catalogue*. Another of his poems ridiculing poetesses is *The Squinting Poetess*.

<sup>5</sup> See *To a Poetess*.

<sup>6</sup> See *To Write as Your Sweet Mother Does*.

natures. Bulwer Lytton phrased the old-fashioned distinction between his hero and heroine,

In each lay poesy—for woman's heart  
Nurses the stream, unsought and oft unseen;  
And if it flow not through the tide of art,  
Nor win the glittering daylight—you may ween  
It slumbers, but not ceases, and if checked  
The egress of rich words, it flows in thought,  
And in its silent mirror doth reflect  
Whate'er affection to its banks hath brought.<sup>1</sup>

Yet the poetess has two of the strongest poets of the romantic period on her side. Wordsworth, in his many allusions to his sister Dorothy, appeared to feel her possibilities equal to his own, and in verses on an anthology, he offered praise of a more general nature to verse written by women.<sup>2</sup> And beside the sober judgment of Wordsworth, one may place the unbounded enthusiasm of Shelley, who not only praises extravagantly the verse of an individual, Emilia Viviani,<sup>3</sup> but who also offers us an imaginary poetess of supreme powers,—Cythna, in *The Revolt of Islam*.

It is disappointing to the agitator to find the question dropping out of sight in later verse. In the Victorian period it comes most plainly to the surface in Browning, and while the exquisite praise of his

Lyric love, half angel and half bird,

<sup>1</sup> Milton.

<sup>2</sup> See *To Lady Mary Lowther*.

<sup>3</sup> See the introduction to *Epipsychidion*.

reveals him a believer in at least sporadic female genius, his position on the question of championing the entire sex is at least equivocal. In *The Two Poets of Croisic* he deals with the eighteenth century in France, where the literary woman came so gloriously into her own. Browning represents a man writing under a feminine pseudonym and winning the admiration of the celebrities of the day—only to have his verse tossed aside as worthless as soon as his sex is revealed. Woman wins by her charm, seems to be the moral. A hopeful sign, however, is the fact that of late years one poet produced his best work under a feminine *nom de plume*, and found it no handicap in obtaining recognition.<sup>1</sup>

If indifference is the attitude of the male poet, not so of the woman writer. She insists that her work shall redound, not to her own glory, merely, but to that of her entire sex as well. For the most worthy presentation of her case, we must turn to Mrs. Browning, though the radical feminist is not likely to approve of her attitude. "My secret profession of faith," she admitted to Robert Browning, "is—that there is a natural inferiority of mind in women—of the intellect—not by any means of the moral nature—and that the history of Art and of genius testifies to this fact openly."<sup>2</sup> Still, despite this private surrender to the enemy, Mrs. Browning defends her sex well.

<sup>1</sup> William Sharp, "Fiona McLeod."

<sup>2</sup> Letter to Robert Browning, July 4, 1845.

In a short narrative poem, *Mother and Poet*, Mrs. Browning claims for her heroine the sterner virtues that have been denied her by the average critic, who assigns woman to sentimental verse as her proper sphere. Of course her most serious consideration of the problem is to be found in *Aurora Leigh*. She feels that making her imaginary poet a woman is a departure from tradition, and she strives to justify it. Much of the debasing adulation and petty criticism heaped upon Aurora must have been taken from Mrs. Browning's own experience. Ignoring insignificant antagonism to her, Aurora is seriously concerned with the charges that the social worker, Romney Leigh, brings against her sex. Romney declares,

Women as you are,  
Mere women, personal and passionate,  
You give us doting mothers, and perfect wives,  
Sublime Madonnas and enduring saints!  
We get no Christ from you,—and verily  
We shall not get a poet, in my mind.

Aurora is obliged to acknowledge to herself that Romney is right in charging women with inability to escape from personal considerations. She confesses,

We women are too apt to look to one,  
Which proves a certain impotence in art.

But in the end, and after much struggling, Aurora wins for her poetry even Romney's reluctant ad-



miration. Mrs. Browning's implication seems to be that the intensely "personal and passionate" nature of woman is an advantage to her, if once she can lift herself from its thralldom, because it saves her from the danger of dry generalization which assails verse of more masculine temper.<sup>1</sup>

Of only less vital concern to poets than the question of the poet's physical constitution is the problem of his environment. Where will the chains of mortality least hamper his aspiring spirit?

In answer, one is haunted by the line,

I too was born in Arcadia.

Still, this is not the answer that poets would make in all periods. In the eighteenth century, for example, though a stereotyped conception of the shepherd poet ruled,—as witness the verses of Hughes,<sup>2</sup> Collins,<sup>3</sup> and Thomson,<sup>4</sup>—it is obvious that these gentlemen were in no literal sense expressing their views on the poet's habitat. It was hardly necessary for Thomas Hood to parody their efforts in his eclogues giving a broadly realistic turn to shepherds assuming the singing robes.<sup>5</sup> Wherever a personal element enters, as in John Hughes' *Letter to a Friend in the Country*, and Sid-

<sup>1</sup> For treatment of the question of the poet's sex in American verse by women, see Emma Lazarus, *Echoes*; Olive Dargan, *Ye Who are to Sing*.

<sup>2</sup> See *Corydon*.

<sup>3</sup> See *Selim, or the Shepherd's Moral*.

<sup>4</sup> See *Pastoral on the Death of Dæmon*.

<sup>5</sup> See *Huggins and Duggins*, and *The Forlorn Shepherd's Complaint*.

ney Dyer's *A Country Walk*, it is apparent that the poet is not indigenous to the soil. He is the city gentleman, come out to enjoy a holiday.

With the growth of a romantic conception of nature, the relation of the poet to nature becomes, of course, more intimate. But Cowper and Thomson keep themselves out of their nature poetry to such an extent that it is hard to tell what their ideal position would be, and not till the publication of Beattie's *The Minstrel* do we find a poem in which the poet is nurtured under the influence of a natural scenery. At the very climax of the romantic period the poet is not always bred in the country. We find Byron revealing himself as one who seeks nature only occasionally, as a mistress in whose novelty resides a good deal of her charm. Shelley, too, portrays a poet reared in civilization, but escaping to nature.<sup>1</sup> Still, it is obvious that ever since the time of Burns and Wordsworth, the idea of a poet nurtured from infancy in nature's bosom has been extremely popular.

There are degrees of naturalness in nature, however. How far from the hubbub of commercialism should the poet reside? Burns and Wordsworth were content with the farm country, but for poets whose theories were not so intimately joined with experience such an environment was too tame. Bowles would send his visionary boy into the wilderness.<sup>2</sup> Coleridge and Southey went so far as

<sup>1</sup> See *Epipsychidion*, and *Alastor*.

<sup>2</sup> See *The Visionary Boy*.

to lay plans for emigrating, in person, to the banks of the Susquehanna. Shelley felt that savage conditions best foster poetry.<sup>1</sup> Campbell, in *Gertrude of Wyoming*, made his bard an Indian, and commented on his songs,

So finished he the rhyme, howe'er uncouth,  
That true to Nature's fervid feelings ran  
(And song is but the eloquence of truth).

The early American poet, J. G. Percival, expressed the same theory, declaring of poetry,

Its seat is deeper in the savage breast  
Than in the man of cities.<sup>2</sup>

To most of us, this conception of the poet is familiar because of acquaintance, from childhood, with Chibiabus, "he the sweetest of all singers," in Longfellow's *Hiawatha*.

But the poet of to-day may well pause, before he starts to an Indian reservation. What is the mysterious benefit which the poet derives from nature? Humility and common sense, Burns would probably answer, and that response would not appeal to the majority of poets. A mystical experience of religion, Wordsworth would say, of course. A wealth of imagery, nineteenth century poets would hardly think it worth while to add, for the influence of natural scenery upon poetic metaphors has come

<sup>1</sup> See the *Defense of Poetry*: "In the infancy of society every author is necessarily a poet."

<sup>2</sup> *Poetry*.

to be such a matter of course that one hardly realizes its significance. Perhaps, too, poets should admit oftener than they do the influence of nature's rhythms upon their style. As Madison Cawein says,

If the wind and the brook and the bird would teach  
My heart their beautiful parts of speech,  
And the natural art they say these with,  
My soul would sing of beauty and myth  
In a rhyme and a meter none before  
Have sung in their love, or dreamed in their lore.<sup>1</sup>

The influence of nature which the romantic poet stressed most, however, was a negative one. In a sense in which Wordsworth probably did not intend it, the romantic poet betrayed himself hastening to nature

More like a man  
Flying from something that he dreads, than one  
Who sought the thing he loved.

What nature is not, seemed often her chief charm to the romanticist. Bowles sent his visionary boy to "romantic solitude." Byron<sup>2</sup> and Shelley,<sup>3</sup> too, were as much concerned with escaping from humanity as with meeting nature. Only Wordsworth, in the romantic period, felt that the poet's life ought not to be wholly disjoined from his fellows.<sup>4</sup>

Of course the poet's quarrel with his unapprecia-

<sup>1</sup> *Preludes.*

<sup>2</sup> See *Childe Harold.*

<sup>3</sup> See *Epipsychidion.*

<sup>4</sup> See *Tintern Abbey, Ode on Intimations of Immortality, and The Prelude.*



tive public has led him to express a longing for complete solitude sporadically, even down to the present time, but by the middle of the nineteenth century "romantic solitude" as the poet's perennial habitat seems just about to have run its course. Of the major poets, Matthew Arnold alone consistently urges the poet to flee from "the strange disease of modern life." The Scholar Gypsy lives the ideal life of a poet, Matthew Arnold would say, and preserves his poetical temperament because of his escape from civilization:

For early didst thou leave the world, with powers  
 Fresh, undiverted to the world without,  
 Firm to their mark, not spent on other things;  
 Free from the sick fatigue, the languid doubt  
 Which much to have tried, in much been baffled brings.

No doubt, solitude magnifies the poet's sense of his own personality. Stephen Phillips says of Emily Brontë's poetic gift,

Only barren hills  
 Could wring the woman riches out of thee,<sup>1</sup>

and there are several poets of whom a similar statement might be made. But the Victorians were aware that only half of a poet's nature was developed thus. Tennyson<sup>2</sup> and Mrs. Browning<sup>3</sup> both sounded a warning as to the dangers of complete

<sup>1</sup> *Emily Brontë.*

<sup>2</sup> See *The Palace of Art.*

<sup>3</sup> See *The Poet's Vow*; Letters to Robert Browning, January 1, 1846, and March 20, 1845.

isolation. And at present, though the eremite poet is still with us,<sup>1</sup> he does not have everything his own way.

For it has begun to occur to poets that it may not have been merely an untoward accident that several of their loftiest brethren were reared in London. In the romantic period even London-bred Keats said, as a matter of course,

The coy muse, with me she would not live  
In this dark city,<sup>2</sup>

and the American romanticist, Emerson, said of the poet,

In cities he was low and mean;  
The mountain waters washed him clean.<sup>3</sup>

But Lowell protested against such a statement, avowing of the muse,

She can find a nobler theme for song  
In the most loathsome man that blasts the sight  
Than in the broad expanse of sea and shore.<sup>4</sup>

A number of the Victorians acknowledged that they lived from choice in London. Christina Rossetti admitted frankly that she preferred London to the country, and defended herself with Bacon's state-

<sup>1</sup> See Lascelles Ambercrombe, *An Escape*; J. E. Flecker, *Dirge*; Madison Cawein, *Comrading*; Yeats, *The Lake Isle of Innisfree*.

<sup>2</sup> *Epistle to George Felton Mathew*. Wordsworth's sonnet, "Earth has not anything to show more fair," seems to have been unique at this time.

<sup>3</sup> *The Poet*.

<sup>4</sup> *L'Envoi*.

ment, "The souls of the living are the beauty of the world."<sup>1</sup> Mrs. Browning made Aurora outgrow pastoral verse, and not only reside in London, but find her inspiration there. Francis Thompson and William Henley were not ashamed to admit that they were inspired by London. James Thomson, B.V., belongs with them in this regard, for though he depicted the horror of visions conjured up in the city streets in a way unparalleled in English verse,<sup>2</sup> this is not the same thing as the romantic poet's repudiation of the city as an unimaginative environment.

Coming to more recent verse, we find Austin Dobson still feeling it an anomaly that his muse should prefer the city to the country.<sup>3</sup> John Davidson, also, was very self-conscious about his city poets.<sup>4</sup> But as landscape painters are beginning to see and record the beauty in the most congested city districts, so poets have been making their muse more and more at home there, until our contemporary poets scarcely stop to take their residence in the city otherwise than as a matter of course. Alan Seeger cries out for Paris as the ideal habitat of the singer.<sup>5</sup> Even New York and Chicago<sup>6</sup> are beginning to serve as backgrounds for the poet fig-

<sup>1</sup> See E. L. Cary, *The Rossettis*, p. 236.

<sup>2</sup> See *The City of Dreadful Night*.

<sup>3</sup> See *On London Stones*.

<sup>4</sup> See *Fleet Street Eclogues*.

<sup>5</sup> See *Paris*.

<sup>6</sup> See Carl Sandburg, *Chicago Poems*; Edgar Lee Masters, *The Loop*; William Griffith, *City Pastorals*; Charles H. Towne, *The City*.

ure. A poem called *A Winter Night* reveals Sara Teasdale as thoroughly at home in Manhattan as the most bucolic shepherd among his flocks.

To poets' minds the only unæsthetic habitat nowadays seems to be the country town. Although Edgar Lee Masters writes what he calls poetry inspired by it, the reader of the *Spoon River Anthology* is still disposed to sympathize with Benjamin Fraser of Spoon River, the artist whose genius was crushed by his ghastly environment.

So manifold, in fact, are the attractions of the world to the modern poet, that the vagabond singer has come into special favor lately. Of course he has appeared in English song ever since the time of minstrels, but usually, as in the Old English poem, *The Wanderer*, he has been unhappy in his roving life. Even so modern a poet as Scott was in the habit of portraying his minstrels as old and homesick.<sup>1</sup> But Byron set the fashion among poets of desiring "a world to roam through,"<sup>2</sup> and the poet who is a wanderer from choice has not been unknown since Byron's day.<sup>3</sup> The poet vagabond of to-day, as he is portrayed in Maurice Hewlitt's autobiographical novels, *Rest Harrow* and *Open Country*, and William H. Davies' tramp poetry, looks upon his condition in life as ideal.<sup>4</sup> Alan Seeger, too, concurred in the view, declaring,

<sup>1</sup> See *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*.

<sup>2</sup> *Epistle to Augusta*.

<sup>3</sup> Alfred Dommatt and George Borrow are notable.

<sup>4</sup> See also Francis Carlin, *Denby the Rhymers* (1918); Henry Herbert Knibbs, *Songs of the Trail* (1920).



Down the free roads of human happiness  
I frolicked, poor of purse but light of heart.<sup>1</sup>

“Poor of purse!” The words recall us to another of the poet’s quarrels with the world in which he is imprisoned. Should the philanthropist, as has often been suggested, endow the poet with an independent income? What a long and glorious tradition would then be broken! From Chaucer’s *Complaint to His Empty Purse*, onward, English poetry has borne the record of its maker’s poverty. The verse of our period is filled with names from the past that offer our poets a noble precedent for their destitution,—Homer, Cervantes, Camöens, Spenser, Dryden, Butler, Johnson, Otway, Collins, Chatterton, Burns,—all these have their want exposed in nineteenth and twentieth century verse.

The wary philanthropist, before launching into relief schemes, may well inquire into the cause of such wretchedness. The obvious answer is, of course, that instead of earning a livelihood the poet has spent his time on a vocation that makes no pecuniary return. Poets like to tell us, also, that their pride, and a fine sense of honour, hold them back from illegitimate means of acquiring wealth. But tradition has it that there are other contributing causes. Edmund C. Stedman’s *Bohemia* reveals the fact that the artist has most impractical ideas about the disposal of his income. He reasons that, since the more guests he has, the smaller the cost per

<sup>1</sup> *Sonnet to Sidney.*

person, then if he can only entertain extensively enough, the cost *per caput* will be *nil*. Not only so, but the poet is likely to lose sight completely of tomorrow's needs, once he has a little ready cash on hand. A few years ago, Philistines derived a good deal of contemptuous amusement from a poet's statement,

Had I two loaves of bread—ay, ay!  
One would I sell and daffodils buy  
To feed my soul.<sup>1</sup>

What is to be done with such people? Charity officers are continually asking.

What relief measure can poets themselves suggest? When they are speaking of older poets, they are apt to offer no constructive criticism, but only denunciation of society. Their general tone is that of Burns' lines *Written Under the Portrait of Ferguson*:

Curse on ungrateful man that can be pleased  
And yet can starve the author of the pleasure.

Occasionally the imaginary poet who appears in their verse is quite as bitter. Alexander Smith's hero protests against being "dungeoned in poverty." One of Richard Gilder's poets warns the public,

You need not weep for and sigh for and saint me  
After you've starved me and driven me dead.  
Friends, do you hear? What I want is bread.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Beauty*, Theodore Harding Rand.

<sup>2</sup> *The Young Poet*.

Through the thin veneer of the fictitious poet in Joaquin Miller's *Ina*, the author himself appears, raving,

A poet! a poet forsooth! Fool! hungry fool!  
 Would you know what it means to be a poet?  
 It is to want a friend, to want a home,  
 A country, money,—aye, to want a meal.<sup>1</sup>

But in autobiographical verse, the tone changes, and the poet refuses to pose as a candidate for charity. Rather, he parades an ostentatious horror of filthy lucre, only paralleled by his distaste for food. Mrs. Browning boasts,

The Devil himself scarce trusts his patented  
 Gold-making art to any who makes rhymes,  
 But culls his Faustus from philosophers  
 And not from poets.<sup>2</sup>

A poet who can make ends meet is practically convicted of being no true artist. Shakespeare is so solitary an exception to this rule, that his mercenary aspect is a pure absurdity to his comrades, as Edwin Arlington Robinson conceives of them.<sup>3</sup> In the eighteenth century indifference to remuneration was not so marked, and in poetic epistles, forgers of the couplet sometimes concerned themselves over the returns,<sup>4</sup> but since the romantic movement began, such

<sup>1</sup> See also John Savage, *He Writes for Bread*.

<sup>2</sup> *Aurora Leigh*.

<sup>3</sup> See *Ben Jonson Entertains a Man from Stratford*.

<sup>4</sup> See *Advice to Mr. Pope*, John Hughes; *Economy, The Poet and the Dun*, Sheenstone.

thought has been held unworthy.<sup>1</sup> In fact, even in these days, we are comparatively safe from a poet's strike.

Usually the poet declares that as for himself, he is indifferent to his financial condition. Praed speaks fairly for his brethren, when in *A Ballad Teaching How Poetry Is Best Paid For*, he represents their terms as very easy to meet. Even the melancholy Bowles takes on this subject, for once, a cheerful attitude, telling his visionary boy,

Nor fear, if grim before thine eyes  
Pale worldly want, a spectre lowers;  
What is a world of vanities  
To a world as fair as ours?

In the same spirit Burns belittles his poverty, saying, in *An Epistle to Davie, Fellow Poet*:

To lie in kilns and barns at e'en  
When bones are crazed, and blind is thin  
Is doubtless great distress,  
Yet then content would make us blest.

Shelley, too, eschews wealth, declaring, in *Epipyschidion*,

Our simple life wants little, and true taste  
Hires not the pale drudge luxury to waste  
The scene it would adorn.

<sup>1</sup> See *To a Poet Abandoning His Art*, Barry Cornwall; and *Poets and Poets*, T. E. Browne. On the other hand, see Sebastian Evans, *Religio Poetæ*.



Later poetry is likely to take an even exuberant attitude toward poverty.<sup>1</sup> The poet's wealth of song is so great that he leaves coin to those who wish it. Indeed he often has a superstitious fear of wealth, lest it take away his delight in song. In Markham's *The Shoes of Happiness*, only the poet who is too poor to buy shoes possesses the secret of joy. With a touching trust in providence, another poet cries,

Starving, still I smile,  
Laugh at want and wrong,  
He is fed and clothed  
To whom God giveth song.<sup>2</sup>

It is doubtful indeed that the poet would have his fate averted. Pope's satirical coupling of want and song, as cause and effect,

One cell there is, concealed from vulgar eye,  
The cave of Poverty and Poetry.  
Keen, hollow winds howl through the bleak recess,  
Emblem of music caused by emptiness,<sup>3</sup>

is accepted quite literally by later writers. Emerson's theory of compensations applies delightfully here as everywhere, and he meditates on the poet,

<sup>1</sup> See especially verse on the Mermaid group, as *Tales of the Mermaid Inn*, Alfred Noyes. See also Josephine Preston Peabody, *The Golden Shoes*; Richard Le Gallienne, *Faery Gold*; J. G. Saxe, *The Poet to his Garret*; W. W. Gibson, *The Empty Purse*; C. G. Halpine, *To a Wealthy Amateur Critic*; Simon Kerl, *Ode to Debt, A Leaf of Autobiography*; Thomas Gordon Hake, *The Poet's Feast*; Dana Burnet, *In a Garret*; Henry Aylett Sampson, *Stephen Phillips Bankrupt*.

<sup>2</sup> Anne Reeve Aldrich, *A Crowned Poet*.

<sup>3</sup> *Dunciad*.

The Muse gave special charge  
His learning should be deep and large,—

His flesh should feel, his eyes should read  
Every maxim of dreadful need.

By want and pain God screeneth him  
Till his appointed hour.<sup>1</sup>

It may appear doubtful to us whether the poet has painted ideal conditions for the nurture of genius in his picture of the poet's physical frame, his environment, and his material endowment, inasmuch as the death rate among young bards,—imaginary ones, at least, is appalling. What can account for it?

In a large percentage of cases, the poet's natural frailty of constitution is to blame for his early death, of course, but another popular explanation is that the very keenness of the poet's flame causes it to burn out the quicker. Byron finds an early death fitting to him,

For I had the share of life that might have filled a  
century,  
Before its fourth in time had passed me by.<sup>2</sup>

A fictitious poet looks back upon the same sort of life, and reflects,

. . . For my thirty years,  
Dashed with sun and splashed with tears,  
Wan with revel, red with wine,  
Other wiser happier men  
Take the full three score and ten.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *The Poet.*

<sup>2</sup> *Epistle to Augusta.*

<sup>3</sup> Alfred Noyes, *Tales of the Mermaid Inn.*

But this richness of experience is not inevitably bound up with recklessness, poets feel. The quality is in such a poet even as Emily Brontë, of whom it is written:

They live not long of thy pure fire composed;  
Earth asks but mud of those that will endure.<sup>1</sup>

Another cause of the poet's early death is certainly his fearlessness. Shelley prophesies that his daring spirit will meet death

Far from the trembling throng  
Whose souls are never to the tempest given.<sup>2</sup>

With the deaths of Rupert Brooke, Alan Seeger, Joyce Kilmer, and Francis Ledwidge, this element in the poet's disposition has been brought home to the public. Joyce Kilmer wrote back from the trenches, "It is wrong for a poet . . . to be listening to elevated trains when there are screaming shells to hear . . . and the bright face of danger to dream about."<sup>3</sup> And in his article on Joyce Kilmer in *The Bookman*, Richard LeGallienne speaks of young poets "touched with the finger of a moonlight that has written 'fated' upon their brows," adding, "Probably our feeling is nothing more than our realization that temperaments so vital and intense must inevitably tempt richer and swifter fates than those less wild-winged."

<sup>1</sup> Stephen Phillips, *Emily Brontë*.

<sup>2</sup> *Adonais*.

<sup>3</sup> Letter to his wife, March 12, 1918.

It is a question whether poets would expect us to condole with them or to felicitate them upon the short duration of their subjection to mortality. Even when the poet speaks of his early death solely with regard to its effect upon his earthly reputation, his attitude is not wholly clear. Much elegiac verse expresses such stereotyped sorrow for a departed bard that it is not significant. In other cases, one seems to overhear the gasp of relief from a patron whom time can never force to retract his superlative claims for his protégé's promise.

More significant is a different note which is sometimes heard. In Alexander Smith's *Life Drama*, it is ostensibly ironic. The critic muses,

He died—'twas shrewd:  
And came with all his youth and unblown hopes  
On the world's heart, and touched it into tears.

In *Sordello*, likewise, it is the unappreciative critic who expresses this sort of pleasure in Eglamor's death. But this feeling has also been expressed with all seriousness, as in Stephen Phillip's *Keats*:

I have seen more glory in sunrise  
Than in the deepening of azure noon,

or in Francis Thompson's *The Cloud's Swan Song*:

I thought of Keats, that died in perfect time,  
In predecease of his just-sickening song,  
Of him that set, wrapped in his radiant rhyme,  
Sunlike in sea. Life longer had been life too long.



Obviously we are in the wake of the Rousseau theory, acclimatized in English poetry by Wordsworth's youth "who daily farther from the east must travel." A long array of poets testifies to the doctrine that a poet's first days are his best.<sup>1</sup> *Optima dies . . . prima fugit*; the note echoes and re-echoes through English poetry. Hear it in Arnold's *Progress of Poetry*:

Youth rambles on life's arid mount,  
And strikes the rock and finds the vein,  
And brings the water from the fount,  
The fount which shall not flow again.

The man mature with labor chops  
For the bright stream a channel grand,  
And sees not that the sacred drops  
Ran off and vanished out of hand.

And then the old man totters nigh  
And feebly rakes among the stones;  
The mount is mute, the channel dry,  
And down he lays his weary bones.

<sup>1</sup> See S. T. Coleridge, *Youth and Age*; J. G. Percival, *Poetry*; William Cullen Bryant, *I Cannot Forget with What Fervid Devotion*; Bayard Taylor, *The Return of the Goddess*; Richard Watson Gilder, *To a Young Poet, The Poet's Secret*; George Henry Boker, *To Bayard Taylor*; Martin Farquhar Tupper, *To a Young Poet*; William E. Henley, *Something Is Dead*; Francis Thompson, *From the Night of Foreboding*; Thomas Hardy, *In the Seventies*; Lewis Morris, *On a Young Poet*; Richard Le Gallienne, *A Face in a Book*; Richard Middleton, *The Faithful Poet, The Boy Poet*; Don Marquis, *The Singer* (1915); John Hall Wheelock, *The Man to his Dead Poet* (1919); Cecil Roberts, *The Youth of Beauty* (1915); J. Thorne Smith, jr., *The Lost Singer* (1920); Edna St. Vincent Millay, *To a Poet that Died Young*.

But the strangle hold of complimentary verse upon English poetry, if nothing else, would prevent this view being unanimously expressed there. For in the Victorian period, poets who began their literary careers by prophesying their early decease lived on and on. They themselves might bewail the loss of their gift in old age—in fact, it was usual for them to do so<sup>1</sup>—but it would never do for their disciples to concur in the sentiment. Consequently we have a flood of complimentary verses, assuring the great poets of their unaltered charm.<sup>2</sup> And of course it is all worth very little as indicating the writer's attitude toward old age. Yet the fact that Landor was still singing as he "tottered on into his ninth decade,"—that Browning, Tennyson, Swinburne, Longfellow, Whittier, Holmes, and Whitman continued to feel the stir of creation when their hair was hoary, may have had a genuine influence on younger writers.

Greater significance attaches to the fact that some

<sup>1</sup> See Scott, *Farewell to the Muse*; Landor, *Dull is my Verse*; J. G. Percival, *Invocation*; Matthew Arnold, *Growing Old*; Longfellow, *My Books*; O. W. Holmes, *The Silent Melody*; C. W. Stoddard, *The Minstrel's Harp*; P. H. Hayne, *The Broken Chords*; J. C. MacNiel, *A Prayer*; Harvey Hubbard, *The Old Minstrel*.

<sup>2</sup> See Swinburne, *Age and Song*, *The Centenary of Landor*, *Statue of Victor Hugo*; O. W. Holmes, *Whittier's Eightieth Birthday*, *Bryant's Seventieth Birthday*; E. E. Stedman, *Ad Vatem*; P. H. Hayne, *To Longfellow*; Richard Gilder, *Jocoseria*; M. F. Tupper, *To the Poet of Memory*; Edmund Gosse, *To Lord Tennyson on his Eightieth Birthday*; Alfred Noyes, *Ode for the Seventieth Birthday of Swinburne*; Alfred Austin, *The Poet's Eightieth Birthday*; Lucy Larcom, *J. G. Whittier*; Mary Clemmer, *To Whittier*; Percy Mackaye, *Browning to Ben Ezra*.

of the self-revealing verse lamenting the decay of inspiration in old age is equivocal, as Landor's

Dull is my verse: not even thou  
 Who movest many cares away  
 From this lone breast and weary brow  
 Canst make, as once, its fountains play;  
 No, nor those gentle words that now  
 Support my heart to hear thee say,  
 The bird upon the lonely bough  
 Sings sweetest at the close of day.

It is, of course, even more meaningful when the aged poet, disregarding convention, frankly asserts the desirability of long life for his race. Browning, despite the sadness of the poet's age recorded in *Cleon* and the *Prologue to Aslando*, should doubtless be remembered for his belief in

The last of life for which the first was made,

as applied to poets as well as to other men. In America old age found its most enthusiastic advocate in Walt Whitman, who in lines *To Get the Final Lilt of Songs* indicated undiminished confidence in himself at eighty. Bayard Taylor,<sup>1</sup> too, and Edward Dowden,<sup>2</sup> were not dismayed by their longevity.

But we are most concerned, naturally, with wholly impersonal verse, and in it the aged poet is never wholly absent from English thought. As the youth-

<sup>1</sup> See *My Prologue*.

<sup>2</sup> See *The Mage*.

ful singer suggests the southland, so the aged bard seems indigenous to the north. It seems inevitable that Gray should depict the Scotch bard as old,<sup>1</sup> and that Scott's minstrels should be old. Campbell, too, follows the Scotch tradition.<sup>2</sup> It is the prophetic power of these fictional poets, no doubt, that makes age seem essential to them. The poet in Campbell's poem explains,

'Tis the sunset of life gives me mystical lore.

Outside of Scotch poetry one finds, occasionally, a similar faith in the old poet. Mrs. Browning's observation tells her that maturity alone can express itself with youthful freshness. Aurora declares,

I count it strange and hard to understand  
That nearly all young poets should write old.  
. . . It may be perhaps  
Such have not settled long and deep enough  
In trance to attain to clairvoyance, and still  
The memory mixes with the vision, spoils  
And works it turbid. Or perhaps again  
In order to discover the Muse Sphinx  
The melancholy desert must sweep around  
Behind you as before.

Aurora feels, indeed, that the poet's gift is not proved till age. She sighs, remembering her own youth,

Alas, near all the birds  
Will sing at dawn,—and yet we do not take  
The chaffering swallow for the holy lark.

<sup>1</sup> *The Bard.*

<sup>2</sup> See *Lochiel's Warning.*



Coinciding with this feeling is Rossetti's sentiment:

. . . Many men are poets in their youth,  
But for one sweet-strung soul the wires prolong  
Even through all age the indomitable song.<sup>1</sup>

Alice Meynell,<sup>2</sup> too, and Richard Watson Gilder<sup>3</sup> feel that increasing power of song comes with age.

It is doubtless natural that the passionate romantic poets insisted upon the poet's youth, while the thoughtful Victorians often thought of him as old. For one is born with nerves, and it does not take long for them to wear out; on the other hand a great deal of experience is required before one can even begin to think significantly. Accordingly one is not surprised, in the turbulent times of Elizabeth, to find Shakespeare, at thirty, asserting,

In me thou seest the glowing of such fire  
As on the ashes of his youth doth lie,

and conversely it seems fitting that a *De Senectute* should come from an Augustan period. As for the attitude toward age of our own day,—the detestation of age expressed by Alan Seeger<sup>4</sup> and Rupert Brooke,<sup>5</sup>—the complaint of Francis Ledwidge, at twenty-six, that years are robbing him of his inspiration,<sup>6</sup>—that, to their future readers, will only mean

<sup>1</sup> *Genius in Beauty.*

<sup>2</sup> See *To any Poet.*

<sup>3</sup> See *Life is a Bell.*

<sup>4</sup> See *There Was a Youth Around Whose Early Way.*

<sup>5</sup> See *The Funeral of Youth: Threnody.*

<sup>6</sup> See *Growing Old, Youth.*

that they lived in days of much feeling and action, and that they died young.<sup>1</sup> As the world subsides, after its cataclysm, into contemplative revery, it is inevitable that poets will, for a time, once more conceive as their ideal, not a singer aflame with youth and passion, but a poet of rich experience and profound reflection,

White-bearded and with eyes that look afar  
From their still region of perpetual snow,  
Beyond the little smokes and stirs of men.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> One of the war poets, Joyce Kilmer, was already changing his attitude at thirty. Compare his juvenile verse, "It is not good for poets to grow old," with the later poem, *Old Poets*.

<sup>2</sup> James Russell Lowell, *Thorwald's Lay*.

### III

#### THE POET AS LOVER

DO the *Phædrus* and the *Symposium* leave anything to be said on the relationship of love and poetry? In the last analysis, probably not. The poet, however, is not one to keep silence because of a dearth of new philosophical conceptions. As he discovers, with ever fresh wonder, the power of love as muse, each new poet, in turn, is wont to pour his gratitude for his inspiration into song, undeterred by the fact that love has received many encomiums before.

It is not strange that this hymn should be broken by rude taunts on the part of the uninitiated.

Saynt Idiote, Lord of these foles alle,

Chaucer's *Troilus* called Love, long ago, and the general public has been no less free with this characterization in the last century than in the fourteenth. Nor is it merely that part of the public which associates all verse with sentimentality, and flees from it as from a contagion, which thus sneers at the praise lovers give to their divinity. On the contrary, certain young aspirants to the poet's laurel, feeling that the singer's indebtedness to love is an overworked theme, have tried, like the non-

lover of the *Phædrus*, to charm the literary public by the novelty of a different profession. As the non-lover of classic Greece was so fluent in his periods that Socrates and Phædrus narrowly escaped from being overwhelmed by his much speaking, so the non-lover of the present time says much for himself.

In the first place, our non-lover may assure us, the nature of love is such that it involves contempt for the life of a bard. For love is a mad pursuit of life at first hand, in its most engrossing aspect, and it renders one deaf and blind to all but the object of the chase; while poetry is, as Plato points out,<sup>1</sup> only a pale and lifeless imitation of the ardors and delights which the lover enjoys at first hand. Moreover, one who attempts to divide his attention between the muse and an earthly mistress, is likely not only to lose the favor of the former, but, as the ubiquity of the rejected poet in verse indicates, to lose the latter as well, because his temperament will incline him to go into retirement and meditate upon his lady's charms, when he should be flaunting his own in her presence. It will not be long, indeed, before he has so covered the object of his affection with the leafage of his fancy, that she ceases to have an actual existence for him at all. The non-lover may remind us that even so ardent an advocate of love as Mrs. Browning voices this danger, confessing, in *Sonnets of the Portuguese*,<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See the *Republic* X, § 599-601; and *Phædrus*, § 248.

<sup>2</sup> Sonnet XXIX.



My thoughts do twine and bud  
About thee, as wild vines about a tree  
Put out broad leaves, and soon there's nought to see  
Except the straggling green that hides the wood.

The non-lover may also recall to our minds the notorious egotism and self-sufficiency of the poet, which seem incompatible with the humility and insatiable yearning of the lover. He exults in the declaration of Keats,

My solitude is sublime,—for, instead of what I have described (*i. e.*, domestic bliss) there is sublimity to welcome me home; the roaring of the wind is my wife; and the stars through the windowpanes are my children; the mighty abstract idea of beauty in all things, I have, stifles the more divided and minute domestic happiness.<sup>1</sup>

Borne aloft by his admiration for this passage, the non-lover may himself essay to be sublime. He may picture to us the frozen heights on which genius resides, where the air is too rare for earthly affection. He may declare that Keats' Grecian Urn is a symbol of all art, which must be

All breathing human passion far above.

He will assert that the mission of the poet is "to see life steadily and see it whole," a feat which is impossible if the worship of one figure out of the multitude is allowed to distort relative values, and to throw his view out of perspective.

<sup>1</sup> Letter to George Keats, October 31, 1818.

Finally, the enemy of love may call as witnesses poets whom he fancies he has led astray. Strangely enough, considering the dedication of the *Ring and the Book*, he is likely to give most conspicuous place among these witnesses to Browning. Like passages of Holy Writ, lines from Browning have been used as the text for whatever harangue a new theorist sees fit to give us. In *Youth and Art*, the non-lover will point out the characteristic attitude of young people who are "married to their art," and consequently have no capacity for other affection. In *Pauline*, he will gloat over the hero's confession that he is inept in love because he is concerned with his perceptions rather than with their objects, and his explanation,

I am made up of an intensest life;  
 Of a most clear idea of consciousness  
 Of self . . .  
 And I can love nothing,—and this dull truth  
 Has come at last: but sense supplies a love  
 Encircling me and mingling with my life.

He will point out that Sordello is another example of the same type, for though Sordello is ostensibly the lover of Palma, he really finds nothing outside himself worthy of his unbounded adoration.<sup>1</sup> Turning to Tennyson, in *Lucretius* the non-lover will note the tragic death of the hero that grows out of the

<sup>1</sup> Compare Browning's treatment of Sordello with the conventional treatment of him as lover, in *Sordello*, by Mrs. W. Buck (1837).

asceticism in love engendered by his absorption in composition. With the greatest pride the enemy of love will point to his popularity in the 1890's, when the artificial and heartless artist enjoyed his greatest vogue. As his most scintillating advocate he will choose Oscar Wilde. Assuring us of many prose passages in his favor, he will read to us the expression of conflict between love and art in *Flower of Love*, where Wilde exclaims,

I have made my choice, have lived my poems, and  
    though my youth is gone in wasted days,  
I have found the lover's crown of myrtle better than  
    the poet's crown of bays,

and he will read the record of the same sense of conflict, in different mood, expressed in the sonnet *Hélas*:

To drift with every passion till my soul  
Is a stringed lute on which all winds can play,  
Is it for this that I have given away  
Mine ancient wisdom and austere control?  
Methinks my life is a twice-written scroll  
Scrawled over on some boyish holiday  
With idle songs for pipe and virelai,  
Which do but mar the secret of the whole.  
Surely there was a time I might have trod  
The sunlit heights, and from life's dissonance  
Struck one clear chord to reach the ears of God.  
Is that time dead? Lo, with a little rod  
I did but touch the honey of romance,  
And must I lose a soul's inheritance?

And yet, when the non-lover has finally arrived at the peroration of his defense, we may remain unshaken in our conviction that from the *Song of Solomon* to the *Love Songs of Sara Teasdale*, the history of poetry constitutes an almost unbroken hymn to the power of love, "the poet, and the source of poetry in others,"<sup>1</sup> as Agathon characterized him at the banquet in Love's honour. Within the field of our especial inquiry, the last century, we may rest assured that there is no true poet whose work, rightly interpreted, is out of tune with this general acclaim. Even Browning and Oscar Wilde are to be saved, although, it may be, only as by fire.

The influence of love upon poetry, which we are assuming with such *a priori* certainty, is effected in various ways. The most obvious, of course, is by affording new subject matter. The confidence of Shakespeare,

How can my muse want subject to invent  
While thou dost breathe, that pourest into my verse  
Thine own sweet argument?

is at least as characteristic of the nineteenth as of the sixteenth century. The depletion of our lyric poetry, if everything relating to the singer's love affairs were omitted, is appalling even to contemplate. Yet, if this were the extent of love's influence upon poetry, one would have to class it, in kind if not in degree, with any number of other

<sup>1</sup> *The Symposium* of Plato, § 196.



personal experiences that have thrilled the poet to composition.

The scope of love's influence is widened when one reflects upon its efficacy as a prize held up before the poet, spurring him on to express himself. In this aspect poetry is often a form of spiritual display comparable to the gay plumage upon the birds at mating season. In the case of women poets, verse often affords an essentially refined and lady-like manner of expressing one's sentiments toward a possible suitor. The convention so charmingly expressed in William Morris' lines, *Rhyme Slayeth Shame*, seems to be especially grateful to them. At times the ruse fails, as a writer has recently admitted:

All sing it now, all praise its artless art,  
But ne'er the one for whom the song was made,<sup>1</sup>

but perhaps the worth of the poetry is not affected by the stubbornness of its recipient. Sara Teasdale very delicately names her anthology of love poems by women, *The Answering Voice*, but half the poems reveal the singer speaking first, while a number of them show her expressing an open-minded attitude toward any possible applicant for her hand among her readers. But it is not merely for its efficacy as a matrimonial agency that poets are indebted to love.

Since the nineteenth century is primarily the age

<sup>1</sup> Edith Thomas, *Vos non Nobis*.

of the love story, personal experience of love has been invaluable to the poet in a third way. The taste of the time has demanded that the poet sing of the tender theme almost exclusively, whether in dramatic, lyric or narrative, whether in historical or fictional verse. This is, of course, one reason that, wherever the figure of a bard appears in verse, he is almost always portrayed as a lover. Not to illustrate exhaustively, three of the most widely read poems with poet heroes, of the beginning, middle and end of the century respectively, *i. e.*, Moore's *Lalla Rookh*, Mrs. Browning's *Lady Geraldine's Courtship*, and Coventry Patmore's *The Angel in the House*, all depend for plot interest upon their hero's implication in a love affair. The authors' love affairs were invaluable, no doubt, since a poet is not to be expected to treat adequately a passion which he has not experienced himself. It is true that one hears from time to time, notably in the 1890's, that the artist should remain apart from, and coldly critical of the emotions he portrays. But this is not the typical attitude of our period. When one speaks thus, he is usually thought to be confusing the poet with the literary man, who writes from calculation rather than from inspiration. The dictum of Aristotle, "Those who feel emotion are most convincing through a natural sympathy with the characters they represent,"<sup>1</sup> has appeared self-evident to most critics of our time.

<sup>1</sup> *Poetics* XVII, Butcher's translation.

But the real question of inspiration by love goes deeper and is connected with Aristotle's further suggestion that poetry involves "a strain of madness," a statement which we are wont to interpret as meaning that the poet is led by his passions rather than by his reason. This constitutes the gist of the whole dispute between the romanticist and the classicist, and our poets are such ardent devotees of love as their muse, simply because, in spite of other short-lived fads, the temper of the last century has remained predominantly romantic. It is obvious that the idea of love as a distraction and a curse is the offspring of classicism. If poetry is the work of the reason, then equilibrium of soul, which is so sorely upset by passionate love, is doubtless very necessary. But the romanticist represents the poet, not as one drawing upon the resources within his mind, but as the vessel filled from without. His afflatus comes upon him and departs, without his control or understanding. Poetical inspiration, to such a temperament, naturally assumes the shape of passion. Bryant's expression of this point of view is so typical of the general attitude as to seem merely commonplace. He tells us, in *The Poet*,

No smooth array of phrase,  
Artfully sought and ordered though it be,  
Which the cold rhymer lays  
Upon his page languid industry  
Can wake the listless pulse to livelier speed.

. . . . .

The secret wouldst thou know  
 To touch the heart or fire the blood at will?  
 Let thine own eyes o'erflow;  
 Let thy lips quiver with the passionate thrill.  
 Seize the great thought, ere yet its power be past,  
 And bind, in words, the fleet emotion fast.

Coleridge's comprehension of this fact led him to cry, "Love is the vital air of my genius."<sup>1</sup>

All this, considering the usual subject-matter of poetry, is perhaps only saying that the poet must be sincere. The mathematician is most sincere when he uses his intellect exclusively, but a reasoned portrayal of passion is bound to falsify, for it leads one insensibly either to understate, or to burlesque, or to indulge in a psychopathic analysis of emotion.<sup>2</sup>

Accordingly, our poets have not been slow to remind us of their passionate temperaments. Landor, perhaps, may oblige us to dip into his biography in order to verify our thesis that the poet is invariably passionate, but in many cases this state of things is reversed, the poet being wont to assure us that the conventional incidents of his life afford no gauge of the ardors within his soul. Thus Wordsworth solemnly assures us,

Had I been a writer of love poetry, it would have been natural to me to write with a degree of warmth which could hardly have been approved by my principles, and which might have been undesirable for the reader.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Letter to his wife, March 12, 1799.

<sup>2</sup> Of the latter type of poetry a good example is Edgar Lee Masters' *Monsieur D— and the Psycho-Analyst*.

<sup>3</sup> See Arthur Symons, *The Romantic Movement*, p. 92 (from Myers, *Life of Wordsworth*).



Such boasting is equally characteristic of our staid American poets, who shrink from the imputation that their orderly lives are the result of temperamental incapacity for unrestraint.<sup>1</sup> In differing mode, Swinburne's poetry is perhaps an expression of the same attitude. The ultra-erotic verse of that poet somehow suggests a wild hulla-baloo raised to divert our attention from the fact that he was constitutionally incapable of experiencing passion.

Early in the century, something approaching the Wordsworthian doctrine of emotion recollected in tranquillity was in vogue, as regards capacity for passion. The Byronic hero is one whose affections have burned themselves out, and who employs the last worthless years of his life writing them up. Childe Harold is

Grown aged in this world of woe,  
In deeds, not years, piercing the depths of life,  
So that no wonder waits him, nor below  
Can love, or sorrow, fame, ambition, strife,  
Cut to his heart again with the keen knife  
Of silent, sharp endurance.

The very imitative hero of Praed's *The Troubadour*, after disappointment in several successive

<sup>1</sup> Thus Whittier, in *My Namesake*, says of himself,  
Few guessed beneath his aspect grave  
What passions strove in chains.

Also Bayard Taylor retorts to those who taunt him with lack of passion,

But you are blind, and to the blind  
The touch of ice and fire is one.

The same defense is made by Richard W. Gilder in lines entitled *Our Elder Poets*.

amours, at the age of twenty-six dismisses passion forever. We are assured that

The joys that wound, the pains that bless,  
 Were all, were all departed,  
 And he was wise and passionless  
 And happy and cold-hearted.

The popularity of this sort of poet was, however, ephemeral. Of late years poets have shown nothing but contempt for their brothers who attempt to sing after their passion has died away. It seems likely, beside, that instead of giving an account of his genius, the depleted poet depicts his passionless state only as a ruse to gain the sympathy of his readers, reminding them how much greater he might have been if he had not wantonly wasted his emotions.

One is justified in asking why, on the other hand, the poet should not be one who, instead of spending his love on a finite mistress, should devote it all to poetry. The bard asks us to believe that love of poetry is as thrilling a passion as any earthly one. His usual emotions are portrayed in Alexander Smith's *Life Drama*, where the hero agonizes for relief from his too ardent love:

O that my heart was quiet as a grave  
 Asleep in moonlight!  
 For, as a torrid sunset boils with gold  
 Up to the zenith, fierce within my soul  
 A passion burns from basement to the cope.  
 Poesy, poesy!

But one who imagines that this passion can exist in the soul wholly unrelated to any other, is confusing poetry with religion, or possibly with philosophy. The medieval saint was pure in proportion as he died to the life of the senses. This is likewise the state of the philosopher described in the *Phædo*. But beauty, unlike wisdom and goodness, is not to be apprehended abstractly; ideal beauty is supersensual, to be sure, but the way to vision of it is through the senses. Without doubt one occasionally finds asceticism preached to the poet in verse. One of our minor American poets declares,

The bard who yields to flesh his emotion  
Knows naught of the frenzy divine.<sup>1</sup>

But this is not the genuine poet's point of view. In so far as he is a Platonist—and "all poets are more or less Platonists"<sup>2</sup>—the poet is led upward to the love of ideal beauty through its incarnations in the world of sense. Thus in one of the most Platonic of our poems, G. E. Woodberry's *Agathon*, Eros says of the hero, who is the young poet of the *Symposium*,

A spirit of joy he is, to beauty vowed,  
Made to be loved, and every sluggish sense  
In him is amorous and passionate.  
Whence danger is; therefore I seek him out  
So with pure thought and care of things divine  
To touch his soul that it partake the gods.

<sup>1</sup> *Passion*, by Elizabeth Cheney. But compare Keats' protest against the poet's abstract love, in the fourth book of *Endymion*.

<sup>2</sup> H. B. Alexander, *Poetry and the Individual*, p. 46.

This does not imply that romantic love is the only avenue to ideal beauty. Rupert Brooke's *The Great Lover* might dissipate such an idea, by its picture of childlike and omnivorous taste for sensuous beauty.

These I have loved,

Brooke begins,

White plates and cups, clean gleaming,  
 Ringed with blue lines; and feathery, faery dust;  
 Wet roofs, beneath the lamplight; the strong crust  
 Of friendly bread; and many tasting food;  
 Rainbows, and the blue bitter smoke of wood.

And so on he takes us, apparently at random, through the whole range of his sense impressions. But the main difficulty with having no more than such scattered and promiscuous impressionability is that it is likely to result in poetry that is a mere confusion of color without design, unless the poet is subject to the unifying influence of a great passion, which, far from destroying perspective, as was hinted previously, affords a fixed standard by which to gauge the relative values of other impressions. Of course the exceptionally idealistic poet, who is conscious of a religious ideal, can say with Milton, "I am wont day and night to seek the *idea* of beauty through all the forms and faces of things (for many are the shapes of things divine) and to follow it leading me on with certain assured traces."<sup>1</sup> To him there is no need of the unifying influence of romantic love. In

<sup>1</sup> *Prose Works*, Vol. I, Letter VII, Symmons ed.



his case the mission of a strong passion is rather to humanize the ideal, lest it become purely philosophical (as that of G. E. Woodberry is in danger of doing) or purely ethical, as is the case of our New England poets. On the other hand, to the poet who denies the ideal element in life altogether, the unifying influence of love is indispensable. Such deeply tragic poetry as that of James Thomson, B. V., for instance, which asserts Macbeth's conclusion that life is "a tale told by an idiot," is saved from utter chaos sufficiently to keep its poetical character, only because the memory of his dead love gives Thomson a conception of eternal love and beauty by which to gauge his hopeless despair.

In addition, our poets are wont to agree with their father Spenser that the beauty of a beloved person is not to be placed in the same class as the beauty of the world of nature. Spenser argues that the spiritual beauty of a lady, rather than her outward appearance, causes her lover's perturbation. He inquires:

Can proportion of the outward part  
Move such affection in the inward mind  
That it can rob both sense and reason blind?  
Why do not then the blossoms of the field,  
Which are arrayed with much more orient hue  
And to the sense most daintie odors yield,  
Work like impression in the looker's view?<sup>1</sup>

Modern theorists, who would no doubt despise the quaintly idealistic mode of Spenser's expression, yet

<sup>1</sup> *An Hymne in Honour of Beautie.*

express much the same view in asserting that romantic excitement is a stimulus which keys all the senses to a higher pitch, thus dispersing one's amorousness over all creation. The love celebrated in Brooke's *The Great Lover*, they declare, cannot be compared with that of his more conventional love poems, simply because the one love is the cause of the other. Such heightened sensuous impressionability is celebrated in much of our most beautiful love poetry of to-day, notably in Sara Teasdale's.

It may be that this intensity of perception engendered by love is its most poetical effect. Much verse pictures the poet as a flamelike spirit kindled by love to a preternaturally vivid apprehension of life for an instant, before love dies away, leaving him ashes. Again and again the analogy is pointed out between Shelley's spirit and the leaping flames that consumed his body. Josephine Preston Peabody's interpretation of Marlowe is of the same sort. In the drama of which Marlowe is the title-character, his fellow-dramatist, Lodge, is much worried when he learns of Marlowe's mad passion for a woman of the court.

Thou art a glorious madman,

Lodge exclaims,

Born to consume thyself anon in ashes,  
And rise again to immortality.

Marlowe replies,

Oh, if she cease to smile, as thy looks say,  
 What if? I shall have drained my splendor down  
 To the last flaming drop! Then take me, darkness,  
 And mirk and mire and black oblivion,  
 Despairs that raven where no camp-fire is,  
 Like the wild beasts. I shall be even blest  
 To be so damned.

Most often this conception of love's flamelike lightening of life for the poet is applied to Sappho. Many modern English poets picture her living "with the swift singing strength of fire."<sup>1</sup> Swinburne, in *On the Cliffs*, claims this as the essential attribute of genius, when he cries to her for sympathy,

For all my days as all thy days from birth  
 My heart as thy heart was in me as thee  
 Fire, and not all the fountains of the sea  
 Have waves enough to quench it; nor on earth  
 Is fuel enough to feed,  
 While day sows night, and night sows day for seed.

This intensity of perception is largely the result, or the cause, of the poet's unusually sensitive consciousness of the ephemerality of love. The notion of permanence often seems to rob love of all its poetical quality. The dark despair engendered by a sense of its transience is needed as a foil to the

<sup>1</sup> See Southey, *Sappho*; Mary Robinson (1758-1800), *Sappho and Phaon*; Philip Moren Freneau, *Monument of Phaon*; James Gates Percival, *Sappho*; Charles Kingsley, *Sappho*; Lord Houghton, *A Dream of Sappho*; Swinburne, *On the Cliffs*, *Anactoria*, *Sapphics*; Cale Young Rice, *Sappho's Death Song*; Sara Teasdale, *Sappho*; Percy Mackaye, *Sappho and Phaon*; Zoë Akins, *Sappho to a Swallow on the Ground*; James B. Kenyon, *Phaon Concerning Sappho*, *Sappho* (1920); William Alexander Percy, *Sappho in Leukos* (1920).

fiery splendors of passion. Thus Rupert Brooke, in the sonnet, *Mutability*, dismisses the Platonic idea of eternal love and beauty, declaring,

Dear, we know only that we sigh, kiss, smile;  
 Each kiss lasts but the kissing; and grief goes over;  
 Love has no habitation but the heart:  
 Poor straws! on the dark flood we catch awhile,  
 Cling, and are borne into the night apart,  
 The laugh dies with the lips, "Love" with the lover.

Sappho is represented as especially aware of this aspect of her love. Her frenzies in *Anactoria*, where, if our hypothesis is correct, Swinburne must have been terribly concerned over his natural coldness, arise from rebellion at the brevity of love. Sappho cries,

What had all we done  
 That we should live and loathe the sterile sun,  
 And with the moon wax paler as she wanes,  
 And pulse by pulse feel time grow through our veins?

Poetry, we are to believe, arises from the yearning to render eternal the fleeting moment of passion. Sappho's poetry is, as Swinburne says,<sup>1</sup> "life everlasting of eternal fire." In Mackaye's *Sappho and Phaon*, she exults in her power to immortalize her passion, contrasting herself with her mother, the sea:

Her ways are birth, fecundity and death,  
 But mine are beauty and immortal love.  
 Therefore I will be tyrant of myself—  
 Mine own law will I be! And I will make

<sup>1</sup> In *On the Cliffs*.



Creatures of mind and melody, whose forms  
 Are wrought of loveliness without decay,  
 And wild desire without satiety,  
 And joy and aspiration without death.  
 And on the wings of these shall I, I, Sappho!  
 Still soar and sing above these cliffs of Lesbos,  
 Even when ten thousand blooms of men and maidens  
 Are fallen and withered.

To one who craves an absolute æsthetic standard, it is satisfactory to note how nearly unanimous our poets are in their portrayal of Sappho.<sup>1</sup> This is the more remarkable, since our enormous ignorance of her life and poetry would give almost free scope to inventive faculty. It is significant that none of our writers have been attracted to the picture Welcker gives of her as the respectable matronly head of a girl's seminary. Instead, she is invariably shown as mad with an insatiable yearning, tortured by the conviction that her love can never be satisfied. Charles Kingsley, describing her temperament,

Night and day

A mighty hunger yearned within her heart,  
 And all her veins ran fever,<sup>2</sup>

conceives of her much as does Swinburne, who calls her,

Love's priestess, mad with pain and joy of song,  
 Song's priestess, mad with pain and joy of love.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> No doubt they are influenced by the glimpse of her given in Longinus, *On the Sublime*.

<sup>2</sup> *Sappho*.

<sup>3</sup> *On the Cliffs*.

It is in this insatiability that Swinburne finds the secret of her genius, as opposed to the meager desires of ordinary folk. Expressing her conception of God, he makes Sappho assert,

But having made me, me he shall not slay :  
Nor slay nor satiate, like those herds of his,  
Who laugh and love a little, and their kiss  
Contents them.

It is, no doubt, an inarticulate conviction that she is "imprisoned in the body as in an oyster shell,"<sup>1</sup> while the force that is wooing her is outside the boundary of the senses, that accounts for Sappho's agonies of despair. In Sara Teasdale's *Sappho* she describes herself,

Who would run at dusk  
Along the surges creeping up the shore  
When tides come in to ease the hungry beach,  
And running, running till the night was black,  
Would fall forspent upon the chilly sand,  
And quiver with the winds from off the sea.  
Ah! quietly the shingle waits the tides  
Whose waves are stinging kisses, but to me  
Love brought no peace, nor darkness any rest.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Plato, *Phædrus*, § 250.

<sup>2</sup> In the end, Sara Teasdale does show her winning content, in the love of her baby daughter, but it is significant that this destroys her lyric gift. She assures Aphrodite,

If I sing no more  
To thee, God's daughter, powerful as God,  
It is that thou hast made my life too sweet  
To hold the added sweetness of a song.

I taught the world thy music; now alone  
I sing for her who falls asleep to hear.

Swinburne characteristically shows her literally tearing the flesh in her quest of the divinity that is reflected there. In *Anactoria* she tells the object of her infatuation:

I would my love could kill thee: I am satiated  
With seeing thee alive, and fain would have thee dead.

. . . . .

I would find grievous ways to have thee slain,  
Intense device and superflux of pain.

And after detailing with gusto the bloody ingenuities of her plan of torture, she states that her motive is,

To wring thy very spirit through the flesh.

The myth that Sappho's agony resulted from an offense done to Aphrodite, is several times alluded to. In *Sappho and Phaon* she asserts her independence of Aphrodite's good will, and in revenge the goddess turns Phaon's affection away from Sappho, back to Thalassa, the mother of his children. Sappho's infatuation for Phaon, the slave, seems a cruel jest of Aphrodite, who fills Sappho with a wholly blind and unreasoning passion. In all three of Swinburne's Lesbian poems, Aphrodite's anger is mentioned. This is the sole theme of *Sapphics*, in which poem the goddess, displeased by Sappho's preferment of love poetry to the actual delights of love, yet tried to win Sappho back to her:

Called to her, saying "Turn to me, O my Sappho,"  
Yet she turned her face from the Loves, she saw not  
Tears or laughter darken immortal eyelids. . . .  
Only saw the beautiful lips and fingers,  
Full of songs and kisses and little whispers,  
Full of music; only beheld among them  
Soar as a bird soars  
Newly fledged, her visible song, a marvel  
Made of perfect sound and exceeding passion,  
Sweetly shapen, terrible, full of thunders,  
Clothed with the wind's wings.

It seems likely that this myth of Aphrodite's anger is an allegory indicating the tragic character of all poetic love, in that, while incarcerated in the body, the singer strives to break through the limits of the flesh and to grasp ideality. The issue is made clear in Mackaye's drama. There Sappho's rival is Thalassa, Phaon's slave-mate, who conceives as love's only culmination the bearing of children. Sappho, in her superiority, points out that mere perpetuation of physical life is a meaningless circle, unless it leads to some higher satisfaction. But in the end the figure of "the eternal mother," as typified by Thalassa, is more powerful than is Sappho, in the struggle for Phaon's love. Thus Aphrodite asserts her unwillingness to have love refined into a merely spiritual conception.

Often the greatest poets, as Sappho herself, are represented as having no more than a blind and instinctive apprehension of the supersensual beauty which is shining through the flesh, and which is the real object of desire. But thus much ideality



must be characteristic of love, it seems obvious, before it can be spiritually creative. Unless there is some sense of a universal force, taking the shape of the individual loved one, there can be nothing suggestive in love. Instead of waking the lover to the beauty in all of life, as we have said, it would, as the non-lover has asserted, blind him to all but the immediate object of his pursuit. Then, the goal being reached, there would be no reason for the poet's not achieving complete satisfaction in love, for there would be nothing in it to suggest any delight that he does not possess. Therefore, having all his desire, the lover would be lethargic, with no impulse to express himself in song. Probably something of this sort is the meaning of the Tannhauser legend, as versified both by Owen Meredith and Emma Lazarus, showing the poet robbed of his gift when he comes under the power of the Paphian Venus. Such likewise is probably the meaning of Oscar Wilde's sonnet, *Hélas*, quoted above.

While we thus lightly dismiss sensual love as unpoetical, we must remember that Burns, in some of his accounts of inspiration, ascribes quite as powerful and as unidealistic an effect to the kisses of the barmaids, as to the liquor they dispense. But this is mere bravado, as much of his other verse shows. Byron's case, also, is a doubtful one. The element of discontent is all that elevates his amours above the "swinish trough," which Alfred Austin asserts them to be.<sup>1</sup> Yet, such as his idealism is, it con-

<sup>1</sup> In *Off Mesolonghi*.

stitutes the strength and weakness of his poetical gift. Landor well says,<sup>1</sup>

Although by fits so dense a cloud of smoke  
Puffs from his sappy and ill-seasoned oak,  
Yet, as the spirit of the dream draws near,  
Remembered loves make Byron's self sincere.  
The puny heart within him swells to view,  
The man grows loftier and the poet too.

Ideal love is most likely to become articulate in the sonnet sequence. The Platonic theory of love and beauty, ubiquitous in renaissance sonnets, is less pretentiously but no less sincerely present in the finest sonnets of the last century. The sense that the beauty of his beloved is that of all other fair forms, the motive of Shakespeare's

Thy bosom is endeared with all hearts  
Which I by lacking have supposed dead,

is likewise the motive of Rossetti's *Heart's Compass*,

Sometimes thou seemest not as thyself alone,  
But as the meaning of all things that are;  
A breathless wonder, shadowing forth afar  
Some heavenly solstice, hushed and halcyon,  
Whose unstirred lips are music's visible tone;  
Whose eyes the sungates of the soul unbar,  
Being of its furthest fires oracular,  
The evident heart of all life sown and mown.

Thus also Mrs. Browning says of her earlier ideal loves,

<sup>1</sup> In *Lines To a Lady*.

Their shining fronts,  
 Their songs, their splendors (better, yet the same,  
 As river water hallowed into founts)  
 Met in thee.<sup>1</sup>

Reflection of this sort almost inevitably leads the poet to the conviction that his real love is eternal beauty. Such is the progress of Rossetti's thought in *Heart's Hope*:

Lady, I fain would tell how evermore  
 Thy soul I know not from thy body nor  
 Thee from myself, neither our love from God.

The whole of Diotima's theory of the ascent to ideal beauty is here implicit in three lines. In the same spirit Christina Rossetti identifies her lover with her Christian faith:

Yea, as I apprehend it, love is such  
 I cannot love you if I love not Him,  
 I cannot love Him if I love not you.<sup>2</sup>

It is obvious that, from the standpoint of the beloved at least, there is danger in this identification of all beauties as manifestations of the ideal. It is unpropitious to lifelong affection for one person. As a matter of fact, though the English taste for decorous fidelity has affected some poets, on the whole they have not hesitated to picture their race as fickle. Plato's account of the second step in the

<sup>1</sup> *Sonnets of the Portuguese*, XXVI.

<sup>2</sup> *Monna Innominata*, VI. See also Robert Bridges, *The Growth of Love* (a sonnet sequence).

ascent of the lover, "Soon he will himself perceive that the beauty of one form is truly related to the beauty of another; and then if beauty in general is his pursuit, how foolish would he be not to recognize that the beauty in every form is one and the same,"<sup>1</sup> is made by Shelley the justification of his shifting enthusiasms, which the world so harshly censured. In *Epipsychidion* Shelley declares,

I never was attached to that great sect  
Whose doctrine is that each one should select  
Out of the crowd a mistress or a friend,  
And all the rest, though fair and wise, commend  
To cold oblivion. . . .

True love in this differs from gold and clay,  
That to divide is not to take away.  
Love is like understanding, that grows bright  
Gazing on many truths. . . .

Narrow the heart that loves, the brain that contem-  
plates,  
The life that wears, the spirit that creates  
One object and one form, and builds thereby  
A sepulchre for its eternity.

These last lines suggest, what many poets have asserted, that the goddess of beauty is apt to change her habitation from one clay to another, and that the poet who clings to the fair form after she has departed, is nauseated by the dead bones which he clasps.<sup>2</sup> This theme Rupert Brooke is constantly

<sup>1</sup> *Symposium*, Jowett translation, § 210.

<sup>2</sup> See Thomas Hardy's novel, *The Well Beloved*.



harping upon, notably in *Dead Men's Love*, which begins,

There was a damned successful poet,  
There was a woman like the Sun.  
And they were dead. They did not know it.  
They did not know his hymns  
Were silence; and her limbs  
That had served love so well,  
Dust, and a filthy smell.

The feeling that Aphrodite is leading them a merry chase through many forms is characteristic of our ultra-modern poets, who anticipate at least one new love affair a year. Most elegantly Ezra Pound expresses his feeling that it is time to move on to a fresh inspiration:

As a bathtub lined with white porcelain  
When the hot water gives out or goes tepid,—  
So is the slow cooling of our chivalrous passion,  
My much praised, but not altogether satisfactory lady.

As each beautiful form is to be conceived of as reflecting eternal beauty from a slightly different angle, the poet may claim that flitting affection is necessary to one who would gain as complete as possible vision of ideality. Not only so, but this glimpsing of beauty through first one mistress, then another, often seems to perform the function of the mixed metaphor in freeing the soul from bondage to the sensual. This is the interpretation of Sappho's fickleness most popular with our writers, who

give her the consciousness that Aphrodite, not flesh and blood, is the object of her quest. In her case, unlike that of the ordinary lover, the new passion does not involve the repudiation or belittling of the one before. In Swinburne's *Anactoria* Sappho compares her sensations

Last year when I loved Atthis, and this year  
When I love thee.

In Mackaye's *Sappho and Phaon*, when Alcæus pleads for the love of the poetess, she asserts of herself,

I doubt if ever she saw form of man  
Or maiden either whom, being beautiful,  
She hath not loved.

When Alcæus protests, "But not with passion!" she rejoins,

All  
That breathes to her is passion, love itself  
All passionate.

The inevitability of fickleness arising from her idealism, which fills her with insuperable discontent, is voiced most clearly by the nineteenth century Sappho through the lips of Sara Teasdale, in lines wherein she dismisses those who gossip about her:

How should they know that Sappho lived and died  
Faithful to love, not faithful to the lover,  
Never transfused and lost in what she loved,  
Never so wholly loving nor at peace.

I asked for something greater than I found,  
And every time that love has made me weep  
I have rejoiced that love could be so strong;  
For I have stood apart and watched my soul  
Caught in a gust of passion as a bird  
With baffled wings against the dusty whirlwind  
Struggles and frees itself to find the sky.

She continues, apostrophizing beauty,

In many guises didst thou come to me;  
I saw thee by the maidens when they danced,  
Phaon allured me with a look of thine,  
In Anactoria I knew thy grace.  
I looked at Cercolas and saw thine eyes,  
But never wholly, soul and body mine  
Didst thou bid any love me as I loved.

The last two lines suggest another reason for the fickleness, as well as for the insatiability of the poet's love. If the poet's genius consists of his peculiar capacity for love, then in proportion as he outsoars the rest of humanity he will be saddened, if not disillusioned, by the half-hearted return of his love. Mrs. Browning characterizes her passion:

I love thee to the depth and breadth and height  
My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight  
For the ends of Being and ideal grace.

It is clear that a lesser soul could not possibly give an adequate response to such affection. Perhaps it is one of the strongest evidences that Browning is a genuine philosopher, and not a prestidigitator of philosophy in rhyme, that Mrs. Browning's love

poetry does not conclude with the note either of tragic insatiability or of disillusionment.<sup>1</sup>

Since the poet's soul is more beautiful than the souls of other men, it follows that he cannot love at all except, in a sense, by virtue of the fact that he is easily deceived. Here is another explanation of the transience of his affections,—in his horrified recoil from an unworthy object that he has idealized. This blindness to sensuality is accounted for by Plato in the figure, "The lover is his mirror in whom he is beholding himself, but he is not aware of this."<sup>2 3</sup> This is the figure used in Sara Teasdale's little poem, *The Star*, which says to the pool,

O wondrous deep,  
I love you, I give you my light to keep.  
Oh, more profound than the moving sea,  
That never has shown myself to me.

But out of the woods as night grew cool  
A brown pig came to the little pool;  
It grunted and splashed and waded in  
And the deepest place but reached its chin.

The tragedy in such love is the theme of Alfred Noyes' poem on Marlowe, *At the Sign of the Golden*

<sup>1</sup> The tragedy of incapacity to return one's poet-lover's passion is the theme of Alice Meynell's *The Poet and his Wife*. On the same theme are the following: Amelia Josephine Burr, *Anne Hathaway's Cottage* (1914); C. J. Druce, *The Dark Lady to Shakespeare* (1919); Karle Wilson Baker, *Keats and Fanny Brawne* (1919); James B. Kenyon, *Phaon concerning Sappho* (1920).

<sup>2</sup> *Phædrus*, 255.

<sup>3</sup> Browning shows the poet, with his eyes open, loving an unworthy form, in *Time's Revenges*.



*Shoe.* The dramatist comes to London as a young boy, full of high visions and faith in human nature. His innocence makes him easy prey of a notorious woman:

In her treacherous eyes,  
As in dark pools the mirrored stars will gleam,  
Here did he see his own eternal skies.

But, since his love is wholly spiritual, it dies on the instant of her revelation of her character:

Clasped in the bitter grave of that sweet clay,  
Wedded and one with it, he moaned.

Yet, ere he went, he strove once more to trace  
Deep in her eyes, the loveliness he knew,  
Then—spat his hatred in her smiling face.

It is probably an instance of the poet's blindness to the sensual, that he is often represented as having a peculiar sympathy with the fallen woman. He feels that all beauty in this world is forced to enter into forms unworthy of it, and he finds the attractiveness of the courtesan only an extreme instance of this. Joaquin Miller's *The Ideal and the Real* is an allegory in which the poet, following ideal beauty into this world, finds her in such a form. The tradition of the poet idealizing the outcast, which dates back at least to Rossetti's *Jenny*, is still alive, as witness John D. Neihardt's recent poem, *A Vision of Woman*.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See also Kirke White, *The Prostitute*; Whitman, *To a Common Prostitute*; Joaquin Miller, *A Dove of St. Mark*; and Olive Dargan, *A Magdalen to Her Poet*.

To return to the question of the poet's fickleness, a very ingenious denial of it is found in the argument that, as his poetical love is purely ideal, he can indulge in a natural love that in no way interferes with it. A favorite view of the 1890's is in Ernest Dowson's *Non Sum Qualis Eram Bonæ sub Regno Cynaræ*:

Last night, ah, yesternight, betwixt her lips and mine  
 There fell thy shadow, Cynara! thy breath was shed  
 Upon my soul between the kisses and the wine;  
 And I was desolate and sick of an old passion;  
 Yea, I was desolate and bowed my head:  
 I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion.

The poet sometimes regards it as a proof of the supersensual nature of his passion that he is willing to marry another woman. The hero of May Sinclair's novel, *The Divine Fire*, who is irresistibly impelled to propose to a girl, even while he trembles at the sacrilege of her touching a book belonging to his soul's mistress, is only a *reductio ad absurdum* of a rather popular theory. All narratives of this sort can probably be traced back to Dante's autobiography, as given in the *Vita Nuova*. We have two poetic dramas dealing with Dante's love, by G. L. Raymond,<sup>1</sup> and by Sara King Wiley.<sup>2</sup> Both these writers, however, show a tendency to slur over Dante's affection for Gemma. Raymond represents their marriage as the result solely of Dante's compromising her by apparent attention, in order to

<sup>1</sup> *Dante.*

<sup>2</sup> *Dante and Beatrice.*

avoid the appearance of insulting Beatrice with too close regard. Sara King Wiley, on the other hand, stresses the other aspect of Dante's feeling for Gemma, his gratitude for her pity at the time of Beatrice's death. Of course both dramatists are bound by historical considerations to make the outcome of their plays tragical, but practically all other expositions of the poet's double affections are likewise tragic. Cale Young Rice chooses another famous Renaissance lover for the hero of *A Night in Avignon*, a play with this theme. Here Petrarch, in a fit of impatience with his long loyalty to a hopeless love for Laura, turns to a light woman for consolation. According to the accepted mode, he refuses to tolerate Laura's name on the lips of his fancy. Laura, who has chosen this inconvenient moment to become convinced of the purity of Petrarch's devotion to her, comes to his home to offer her heart, but, discovering the other woman's presence there, she fails utterly to comprehend the subtle compliment to her involved, and leaves Petrarch in an agony of contrition.

Marlowe, in Josephine Preston Peabody's drama, distributes his admiration more equally between his two loves. One stimulates the dramatist in him, by giving him an insatiable thirst for this world; the other elevates the poet, by lifting his thoughts to eternal beauty. When he is charged with being in love with the Canterbury maiden who is the object of his reverence, the "Little Quietude," as he calls her, he, comparing her to the Evening Star,

contrasts her with the object of his burning passion, who seems to him the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. He explains,

I serve a lady so imperial fair,  
 June paled when she was born. Indeed no star,  
 No dream, no distance, but a very woman,  
 Wise with the argent wisdom of the snake;  
 Fair nurtured with that old forbidden fruit  
 That thou hast heard of . . .  
 . . . I would eat, and have all human joy,  
 And know,—and know.

He continues,

But, for the Evening Star, I have it there.  
 I would not have it nearer. Is that love  
 As thou dost understand? Yet is it mine  
 As I would have it: to look down on me,  
 Not loving and not cruel; to be bright,  
 Out of my reach; to lighten me the dark  
 When I lift eyes to it, and in the day  
 To be forgotten. But of all things, far,  
 Far off beyond me, otherwise no star.

Marlowe's closing words bring us to another important question, *i. e.*, the stage of love at which it is most inspiring. This is the subject of much difference of opinion. Mrs. Browning might well inquire, in one of her love sonnets,

How, Dearest, wilt thou have me for most use?  
 A hope, to sing by gladly? or a fine  
 Sad memory with thy songs to interfuse?



A shade, in which to sing, of palm or pine?  
A grave, on which to rest from singing? Choose.<sup>1</sup>

Each of these situations has been celebrated as begetting the poet's inspiration.

To follow the process of elimination, we may first dispose of the married state as least likely to be spiritually creative. It is true that we find a number of poems addressed by poets to their wives. But these are more likely to be the contented purring of one who writes by a cozy fireside, than the passionate cadence of one whose genius has been fanned to flame. One finds but a single champion of the married state considered abstractly. This is Alfred Austin, in whose poem, *The Poet and the Muse*, his genius explains to the newly betrothed poet:

How should you, poet, hope to sing?  
The lute of love hath a single string.  
Its note is sweet as the coo of the dove,  
But 'tis only one note, and the note is love.

But when once you have paired and built your nest,  
And can brood thereon with a settled breast,  
You will sing once more, and your voice will stir  
All hearts with the sweetness gained from her.

And perhaps even Alfred Austin's vote is canceled by his inconsistent statement in his poem on Petrarch, *At Vacluse*,

Let this to lowlier bards atone,  
Whose unknown Laura is their own,  
Possessing and possessed:

<sup>1</sup> *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, XVII.

Of whom if sooth they do not sing,  
'Tis that near her they fold their wing  
To drop into her nest.

Let us not forget Shelley's expression of his need for his wife:

Ah, Mary dear, come to me soon;  
I am not well when thou art far;  
As twilight to the sphered moon,  
As sunset to the evening star,  
Thou, beloved, art to me.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps it is unworthy quibbling to object that the figure here suggests too strongly Shelley's consciousness of the merely atmospheric function of Mary, in enhancing his own personality, as contrasted with the radiant divinity of Emilia Viviani, to whom he ascribes his creativeness.<sup>2</sup>

It is customary for our bards gallantly to explain that the completeness of their domestic happiness leaves them no lurking discontent to spur them on to verse writing. This is the conclusion of the happily wedded heroes of Bayard Taylor's *A Poet's Journal*, and of Coventry Patmore's *The Angel in the House*; likewise of the poet in J. G. Holland's *Kathrina*, who excuses his waning inspiration after his marriage:

She, being all my world, had left no room  
For other occupation than my love.  
. . . I had grown enervate  
In the warm atmosphere which I had breathed.

<sup>1</sup> *To Mary.*

<sup>2</sup> Compare Wordsworth, *She Was a Phantom of Delight, O Dearer Far than Life*; Tennyson, *Dedication of Enoch Arden*.

Taken as a whole, the evidence is decidedly in favor of the remote love, prevented in some way from reaching its culmination. To requote Alfred Noyes, the poet knows that ideal love must be

Far off, beyond me, otherwise no star.<sup>1</sup>

In *Sister Songs* Francis Thompson asserts that such remoteness is essential to his genius:

I deem well why life unshared  
Was ordained me of yore.  
In pairing time, we know, the bird  
Kindles to its deepmost splendour,  
And the tender  
Voice is tenderest in its throat.  
Were its love, forever by it,  
Never nigh it,  
It might keep a vernal note,  
The crocean and amethystine  
In their pristine  
Lustre linger on its coat.<sup>2</sup>

Byron, in the *Lament of Tasso*, causes that famous lover likewise to maintain that distance is necessary to idealization. He sighs,

Successful love may sate itself away.  
The wretched are the faithful; 'tis their fate  
To have all feeling save the one decay,

<sup>1</sup> *Marlowe*.

<sup>2</sup> Possibly this is characteristic only of the male singer. Christina Rossetti expresses the opposite attitude in *Monna Innominata* XIV, mourning for

The silence of a heart that sang its songs  
When youth and beauty made a summer morn,  
Silence of love that cannot sing again.

And every passion into one dilate,  
 As rapid rivers into ocean pour.  
 But ours is bottomless and hath no shore.

The manner of achieving this necessary remoteness is a nice problem. Of course the poet may choose it, with open eyes, as the Marlowe of Miss Peabody's imagination does, or as the minstrel in Hewlitt's *Cormac, Son of Ogmond*. The long engagements of Rossetti and Tennyson are often quoted as exemplifying this idiosyncrasy of poets. But there is something decidedly awkward in such a situation, inasmuch as it is not till love becomes so intense as to eclipse the poet's pride and joy in poetry that it becomes effective as a muse.<sup>1</sup> The minor poet, to be sure, is often discovered solicitously feeling his pulse to gauge the effect of love on his rhymes, but one does not feel that his verse gains by it. Therefore, an external obstacle is usually made to intervene.

As often as not, this obstacle is the indifference of the beloved. One finds rejected poets by the dozens, mourning in the verse of our period. The sweetheart's reasons are manifold; her suitor's inferior station and poverty being favorites. But one wonders if the primary reason may not be the quality of the love offered by the poet, whose extreme humility and idealization are likely to engender pride and contempt in the lady, she being unaware that

<sup>1</sup> See Mrs. Browning, Sonnet VII.

And this! this lute and song, loved yesterday,  
 Are only dear, the singing angels know  
 Because thy name moves right in what they say.



it is the reflection of his own soul that the poet is worshipping in her. One can feel some sympathy with the lady in Thomas Hardy's *I Rose Up as My Custom Is*, who, when her lover's ghost discovers her beside a snoring spouse, confesses that she is content with her lot:

He makes no quest into my thoughts,  
But a poet wants to know  
What one has felt from earliest days,  
Why one thought not in other ways,  
And one's loves of long ago.

It may be, too, that an instinct for protection has something to do with the lady's rejection, for a recent poet has openly proclaimed the effect of attaining, in successful love, one step toward absolute beauty:

O beauty, as thy heart o'erflows  
In tender yielding unto me,  
A vast desire awakes and grows  
Unto forgetfulness of thee.<sup>1</sup>

Rejection is apt to prove an obstacle of double worth to the poet, since it not only removes him to a distance where his lady's human frailties are less visible, so that the divine light shining through her seems less impeded, but it also fires him with a very human ambition to prove his transcendent worth and thus "get even" with his unappreciative beloved.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>"A. E.," *The Fountain of Shadowy Beauty*.

<sup>2</sup>See Joaquin Miller, *Ina*; G. L. Raymond, "Loving," from *A Life in Song*; Alexander Smith, *A Life Drama*.

Richard Realf in *Advice Gratis* satirically depicts the lady's altruism in rejecting her lover:

It would strike fresh heat in your poet's verse  
If you dropped some aloes into his wine,  
They write supremely under a curse.

There is danger, of course, that the disillusionment produced by the revelation of low ideals which the lady makes in her refusal will counterbalance these good effects. Still, though the poet is so egotistical toward all the world beside, in his attitude toward his lady the humility which Emerson expresses in *The Sphinx* is not without parallel in verse. Many singers follow him in his belief that the only worthy love is that for a being so superior that a return of love is impossible.<sup>1</sup>

To poets who do not subscribe to Emerson's belief in one-sided attachments, Alexander Smith's *A Life Drama* is a treasury of suggestions as to devices by which the poet's lady may be kept at sufficient distance to be useful. With the aid of intercalations Smith exhibits the poet removed from his lady by scornful rejection, by parental restraint, by an unhappy marriage, by self-reproach, and by death. All these devices have been popular in our poetry.

<sup>1</sup> See *The Sphinx*—

Have I a lover who is noble and free?  
I would he were nobler than to love me.

See also Walt Whitman, *Sometimes with One I Love*, and Mrs. Browning, "I never thought that anyone whom I could love would stoop to love me—the two things seemed clearly incompatible." Letter to Robert Browning, December 24, 1845.

The lady's marriage is seldom felt to be an insuperable barrier to love, though it is effective in removing her to a suitable distance for idealization. The poet's worship is so supersensual as to be inoffensive. To confine ourselves to poetic dramas treating historical poets,—Beatrice,<sup>1</sup> Laura,<sup>2</sup> Vittoria Colonna,<sup>3</sup> and Alison<sup>4</sup> are all married to one man while inspiring another. A characteristic autobiographical love poem of this type, is that of Francis Thompson, who asserts the ideality of the poet's affection in his reference to

This soul which on thy soul is laid,  
As maid's breast upon breast of maid.<sup>5</sup>

There is no other barrier that so elevates love as does death. Translation of love into Platonic idealism is then almost inevitable. Alexander Smith describes the change accomplished by the death of the poet's sweetheart:

Two passions dwelt at once within his soul,  
Like eve and sunset dwelling in one sky.  
And as the sunset dies along the west,  
Eve higher lifts her front of trembling stars  
Till she is seated in the middle sky,  
So gradual one passion slowly died  
And from its death the other drew fresh life,  
Until 'twas seated in the soul alone,  
The dead was love, the living, poetry.

<sup>1</sup>G. L. Raymond's and S. K. Wiley's dramas, *Dante*, and *Dante and Beatrice*.

<sup>2</sup>Cale Young Rice, *A Night in Avignon*.

<sup>3</sup>Longfellow, *Michael Angelo*.

<sup>4</sup>Peabody, *Marlowe*.

<sup>5</sup>See also *Ad Amicam*, *Her Portrait*, *Manus Animon Pinxit*.

The mystic merging of Beatrice into ideal beauty is, of course, mentioned often in nineteenth century poetry, most sympathetically, perhaps, by Rossetti.<sup>1</sup> Much the same kind of translation is described in *Vane's Story*, by James Thomson, B.V., which appears to be a sort of mystic autobiography.

The ascent in love for beauty, as Plato describes it,<sup>2</sup> might be expected to mark at every step an increase of poetic power, as it leads one from the individual beauties of sense to absolute, supersensual beauty. But it is extremely doubtful if this increase in poetic power is achieved when our poets try to take the last step, and rely for their inspiration upon a lover's passion for disembodied, purely ideal beauty. The lyric power of such love has, indeed, been celebrated by a recent poet. George Edward Woodberry, in his sonnet sequence, *Ideal Passion*, thus exalts his mistress, the abstract idea of beauty, above the loves of other poets:

Dante and Petrarch all unenvied go  
From star to star, upward, all heavens above,  
The grave forgot, forgot the human woe.  
Though glorified, their love was human love,  
One unto one; a greater love I know.

But very few of our poets have felt their genius burning at its brightest when they have eschewed the sensuous embodiment of their love.

Plato might point out that he intended his theory of progression in love as a description of the de-

<sup>1</sup> See *On the Vita Nuova of Dante*; also *Dante at Verona*.

<sup>2</sup> *Symposium*.



velopment of the philosopher, not of the poet, who, as a base imitator of sense, has not a pure enough soul to soar very high away from it. But our writers have been able partially to vindicate poets by pointing out that Dante was able to travel the whole way toward absolute beauty, and to sublimate his perceptions to supersensual fineness without losing their poetic tone. Nineteenth and twentieth century writers may modestly assert that it is the fault of their inadequacy to represent poetry, and not a fault in the poetic character as such, that accounts for the tameness of their most idealistic verse.

However this may be, one notes a tendency in much purely idealistic and philosophical love poetry to present us with a mere skeleton of abstraction. Part of this effect may be the reader's fault, of course. Plato assures us that the harmonies of mathematics are more ravishing than the harmonies of music to the pure spirit, but many of us must take his word for it; in the same way it may be that when we fail to appreciate certain celebrations of ideal love it is because of our "muddy vesture of decay" which hinders our hearing its harmonies.

Within the last one hundred and fifty years three notable attempts, of widely varying success, have been made to write a purely philosophical love poem.<sup>1</sup>

Bulwer Lytton's *Milton* was, if one may believe

<sup>1</sup> Keats' *Endymion* is not discussed here, though it seems to have much in common with the philosophy of the *Symposium*. See Sidney Colvin, *John Keats*, pp. 160ff.

the press notices, the most favorably received of his poems, but it is a signal example of aspiring verse that misses both the sensuous beauty of poetry, and the intellectual content of philosophy. Milton is portrayed as the life-long lover of an incarnation of beauty too attenuated to be human and too physical to be purely ideal. At first Milton devotes himself to this vision exclusively, but, hearing the call of his country in distress, he abandons her, and their love is not suffered to culminate till after death. Bulwer Lytton cites the *Phædrus* of Plato as the basis of his allegory, reminding us,

The Athenian guessed that when our souls descend  
 From some lost realm (sad aliens here to be),  
 Dim broken memories of the state before  
 Form what we call our reason . . .  
 . . . Is not Love,  
 Of all those memories which to parent skies  
 Mount struggling back—(as to their source, above,  
 In upward showers, imprisoned founts arise:)  
 Oh, is not Love the strongest and the clearest?

Greater importance attaches to a recent treatment of the theme by George Edward Woodberry. His poem, *Agathon*, dealing with the young poet of Plato's *Symposium*, is our most literal interpretation of Platonism. Agathon is sought out by the god of love, Eros, who is able to realize his divinity only through the perfection of man's love of beauty. He chooses Agathon as the object of instruction because Agathon is a poet, one of those

Whose eyes were more divinely touched  
In that long-remembered world whence souls set forth.

As the poem opens, Agathon is in the state of the favorite poet of nineteenth century imagination, loving, yet discontented with, the beauty of the senses. To Diotima, the wise woman of the *Symposium*, he expresses his unhappiness:

Still must I mourn  
That every lovely thing escapes the heart  
Even in the moment of its cherishing.

Eros appears and promises Agathon that if he will accept his love, he may find happiness in eternal beauty, and his poetical gift will be ennobled:

Eros I am, the wooer of men's hearts.  
Unclasp thy lips; yield me thy close embrace;  
So shall thy thoughts once more to heaven climb,  
Their music linger here, the joy of men.

Agathon resolves to cleave to him, but at this point Anteros, corresponding to Plato's Venus Pandemos, enters into rivalry with Eros for Agathon's love. He shows the poet a beautiful phantom, who describes the folly of one who devotes himself to spiritual love:

The waste desire be his, and sightless fate,  
Him light shall not revisit; late he knows  
The love that mates the heaven weds the grave.

Agathon starts to embrace her, but seeing in her face the inevitable decay of sensual beauty, he recoils, crying,

In its fiery womb I saw  
The twisted serpent ringing woe obscene,  
And far it lit the pitchy ways of hell.

In an agony of horror and contrition, he recalls Eros, who expounds to him how love, beginning with sensuous beauty, leads one to ideality:

Let not dejection on thy heart take hold  
That nature hath in thee her sure effects,  
And beauty wakes desire. Should Daphne's eyes,  
Leucothea's arms, and clinging white caress,  
The arch of Thetis' brows, be made in vain?

But, he continues,

In fair things  
There is another vigor, flowing forth  
From heavenly fountains, the glad energy  
That broke on chaos, and the outward rush  
Of the eternal mind; . . .  
. . . Hence the poet's eye  
That mortal sees, creates immortally  
The hero more than men, not more than man,  
The type prophetic.

Agathon, in an ecstasy of comprehension, chants the praises of love which Plato puts into his mouth in the *Symposium*. In conclusion, Urania sums up the mystery of love and genius:

For truth divine is life, not love,  
Creative truth, and evermore  
Fashions the object of desire  
Through love that breathes the spirit's fire.



We may fittingly conclude a discussion of the poet as lover with the *Epipsychidion*, not merely because it is the most idealistic of the interpretations of Platonic love given by nineteenth century poets, but because by virtue of the fact that it describes Shelley's personal experience, it should be most valuable in revealing the attitude toward love of one possessing the purest of poetic gifts.<sup>1</sup>

The prominence given to Shelley's earthly loves in this poem has led J. A. Symonds to deny that it is truly Platonic. He remarks,

While Shelley's doctrine in *Epipsychidion* seems Platonic, it will not square with the *Symposium*. . . . When a man has formed a just conception of universal beauty, he looks back with a smile on those who find their soul's sphere in the love of some mere mortal object. Tested by this standard, Shelley's identification of Intellectual Beauty with so many daughters of earth, and his worshipping love of Emilia, is spurious Platonism.<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps this failure to break altogether with the physical is precisely the distinction between the love of the poet and the love of the philosopher with whom Plato is concerned. I do not believe that the Platonism of this poem is intrinsically spurious; the conception of Emilia seems to be intended simply as a poetic personification of abstract beauty, but it is undeniable that at times this vision does not mean abstract beauty to Shelley at all, but the actual Emilia Viviani. He has protested against

<sup>1</sup> Treatment of this theme is foreshadowed in *Alastor*.

<sup>2</sup> *Shelley*, p. 142.

this judgment, "The *Epipsychidion* is a mystery; as to real flesh and blood, you know that I do not deal with those articles." The revulsion of feeling that turned him away from Emilia, however, taught him how much of his feeling for her had entered into the poem, so that, in June, 1822, Shelley wrote,

The *Epipsychidion* I cannot bear to look at. I think one is always in love with something or other; the error, and I confess it is not easy for spirits cased in flesh and blood to avoid it, consists in seeking in a mortal image the likeness of what is perhaps eternal.

Shelley begins his spiritual autobiography with his early mystical intuition of the existence of spiritual beauty, which is to be the real object of his love throughout life. By Plato, of course, this love is made prenatal. Shelley says,

She met me, robed in such exceeding glory  
That I beheld her not.

As this vision was totally disjoined from earthly objects, it won the soul away from all interest in life. Therefore Shelley says,

She met me, Stranger, upon life's rough way  
And lured me towards sweet death.

This early vision passed away, however,

Into the dreary cone of our life's shade.

This line is evidently Shelley's Platonic fashion of referring to the obscurity of this life as compared

to the world of ideas. As the vision has embodied itself in this world, it is only through love of its concrete manifestations that the soul may regain it. When it is regained, it will not be, as in the beginning, a momentary intuition, but an abiding presence in the soul.

The first step toward this goal was a mistaken one. Shelley describes his marriage with Harriet as a yielding to the senses merely, in other words, as slavery to the Venus Pandemos. He describes this false vision,

Whose voice was venom'd melody.

The breath of her false mouth was like sweet flowers,  
Her touch was as electric poison.

Shelley was more successful in his second love, for Mary, whom he calls the "cold, chaste moon." The danger of this stage in the ascent toward beauty is that one is likely to be content with the fragmentary glimpse of beauty gained through the loved one, and by losing sight of its other embodiments fail to aspire to more complete vision. So Shelley says of this period, "I was laid asleep, spirit and limb." By a great effort, however, the next step was taken,—the agonizing one of breaking away from the bondage of this individual, in order that beauty in all its forms may appeal to one. Shelley writes,

What storms then shook the ocean of my sleep,  
Blotting that moon, whose pale and waning lips  
Then shrank as in the sickness of eclipse.

Finally, the dross of its earthly embodiments being burned away by this renunciation, ideal beauty is revealed to the poet, not merely in a flash of inspiration, as at the beginning of his quest, but as an abiding presence in the soul. At least this is the ideal, but, being a poet, Shelley cannot claim the complete merging with the ideal that the philosopher possesses. At the supersensual consummation of his love, Shelley sinks back, only half conceiving of it, and cries,

Woe is me!

The winged words on which my soul would pierce  
Into the height of Love's rare universe  
Are chains of lead around its flight of fire;  
I pant, I sink, I tremble, I expire.



## IV

### *THE SPARK FROM HEAVEN*

**D**ARE we venture into the holy of holies, where the gods are said to come upon the poet? Is there not danger that the divine spark which kindles his song may prove a bolt to annihilate us, because of our presumptuous intrusion? What voice is this, which meets us at the threshold?

Beware! Beware!  
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!  
Weave a circle round him thrice,  
And close your eyes in holy dread—

It is Coleridge, warning us of our peril, if we remain open-eyed and curious, trying to surprise the secret of the poet's visitation.

Yet are we not tolerably safe? We are under the guidance of an initiate; the poet himself promises to unveil the mystery of his inspiration for us. As Vergil kept Dante unscathed by the flames of the divine vision, will not our poet protect us? Let us enter.

But another doubt, a less thrilling one, bids us pause. Is it indeed the heavenly mystery that we are bid gaze upon, or are we to be the dupe of self-deceived impostors? Our intimacy is with poets of

the last two centuries,—not the most inspired period in the history of poetry. And in the ranks of our multitudinous verse-writers, it is not the most prepossessing who are loudest in promising us a fair spectacle. How harsh-voiced and stammering are some of these obscure apostles who are offering to exhibit the entire mystery of their gift of tongues! We see more impressive figures, to be sure. Here is the saturnine Poe, who with contemptuous smile assures us that we are welcome to all the secrets of his creative frenzies. Here is our exuberant Walt Whitman, crying, "Stop this day and night with me, and you shall possess the origin of all poems."<sup>1</sup> But though we scan every face twice, we find here no Shakespeare promising us the key to creation of a *Hamlet*.

Still, is it not well to follow a forlorn hope? Among the less vociferous, here are singers whose faces are alight with a mysterious radiance. Though they promise us little, saying that they themselves are blinded by the transcendent vision, so that they appear as men groping in darkness, yet may they not unawares afford us some glimpse of their transfiguration?

If we refuse the poet's revelation, we have no better way of arriving at the truth. The scientist offers us little in this field; and his account of inspiration is as cold and comfortless as a chemical formula. Of course the scientist is amused by this objection to him, and asks, "What more do you

<sup>1</sup> *Song of Myself*.

expect from the effusions of poets? Will not whatever secret they reveal prove an open one? What will it profit you to learn that the milk of Paradise nourishes the poetic gift, since it is not handled by an earthly dairy?" But when he speaks thus, our scientific friend is merely betraying his ignorance regarding the nature of poetry. Longinus,<sup>1</sup> and after him, Sidney,<sup>2</sup> long ago pointed out its peculiar action, telling us that it is the poet's privilege to make us partakers of his ecstasy. So, if the poet describes his creative impulses, why should he not make us sharers of them?

This is not an idle question, for surely Plato, that involuntary poet, has had just this effect upon his readers. Have not his pictures, in the *Phædrus* and the *Ion*, of the artist's ecstasy touched Shelley and the lesser Platonic poets of our time with the enthusiasm he depicts? Incidentally, the figure of the magnet which Plato uses in the *Ion* may arouse hope in the breasts of us, the humblest readers of Shelley and Woodberry. For as one link gives power of suspension to another, so that a ring which is not touched by the magnet is yet thrilled with its force, so one who is out of touch with Plato's supernal melodies, may be sensitized by the virtue imparted to his nineteenth century disciples, who are able to "temper this planetary music for mortal ears."

Let us not lose heart, at the beginning of our

<sup>1</sup> *On the Sublime*, I.

<sup>2</sup> *Apology for Poetry*.

investigation, though our greatest poets admit that they themselves have not been able to keep this creative ecstasy for long. To be sure this is disillusioning. We should prefer to think of their silent intervals as times of insight too deep for expression; as Anna Branch phrases it,

When they went  
Unto the fullness of their great content  
Like moths into the grass with folded wings.<sup>1</sup>

This pleasing idea has been fostered in us by poems of appeal to silent singers.<sup>2</sup> But we have manifold confessions that it is not commonly thus with the non-productive poet. Not merely do we possess many requiems sung by erst-while makers over their departed gift,<sup>3</sup> but there is much verse indicating that, even in the poet's prime, his genius is subject to a mysterious ebb and flow.<sup>4</sup> Though he has

<sup>1</sup> *The Silence of the Poets.*

<sup>2</sup> See Swinburne, *A Ballad of Appeal to Christina Rossetti*; and Francis Thompson, *To a Poet Breaking Silence.*

<sup>3</sup> See especially Scott, *Farewell to the Muse*; Kirke White, *Hushed is the Lyre*; Landor, *Dull is My Verse*, and *To Wordsworth*; James Thomson, B. V., *The Fire that Filled My Heart of Old*, and *The Poet and the Muse*; Joaquin Miller, *Vale*; Andrew Lang, *The Poet's Apology*; Francis Thompson, *The Cloud's Swan Song.*

<sup>4</sup> See Burns, *Second Epistle to Lapraik*; Keats, *To My Brother George*; Winthrop Mackworth Praed, *Letter from Eaton*; William Cullen Bryant, *The Poet*; Oliver Wendell Holmes, *Invita Minerva*; Emerson, *The Poet, Merlin*; James Gates Percival, *Awake My Lyre, Invocation*; J. H. West, *To the Muse, After Silence*; Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Laureate to an Academy Class Dinner*; Alice Meynell, *To one Poem in Silent Time*; Austin Dobson, *A Garden Idyl*; James Stevens, *A Reply*; Richard Middleton, *The Artist*; Franklin Henry Giddings, *Song*; Benjamin R. C. Low, *Inspiration*; Robert Haven Schaffer, *The Wonderful Hour*; Henry A. Beers, *The Thankless Muse*; Karl Wilson Baker, *Days.*



faith that he is not "widowed of his muse,"<sup>1</sup> she yet torments him with all the ways of a coquette, so that he sadly assures us his mistress "is sweet to win, but bitter to keep."<sup>2</sup> The times when she solaces him may be pitifully infrequent. Rossetti, musing over Coleridge, says that his inspired moments were

Like desert pools that show the stars  
Once in long leagues.<sup>3</sup>

Yet, even so, upon such moments of insight rest all the poet's claims for his superior personality. It is the potential greatness enabling him at times to have speech with the gods that makes the rest of his life sacred. Emerson is more outspoken than most poets; he is not perhaps at variance with their secret convictions, when he describes himself:

I, who cower mean and small  
In the frequent interval  
When wisdom not with me resides.<sup>4</sup>

However divine the singer considers himself in comparison with ordinary humanity, he must admit that at times

Discrowned and timid, thoughtless, worn,  
The child of genius sits forlorn,

A cripple of God, half-true, half-formed.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See Francis Thompson, *The Cloud's Swan Song*.

<sup>2</sup> C. G. Roberts, *Ballade of the Poet's Thought*.

<sup>3</sup> *Sonnet to Coleridge*.

<sup>4</sup> *The Poet*.

<sup>5</sup> Emerson, *The Poet*. See also George Meredith, *Pegasus*.

Like Dante, we seem disposed to faint at every step in our revelation. Now a doubt crosses our minds whether the child of genius in his crippled moments is better fitted than the rest of us to point out the pathway to sacred enthusiasm. It appears that little verse describing the poet's afflatus is written when the gods are actually with him. In this field, the sower sows by night. Verse on inspiration is almost always retrospective or theoretical in character. It seems as if the intermittence of his inspiration filled the poet with a wistful curiosity as to his nature in moments of soaring. By continual introspection he is seeking the charm, so to speak, that will render his afflatus permanent. The rigidity in much of such verse surely betrays, not the white heat of genius, but a self-conscious attitude of readiness for the falling of the divine spark.

One wonders whether such preparation has been of much value in hastening the fire from heaven. Often the reader is impatient to inform the loud-voiced suppliant that Baal has gone a-hunting. Yet it is alleged that the most humble bribe has at times sufficed to capture the elusive divinity. Schiller's rotten apples are classic, and Emerson lists a number of tested expedients, from a pound of tea to a night in a strange hotel.<sup>1</sup> This, however, is Emerson in a singularly flat-footed moment. The real poet scoffs at such suggestions. Instead, he

<sup>1</sup> See the essay on Inspiration. Hazlitt says Coleridge liked to compose walking over uneven ground or breaking through straggling branches.

feels that it is not for him to know the times and seasons of his powers. Indeed, it seems to him, sometimes, that pure contrariety marks the god's refusal to come when entreated. Thus we are told of the god of song,

Vainly, O burning poets!  
Ye wait for his inspiration.

Hasten back, he will say, hasten back  
To your provinces far away!  
There, at my own good time  
Will I send my answer to you.<sup>1</sup>

Then, at the least expected moment, the fire may fall, so that the poet is often filled with naïve wonder at his own ability. Thus Alice Meynell greets one of her poems,

Who looked for thee, thou little song of mine?  
This winter of a silent poet's heart  
Is suddenly sweet with thee, but what thou art,  
Mid-winter flower, I would I could divine.

But if the poet cannot predict the time of his afflatus, he indicates that he does know the attitude of mind which will induce it. In certain quarters there is a truly Biblical reliance upon faith as bringer of the gift. A minor writer assures us, "Ah, if we trust, comes the song!"<sup>2</sup> Emerson says,

<sup>1</sup> E. C. Stedman, *Apollo. The Hillside Door* by the same author also expresses this idea. See also Browning, *Old Pictures in Florence*, in which he speaks "of a gift God gives me now and then." See also Longfellow, *L'Envoi*; Keats, *On Receiving a Laurel Crown*; Cale Young Rice, *New Dreams for Old*; Fiona Macleod, *The Founts of Song*.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Burton, *Singing Faith*.

The muses' hill by fear is guarded;  
A bolder foot is still rewarded.<sup>1</sup>

And more extreme is the counsel of Owen Meredith to the aspiring artist:

The genius on thy daily walks  
Shall meet, and take thee by the hand;  
But serve him not as who obeys;  
He is thy slave if thou command.<sup>2</sup>

The average artist is probably inclined to quarrel with this last high-handed treatment of the muse. Reverent humility rather than arrogance characterizes the most effectual appeals for inspiration. The faith of the typical poet is not the result of boldness, but of an aspiration so intense that it entails forgetfulness of self. Thus one poet accounts for his inspired hour:

Purged with high thoughts and infinite desire  
I entered fearless the most holy place;  
Received between my lips the sacred fire,  
The breath of inspiration on my face.<sup>3</sup>

Another writer stresses the efficacy of longing no less strongly; speaking of

The unsatiated, insatiable desire  
Which at once mocks and makes all poesy.<sup>4</sup>

There is nothing new in this. It is only what the poet has implied in all his confessions. Was he

<sup>1</sup> *The Poet.*

<sup>2</sup> *The Artist.*

<sup>3</sup> C. G. Roberts, *Ave.*

<sup>4</sup> William Alexander, *The Finding of the Book.* See also Edward Dowden, *The Artist's Waiting.*



inspired by love? It was because thwarted love filled him with intensest longing. So with his thirst for purity, for religion, for worldly vanities. Any desire, be it fierce enough, and hindered from immediate satisfaction, may engender poetry. As Joyce Kilmer phrases it,

Nothing keeps a poet  
In his high singing mood,  
Like unappeasable hunger  
For unattainable food.<sup>1</sup>

But the poet would not have us imagine that we have here sounded the depths of the mystery. Aspiration may call down inspiration, but it is not synonymous with it. Mrs. Browning is fond of pointing out this distinction. In *Aurora Leigh* she reminds us, "Many a fervid man writes books as cold and flat as gravestones." In the same poem she indicates that desire is merely preliminary to inspiration. There are, she says,

Two states of the recipient artist-soul;  
One forward, personal, wanting reverence,  
Because aspiring only. We'll be calm,  
And know that when indeed our Joves come down,  
We all turn stiller than we have ever been.

What is this mysterious increment, that must be added to aspiration before it becomes poetically creative? So far as a mere layman can understand it, it is a sudden arrest, rather than a satisfaction, of the poet's longing, for genuine satisfaction would

<sup>1</sup> *Apology.*

kill the aspiration, and leave the poet heavy and phlegmatic. Inspiration, on the contrary, seems to give him a fictitious satisfaction; it is an arrest of his desire that affords him a delicate poise and repose, on tiptoe, so to speak.<sup>1</sup>

Does not the fact that inspiration works in this manner account for the immemorial connection of poetic creativeness with Bacchic frenzy? To the aspiring poet wine does not bring his mistress, nor virtue, nor communion with God, nor any object of his longing. Yet it does bring a sudden ease to his craving. So, wherever there is a romantic conception of poetry, one is apt to find inspiration compared to intoxication.

Such an idea did not, of course, find favor among typical eighteenth century writers. Indeed, they would have seen more reason in ascribing their clear-witted verse to an ice-pack, than to the bibulous hours preceding its application to the fevered brow. We must wait for William Blake before we can expect Bacchus to be reinstated among the gods of song. Blake does not disappoint us, for we find his point of view expressed, elegantly enough, in his comment on artists, "And when they are drunk, they always paint best."<sup>2</sup>

As the romantic movement progresses, one meets with more lyrical expositions of the power in strong

<sup>1</sup> Compare Coleridge's statement that poetry is "a more than usual state of emotion with more than usual order." *Biographia Literaria*, Vol. II, Chap. I, p. 14, ed. Henry Nelson Coleridge.

<sup>2</sup> *Artist Madmen: On the Great Encouragement Given by the English Nobility and Gentry to Correggio, etc.*

drink. Burns, especially, is never tired of sounding its praise. He exclaims,

There's naething like the honest nappy.

I've seen me daist upon a time  
 I scarce could wink or see a styme;  
 Just ae half mutchkin does me prime;  
 Aught less is little,  
 Then back I rattle with the rhyme  
 As gleg's a whittle.<sup>1</sup>

Again he assures us,

But browster wives and whiskey stills,  
 They are my muses.<sup>2</sup>

Then, in more exalted mood:

O thou, my Muse, guid auld Scotch drink!  
 Whether through wimplin' worms thou jink,  
 Or, richly brown, ream o'er the brink  
 In glorious faem,  
 Inspire me, till I lisp and wink  
 To sing thy name.<sup>3</sup>

Keats enthusiastically concurs in Burns' statements.<sup>4</sup> Landor, also, tells us meaningly,

Songmen, grasshoppers and nightingales  
 Sing cheerily but when the throat is moist.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *The First Epistle to Lapraik.*

<sup>2</sup> *The Third Epistle to Lapraik.*

<sup>3</sup> *Scotch Drink.*

<sup>4</sup> See the *Sonnet on the Cottage Where Burns Was Born,* and *Lines on the Mermaid Tavern.*

<sup>5</sup> *Homer: Laertes: Agatha.*

James Russell Lowell, in *The Temptation of Hassan Khaled*, presents the argument of the poet's tempters with charming sympathy:

The vine is nature's poet: from his bloom  
 The air goes reeling, typsy with perfume,  
 And when the sun is warm within his blood  
 It mounts and sparkles in a crimson flood,  
 Rich with dumb songs he speaks not, till they find  
 Interpretation in the poet's mind.  
 If wine be evil, song is evil too.

His *Bacchic Ode* is full of the same enthusiasm. Bacchus received his highest honors at the end of the last century from the decadents in England. Swinburne,<sup>1</sup> Lionel Johnson,<sup>2</sup> Ernest Dowson,<sup>3</sup> and Arthur Symonds,<sup>4</sup> vied with one another in praising inebriety as a lyrical agent. Even the sober Watts-Dunton<sup>5</sup> was drawn into the contest, and warmed to the theme.

Poetry about the Mermaid Inn is bound to take this tone. From Keats<sup>6</sup> to Josephine Preston Peabody<sup>7</sup> writers on the Elizabethan dramatists have dwelt upon their conviviality. This aspect is especially stressed by Alfred Noyes, who imagines himself carried back across the centuries to become the Ganymede of the great poets. All of the group keep him busy. In particular he mentions Jonson:

<sup>1</sup> See *Burns*.

<sup>2</sup> See *Vinum Dæmonum*.

<sup>3</sup> See *A Villanelle of the Poet's Road*.

<sup>4</sup> See *A Sequence to Wine*.

<sup>5</sup> See *A Toast to Omar Khayyam*.

<sup>6</sup> See *Lines on the Mermaid Inn*.

<sup>7</sup> See *Marlowe*.



And Ben was there,  
 Humming a song upon the old black settle,  
 "Or leave a kiss within the cup  
 And I'll not ask for wine,"  
 But meanwhile, he drank malmsey.<sup>1</sup>

Fortunately for the future of American verse, there is another side to the picture. The teetotaler poet is by no means non-existent in the last century. Wordsworth takes pains to refer to himself as "a simple, water-drinking bard,"<sup>2</sup> and in lines *To the Sons of Burns* he delivers a very fine prohibition lecture. Tennyson offers us *Will Waterproof's Lyrical Monologue*, a *reductio ad absurdum* of the claims of the bibulous bard. Then, lest the temperance cause lack the support of great names, Longfellow causes the title character of *Michael Angelo* to inform us that he "loves not wine," while, more recently, E. A. Robinson pictures Shakespeare's inability to effervesce with his comrades, because, Ben Jonson confides to us,

Whatso he drinks that has an antic in it,  
 He's wondering what's to pay on his insides.<sup>3</sup>

No, the poet will not allow us to take his words too seriously, lest we drag down Apollo to the level of Bacchus. In spite of the convincing realism in certain eulogies, it is clear that to the poet, as to the convert at the eucharist, wine is only a symbol of

<sup>1</sup> *Tales of the Mermaid Inn.*

<sup>2</sup> See *The Waggoner.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ben Jonson Entertains a Man from Stratford.* See also Poe's letter, April 1, 1841, to Snodgrass, on the unfortunate results of his intemperance.

a purely spiritual ecstasy. But if intoxication is only a figure of speech, it is a significant one, and perhaps some of the other myths describing the poet's sensations during inspiration may put us on the trail of its meaning. Of course, in making such an assumption, we are precisely like the expounder of Plato's myths, who is likely to say, "Here Plato was attempting to shadow forth the inexpressible. Now listen, and I will explain exactly what he meant." Notwithstanding, we must proceed.

The device of Chaucer's *House of Fame*, wherein the poet is carried to celestial realms by an eagle, occasionally occurs to the modern poet as an account of his *Aufschwung*. Thus Keats, in *Lines to Apollo*, avers,

Aye, when the soul is fled  
 Too high above our head,  
 Affrighted do we gaze  
 After its airy maze  
 As doth a mother wild  
 When her young infant child  
 Is in an eagle's claws.

"Poetry, my life, my eagle!"<sup>1</sup> cries Mrs. Browning, likening herself to Ganymede, ravished from his sheep to the summit of Olympus. The same attitude is apparent in most of her poems, for Mrs. Browning, in singing mood, is precisely like a child in a swing, shouting with delight at every fresh sensation of soaring.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Aurora Leigh*.

<sup>2</sup> See J. G. Percival, *Genius Awakening*, for the same figure.

Again, the crash of the poet's inspiration upon his ordinary modes of thought is compared to "fearful claps of thunder," by Keats<sup>1</sup> and others.<sup>2</sup> Or, more often, his moment of sudden insight seems a lightning flash upon the dark ways in which he is ordinarily groping. Keats says that his early visions were seen as through a rift of sheet lightning.<sup>3</sup> Emerson's impression is the same; visions come "as if life were a thunderstorm wherein you can see by a flash the horizon, and then cannot see your hand."<sup>4</sup> Likewise Alexander Smith declares,

Across the midnight sea of mind  
 A thought comes streaming like a blazing ship  
 Upon a mighty wind,  
 A terror and a glory! Shocked with light,  
 His boundless being glares aghast.<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps this is a true expression of the poet's feelings during the deepest inspiration, yet we are minded of Elijah's experience with the wind and the fire and the still small voice. So we cannot help sympathizing with Browning's protest against "friend Naddo's" view that genius is a matter of bizarre and grandiose sensations.<sup>6</sup> At least it is pleasant to find verse, by minor writers though it be, describing the quietude and naturalness of the poet's best moments. Thus Holmes tells us of his inspiration:

<sup>1</sup> See *Sleep and Poetry*.

<sup>2</sup> See *The Master*, A. E. Cheney.

<sup>3</sup> See *The Epistle to George Keats*.

<sup>4</sup> *Essay on Inspiration*.

<sup>5</sup> *A Life Drama*.

<sup>6</sup> *Sordello*.

Soft as the moonbeams when they sought  
 Endymion's fragrant bower,  
 She parts the whispering leaves of thought  
 To show her full-leaved flower.<sup>1</sup>

Edwin Markham says,

She comes like the hush and beauty of the night.<sup>2</sup>

And Richard Watson Gilder's mood is the same:

How to the singer comes his song?  
 How to the summer fields  
 Come flowers? How yields  
 Darkness to happy dawn? How doth the night  
 Bring stars?<sup>3</sup>

Various as are these accounts which poets give of their inspired moments, all have one point in common, since they indicate that in such moments the poet is wholly passive. His thought is literally given to him. Edward Dowden, in a sonnet, *Wise Passiveness*, says this plainly:

Think you I choose or that or this to sing?  
 I lie as patient as yon wealthy stream  
 Dreaming among green fields its summer dream,  
 Which takes whate'er the gracious hours will bring  
 Into its quiet bosom.

To the same effect is a somewhat prosaic poem, *Accident in Art*, by Richard Hovey. He inquires,

What poet has not found his spirit kneeling  
 A sudden at the sound of such or such

<sup>1</sup> *Invita Minerva.*

<sup>2</sup> *Poetry.*

<sup>3</sup> *How to the Singer Comes His Song?*



Strange verses staring from his manuscript,  
Written, he knows not how, but which will sound  
Like trumpets down the years.

Doubtless it is a very natural result of his resignation to this creative force that one of the poet's profoundest sensations during his afflatus should be that of reverence for his gift. Longfellow and Wordsworth sometimes speak as if the composition of their poems were a ceremony comparable to high mass. At times one must admit that verse describing such an attitude has a charm of its own.<sup>1</sup> In *The Song-Tree* Alfred Noyes describes his first sensation as a conscious poet:

The first note that I heard,  
A magical undertone,  
Was sweeter than any bird  
—Or so it seemed to me—  
And my tears ran wild.  
This tale, this tale is true.  
The light was growing gray,  
And the rhymes ran so sweet  
(For I was only a child)  
That I knelt down to pray.

But our sympathy with this little poet would not be nearly so intense were he twenty years older. When it is said of a mature poetess,

She almost shrank  
To feel the secret and expanding might  
Of her own mind,<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Compare Browning's characterization of the afflatus of Eglamor in *Sordello*, Book II.

<sup>2</sup> *The Last Hours of a Young Poetess*, Lucy Hooper.

the reader does not always remain in a sympathetically prayerful mind. Such reverence paid by the poet to his gift calls to mind the multiple Miss Beauchamp, of psychologic fame, and her comment on the vagaries of her various personalities, "But after all, they are all me!" Too often, when the poet is kneeling in adoration of his Muse, the irreverent reader is likely to suspect that he realizes, only too well, that it is "all me."

However, if the Philistine reader sets up as a critic, he must make good his charges. Have we any real grounds for declaring that the alleged divinity who inspires the poet is merely his own intelligence, or lack of it? Perhaps not. And yet the dabbler in psychology finds a good deal to indicate the poet's impression that the "subconscious" is shaping his verse. Shelley was especially fascinated by the mysterious regions of his mind lying below the threshold of his ordinary thought. In fact, some of his prose speculations are in remarkable sympathy with recent scientific papers on the subject.<sup>1</sup> And in *Mont Blanc* he expresses his wonder at the phenomenon of thought:

The everlasting universe of things  
Flows through the mind, and rolls its rapid waves,  
Now dark—now glittering—now reflecting gloom—  
Now lending splendor, where from secret springs  
The source of human thought its tribute brings  
Of waters.

<sup>1</sup> See *Speculations on Metaphysics*, Works, Vol. VI, p. 282, edited by Buxton Forman.

Again, in *The Defense of Poetry* he says,

The mind in creation is a fading coal, which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness; this power arises from within, like the color of a flower which fades and changes as it is developed, and the conscious portions of our nature are unprophetic either of its approach or departure.

Wordsworth, too, thinks of his gift as arising from the depths of his mind, which are not subject to conscious control. He apprises us,

A plastic power  
Abode with me, a forming hand, at times  
Rebellious, acting in a devious mood,  
A local spirit of its own, at war  
With general tendency, but for the most  
Subservient strictly to external things  
With which it communed. An auxiliar light  
Came from my mind which on the setting sun  
Bestowed new splendor—<sup>1</sup>

Occasionally the sudden lift of these submerged ideas to consciousness is expressed by the figure of an earthquake. Aurora Leigh says that upon her first impulse to write, her nature was shaken,

As the earth  
Plunges in fury, when the internal fires  
Have reached and pricked her heart, and throwing flat  
The marts and temples, the triumphal gates  
And towers of observation, clears herself  
To elemental freedom.

<sup>1</sup> *The Prelude.*

We have a grander expression of the idea from Robert Browning, who relates how the vision of *Sordello* arises to consciousness:

Upthrust, out-staggering on the world,  
Subsiding into shape, a darkness rears  
Its outline, kindles at the core—.

Is this to say that the poet's intuitions, apparently so sudden, have really been long germinating in the obscure depths of his mind? Then it is in tune with the idea, so prevalent in English verse, that in sleep a mysterious undercurrent of imaginative power becomes accessible to the poet.

"Ever when slept the poet his dreams were music,"<sup>1</sup> says Richard Gilder, and the line seems trite to us. There was surely no reason why Keats' title, *Sleep and Poetry*, should have appeared ludicrous to his critics, for from the time of Cædmon onward English writers have been sensitive to a connection here. The stereotyped device of making poetry a dream vision, so popular in the middle ages,—and even the prominence of *Night Thoughts* in eighteenth century verse—testify that a coupling of poetry and sleep has always seemed natural to poets. Coleridge,<sup>2</sup> Keats, Shelley,<sup>3</sup>—it is the romantics who seem to have depended most upon sleep as bringer of inspiration. And once more, it is

<sup>1</sup> *The Poet's Sleep*.

<sup>2</sup> See his account of the composition of *Kubla Khan*.

<sup>3</sup> See *Alastor*, and *Prince Athanase*. See also Edmund Gosse, *Swinburne*, p. 29, where Swinburne says he produced the first three stanzas of *A Vision of Spring* in his sleep.



Shelley who shows himself most keenly aware that, asleep or waking, the poet feels his afflatus coming in the same manner. Thus he tells us of the singer in *Prince Athanase*:

And through his sleep, and o'er each waking hour  
Thoughts after thoughts, unresting multitudes,  
Were driven within him by some secret power  
Which bade them blaze, and live, and roll afar,  
Like lights and sounds, from haunted tower to tower.

Probably our jargon of the subconscious would not much impress poets, even those whom we have just quoted. Is this the only cause we can give, Shelley might ask, why the poet should not reverence his gift as something apart from himself and truly divine? If, after the fashion of modern psychology, we denote by the subconscious mind only the welter of myriad forgotten details of our daily life, what is there here to account for poesy? The remote, inaccessible chambers of our mind may, to be sure, be more replete with curious lumber than those continually swept and garnished for everyday use, yet, even so, there is nothing in any memory, as such, to account for the fact that poetry reveals things to us above and beyond any of our actual experiences in this world.

Alchemist Memory turned his past to gold,<sup>1</sup>

says Alexander Smith of his poet, and as an account of inspiration, the line sounds singularly flat. There

<sup>1</sup> *A Life Drama.*

is nothing here to distinguish the poet from any octogenarian dozing in his armchair.

Is Memory indeed the only Muse? Not unless she is a far grander figure than we ordinarily suppose. Of course she has been exalted by certain artists. There is Richard Wagner, with his definition of art as memory of one's past youth, or—to stay closer home—Wordsworth, with his theory of poetry as emotion recollected in tranquillity,—such artists have a high regard for memory. Still, Oliver Wendell Holmes is tolerably representative of the nineteenth century attitude when he points memory to a second place. It is only the aged poet, conscious that his powers are decaying, to whom Holmes offers the consolation,

Live in the past; await no more  
The rush of heaven-sent wings;  
Earth still has music left in store  
While memory sighs and sings.<sup>1</sup>

But, though he would discourage us from our attempt to chain his genius, like a ghost, to his past life in this world, the poet is inclined to admit that Mnemosyne, in her true grandeur, has a fair claim to her title as mother of the muses. The memories of prosaic men may be, as we have described them, short and sordid, concerned only with their existence here and now, but the recollection of poets is a divine thing, reaching back to the days when their spirits were untrammelled by the body, and they gazed upon ideal beauty, when, as Plato says,

<sup>1</sup> *Invita Minerva.*

they saw a vision and were initiated into the most blessed mysteries . . . beholding apparitions innocent and simple and calm and happy as in a mystery; shining in pure light, pure themselves and not yet enshrined in the living tomb which we carry about, now that we are imprisoned in the body, as in an oyster shell.<sup>1</sup>

For the poet is apt to transfer Plato's praise of the philosopher to himself, declaring that "he alone has wings, and this is just, for he is always, according to the measure of his abilities, clinging in recollection to those things in which God abides, and in beholding which He is what He is."<sup>2</sup>

If the poet exalts memory to this station, he may indeed claim that he is not furtively adoring his own petty powers, when he reverences the visions which Mnemosyne vouchsafes to him. And indeed Plato's account of memory is congenial to many poets. Shelley is probably the most serious of the nineteenth century singers in claiming an ideal life for the soul, before its birth into this world.<sup>3</sup> Wordsworth's adherence to this view is as widely known as the *Ode on Immortality*. As an explanation for inspiration, the theory recurs in verse of other poets. One writer inquires,

Are these wild thoughts, thus fettered in my rhymes,  
Indeed the product of my heart and brain?<sup>4</sup>

and decides that the only way to account for the occasional gleams of insight in his verse is by assum-

<sup>1</sup> *Phædrus*, 250.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 249.

<sup>3</sup> See *Prince Athanase*. For Matthew Arnold's views, see *Self Deception*.

<sup>4</sup> Henry Timrod, *Sonnet*.

ing a prenatal life for the soul. Another maintains of poetry,

Her touch is a vibration and a light  
From worlds before and after.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps Alice Meynell's *A Song of Derivations* is the most natural and unforced of these verses. She muses:

. . . Mixed with memories not my own  
The sweet streams throng into my breast.  
Before this life began to be  
The happy songs that wake in me  
Woke long ago, and far apart.  
Heavily on this little heart  
Presses this immortality.

This poem, however, is not so consistent as the others with the Platonic theory of reminiscence. It is a previous existence in this world, rather than in ideal realms, which Alice Meynell assumes for her inspirations. She continues,

I come from nothing, but from where  
Come the undying thoughts I bear?  
Down through long links of death and birth,  
From the past poets of the earth,  
My immortality is there.

Certain singers who seem not to have been affected by the philosophical argument for reminiscence have concurred in Alice Meynell's last statement, and have felt that the mysterious power which is im-

<sup>1</sup> Edwin Markham, *Poetry*. Another recent poem on prenatal inspiration is *The Dream I Dreamed Before I Was Born* (1919), by Dorothea Laurence Mann.



pressing itself in their verse is the genius of dead poets, mysteriously finding expression in their disciple's song. A characteristic example of this attitude is Alfred Noyes' account of Chapman's sensations, when he attempted to complete Marlowe's *Hero and Leander*. Chapman tells his brother poets:

I have thought, sometimes, when I have tried  
To work his will, the hand that moved my pen  
Was mine and yet—not mine. The bodily mask  
Is mine, and sometimes dull as clay it sleeps  
With old Musaeus. Then strange flashes come,  
Oracular glories, visionary gleams,  
And the mask moves, not of itself, and sings.<sup>1</sup>

The best-known instance of such a belief is, of course, Browning's appeal at the beginning of *The Ring and the Book*, that his dead wife shall inspire his poetry.

One is tempted to surmise that many of our young poets, especially have nourished a secret conviction that their genius has such an origin as this. Let there be a deification of some poet who has aroused their special enthusiasm,—a mysterious resemblance to his style in the works which arise in their minds spontaneously, in moments of ecstasy,—what is a more natural result than the assumption that their genius is, in some strange manner, a continuation of his?<sup>2</sup> The tone of certain Shelley

<sup>1</sup> *At the Sign of the Golden Shoe.*

<sup>2</sup> Keats wrote to Haydn that he took encouragement in the notion of some good genius—probably Shakespeare—presiding over him. Swinburne was often called Shelley reborn.

worshippers suggests such a hypothesis as an account for their poems. Bayard Taylor seems to be an exception when, after pleading that Shelley infuse his spirit into his disciple's verses, he recalls himself, and concludes:

I do but rave, for it is better thus ;  
 Were once thy starry nature given to mine,  
 In the one life which would encircle us  
 My voice would melt, my voice be lost in thine ;  
 Better to bear the far sublimer pain  
 Of thought that has not ripened into speech,  
 To hear in silence Truth and Beauty sing  
 Divinely to the brain ;  
 For thus the poet at the last shall reach  
 His own soul's voice, nor crave a brother's string.<sup>1</sup>

In the theory that the genius of a past poet may be reincarnated, there is, indeed, a danger that keeps it from appealing to all poets. It tallies too well with the charge of imitativeness, if not downright plagiarism, often brought against a new singer.<sup>2</sup> If the poet feels that his genius comes from a power outside himself, he yet paradoxically insists that it must be peculiarly his own. Therefore Mrs. Browning, through Aurora Leigh, shrinks from the suspicion that her gift may be a heritage from singers before her. She wistfully inquires :

My own best poets, am I one with you ?  
 . . . When my joy and pain,  
 My thought and aspiration, like the stops

<sup>1</sup> *Ode to Shelley.*

<sup>2</sup> See Margaret Steele Anderson, *Other People's Wreaths*, and John Drinkwater, *My Songs*.

Of pipe or flute, are absolutely dumb  
Unless melodious, do you play on me,  
My pipers, and if, sooth, you did not play,  
Would no sound come? Or is the music mine;  
As a man's voice or breath is called his own,  
Inbreathed by the life-breather?

Are we exaggerating our modern poet's conviction that a spirit not his own is inspiring him? Does he not rather feel self-sufficient as compared with the earlier singers, who expressed such naïve dependence upon the Muse? We have been using the name Muse in this essay merely as a figure of speech, and is this not the poet's usage when he addresses her? The casual reader is inclined to say, yes, that a belief in the Muse is indeed dead. It would be absurd on the face of it, he might say, to expect a belief in this pagan figure to persist after all the rest of the Greek theogony has become a mere literary device to us. This may not be a reliable supposition, since as a matter of fact Milton and Dante impress us as being quite as deeply sincere as Homer, when they call upon the Muse to aid them in their song. But at any rate everyone is conscious that such a belief has degenerated before the eighteenth century. The complacent turner of couplets felt no genuine need for any Muse but his own keen intelligence; accordingly, though the machinery of invocation persists in his poetry, it is as purely an introductory flourish as is the ornamented initial letter of a poem. Indeed, as the century progresses, not even the pose of serious prayer

is always kept up. John Hughes is perhaps the most persistent and sober intreater of the Muse whom we find during this period, yet when he compliments the Muse upon her appearance "at Lucinda's tea-table,"<sup>1</sup> one feels that all awe of her has vanished. It is no wonder that James Thomson, writing verses *On the Death of His Mother*, should disclaim the artificial aid of the muses, saying that his own deep feeling was enough to inspire him. As the romantic movement progressed, it would be easy to show that distaste for the eighteenth century mannerism resulted in more and more flippant treatment of the goddesses. Beattie refers to a contemporary's "reptile Muse, swollen from the sty."<sup>2</sup> Burns alludes to his own Muse as a "tapitless ramfeezled hizzie,"<sup>3</sup> and sets the fashion for succeeding writers, who so multiply the original nine that each poet has an individual muse, a sorry sort of guardian-angel, whom he is fond of berating for her lack of ability. One never finds a writer nowadays, with courage to refer to his muse otherwise than apologetically. The usual tone is that of Andrew Lang, when he confesses, apropos of the departure of his poetic gift:

'Twas not much at any time  
 She could hitch into a rhyme,  
 Never was the muse sublime  
 Who has fled.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See *On Lucinda's Tea-table*.

<sup>2</sup> See *On a Report of a Monument to a Late Author*.

<sup>3</sup> See the *Epistle to Lapraik*.

<sup>4</sup> *A Poet's Apology*.



Yet one would be wrong in maintaining that the genuine poet of to-day feels a slighter dependence upon a spirit of song than did the world's earlier singers. There are, of course, certain poetasters now, as always, whose verse is ground out as if by machinery, and who are as little likely to call upon an outside power to aid them as is the horse that treads the cider mill. But among true poets, if the spirit who inspires poesy is a less definitely personified figure than of old, she is no less a sincerely conceived one and reverently worshiped. One doubts if there could be found a poet of merit who would disagree with Shelley's description of poetry as "the interpenetration of a diviner nature through our own."<sup>1</sup>

What is the poet's conception of such a divinity? It varies, of course. There is the occasional belief, just mentioned, in the transmigration of genius, but that goes back, in the end, to the belief that all genius is a memory of pre-existence; that is, dropping (or varying) the myth, that the soul of the poet is not chained to the physical world, but has the power of discerning the things which abide. And this, again, links up with what is perhaps the commonest form of invocation in modern poetry, namely, prayer that God, the spirit of the universe, may inspire the poet. For what does the poet mean when he calls himself the voice of God, but that he is intuitively aware of the eternal verities in the world? Poets who speak in this way ever conceive of God as Shelley did, in what is perhaps the most profoundly

<sup>1</sup> *Defense of Poetry.*

sincere invocation of the last century, his *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty*. All poets are idealists.

There is yet another view of the spirit who inspires poetry, which may seem more characteristic of our poets than are these others. It is expressed in the opening of Shelley's *Alastor*, and informs the whole of the *Ode to the West Wind*. It pervades Wordsworth, for if he seldom calls upon his natural environment as muse, he is yet profoundly conscious that his song is an inflowing from the heart of nature. This power has become such a familiar divinity to later singers that they are scarcely aware how great is their dependence upon her. There is nothing artificial or in any sense affected in the modern poet's conviction that in walking out to meet nature he is, in fact, going to the source of poetic power. Perhaps nineteenth and twentieth century writers, with their trust in the power of nature to breathe song into their hearts, are closer to the original faith in the muses than most of the poets who have called the sisters by name during the intervening centuries. This deification of nature, like the other modern conceptions of the spirit of song, signifies the poet's need of bringing himself into harmony with the world-spirit, which moulds the otherwise chaotic universe into those forms of harmony and beauty which constitute poetry.

Whether the poet ascribes his infilling to a specific goddess of song or to a mysterious harmony between his soul and the world spirit, a coming "into tune with the infinite," as it has been called, the mode

of his communion is identical. There is a frenzy of desire so intolerable that it suddenly fails, leaving the poet in trancelike passivity while the revelation is given to him,—ancient and modern writers alike describe the experience thus. And modern poets, no less than ancient ones, feel that, before becoming the channel of world meaning, they must be deprived of their own petty, egocentric thoughts. So Keats avers of the singer,

One hour, half-idiot, he stands by mossy waterfall;  
The next he writes his soul's memorial.<sup>1</sup>

So Shelley describes the experience:

Meaning on his vacant mind  
Flashed like strong inspiration.<sup>2</sup>

The poet is not, he himself avers, merely thinking about things. He becomes one with them. In this sense all poets are pantheists, and the flash of their inspiration means the death of their personal thought, enabling them, like Lucy, to be

Rolled round in earth's diurnal course  
With rocks and stones and trees.

Hence the singer has always been called a madman. The modern writer cannot escape Plato's conclusion,

There is no invention in him (the poet) until he has been inspired and is out of his senses, and the

<sup>1</sup> *A Visit to Burns' Country.*

<sup>2</sup> *Alastor.*

mind is no longer in him: when he has not attained to this state he is powerless and unable to utter his oracles.<sup>1</sup>

And again,

There is a . . . kind of madness which is a possession of the Muses; this enters into a delicate and virgin soul, and there inspiring frenzy, awakens lyric and all other numbers. . . . But he who, not being inspired, and having no touch of madness in his soul, comes to the door and thinks he will get into the temple by the help of art, he, I say, and his poetry are not admitted; the sane man is nowhere at all when he enters into rivalry with the madman.<sup>2</sup>

Even Aristotle, that sanest of philosophers, so far agrees with Plato as to say,

Poetry implies either a happy gift of nature, or a strain of madness. In the one case, a man can take the mold of any character; in the other he is lifted out of his proper self.<sup>3</sup>

One must admit that poets nowadays are not always so frank as earlier ones in describing their state of mind. Now that the lunatic is no longer placed in the temple, but in the hospital, the popular imputation of insanity to the poet is not always favorably received. Occasionally he regards it as only another unjust charge brought against him by a hostile world. Thus a brother poet has said that George Meredith's lot was

<sup>1</sup> *Ion*, § 534.

<sup>2</sup> *Phædrus*, § 245.

<sup>3</sup> *Poetics*, XVII.



Like Lear's—for he had felt the sting  
Of all too greatly giving  
The kingdom of his mind to those  
Who for it deemed him mad.<sup>1</sup>

In so far as the world's pronouncement is based upon the oracles to which the poet gives utterance, he always repudiates the charge of madness. Such various poets as Jean Ingelow,<sup>2</sup> James Thomson, B. V.,<sup>3</sup> Helen Hunt Jackson,<sup>4</sup> Alice Cary,<sup>5</sup> and George Edward Woodberry,<sup>6</sup> concur in the judgment that the poet is called insane by the rabble simply because they are blind to the ideal world in which he lives. Like the cave-dwellers of Plato's myth, men resent it when the seer, be he prophet or philosopher, tells them that there are things more real than the shadows on the wall with which they amuse themselves. Not all the writers just named are equally sure that they, rather than the world, are right. The women are thoroughly optimistic. Mr. Woodberry, though he leaves the question, whether the poet's beauty is a delusion, unanswered in the poem where he broaches it, has betrayed his faith in the ideal realms everywhere in his writings. James Thomson, on the contrary, is not at all sure that the world is wrong in its doubt of ideal truth. The tone of his poem, *Tasso and Leonora*, is very gloomy. The Italian poet is shown in prison, reflecting upon his faith

<sup>1</sup> Cale Young Rice, *Meredith*.

<sup>2</sup> See *Gladys and Her Island*.

<sup>3</sup> See *Tasso to Leonora*.

<sup>4</sup> See *The Singer's Hills*.

<sup>5</sup> See *Genius*.

<sup>6</sup> See *He Ate the Laurel and is Mad*.

in the ideal realms where eternal beauty dwells.  
He muses,

Yes—as Love is truer far  
Than all other things; so are  
Life and Death, the World and Time  
Mere false shows in some great Mime  
By dreadful mystery sublime.

But at the end Tasso's faith is troubled, and he  
ponders,

For were life no flitting dream,  
Were things truly what they seem,  
Were not all this world-scene vast  
But a shade in Time's stream glassed;  
Were the moods we now display  
Less phantasmal than the clay  
In which our poor spirits clad  
Act this vision, wild and sad,  
I must be mad, mad,—how mad!

However, this is aside from the point. The average poet is as firmly convinced as any philosopher that his visions are true. It is only the manner of his inspiration that causes him to doubt his sanity. Not merely is his mind vacant when the spirit of poetry is about to come upon him, but he is deprived of his judgment, so that he does not understand his own experiences during ecstasy. The idea of verbal inspiration, which used to be so popular in Biblical criticism, has been applied to the works of all poets.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See *Kathrina*, by J. G. Holland, where the heroine maintains that the inspiration of modern poets is similar to that of the Old Testament prophets, and declares,

As for the old seers  
Whose eyes God touched with vision of the life  
Of the unfolding ages, I must doubt  
Whether they comprehended what they saw.

Such a view has been a boon to literary critics. Shakespeare commentators, in particular, have been duly grateful for the lee-way granted them, when they are relieved from the necessity of limiting Shakespeare's meanings to the confines of his knowledge. As for the poet's own sense of his incomprehension, Francis Thompson's words are typical. Addressing a little child, he wonders at the statements she makes, ignorant of their significance; then he reflects,

And ah, we poets, I misdoubt  
 Are little more than thou.  
 We speak a lesson taught, we know not how,  
 And what it is that from us flows  
 The hearer better than the utterer knows.<sup>1</sup>

One might think that the poet would take pains to differentiate this inspired madness from the diseased mind of the ordinary lunatic. But as a matter of fact, bards who were literally insane have attracted much attention from their brothers.<sup>2</sup> Of these, Tasso<sup>3</sup> and Cowper<sup>4</sup> have appeared most often in the verse of the last century. Cowper's inclusion among his poems of verses written during periods of actual insanity has seemed to indicate that poetic

<sup>1</sup> *Sister Songs.*

<sup>2</sup> At the beginning of the romantic period not only Blake and Cowper, but Christopher Smart, John Clare, Thomas Dermody, John Tannahill and Thomas Lovell Beddoes made the mad poet familiar.

<sup>3</sup> See *Song for Tasso*, Shelley; *Tasso to Leonora*, James Thomson, B. V., *Tasso to Leonora*, E. F. Hoffman.

<sup>4</sup> See Bowles, *The Harp and Despair of Cowper*; Mrs. Browning, *Cowper's Grave*; Lord Houghton, *On Cowper's Cottage at Olney.*

madness is not merely a figure of speech. There is also significance, as revealing the poet's attitude toward insanity, in the fact that several fictional poets are represented as insane. Crabbe and Shelley have ascribed madness to their poet-heroes,<sup>1</sup> while the American, J. G. Holland, represents his hero's genius as a consequence, in part, at least, of a hereditary strain of suicidal insanity.<sup>2</sup>

It goes without saying that this is a romantic conception, wholly incompatible with the eighteenth century belief that poetry is produced by the action of the intelligence, aided by good taste. Think of the mad poet, William Blake, assuring his sedate contemporaries,

All pictures that's painted with sense and with thought  
Are painted by madmen as sure as a groat.<sup>3</sup>

What chance did he have of recognition?

This is merely indicative of the endless quarrel between the inspired poet and the man of reason. The eighteenth century contempt for poetic madness finds typical expression in Pope's satirical lines,

Some demon stole my pen (forgive the offense)  
And once betrayed me into common sense.<sup>4</sup>

And it is answered by Burns' characterization of writers depending upon dry reason alone:

<sup>1</sup> See Crabbe, *The Patron*; Shelley, *Rosalind and Helen*.

<sup>2</sup> See J. G. Holland, *Kathrina*. For recent verse on the mad poet see William Rose Benét, *Mad Blake*; Amy Lowell, *Clear, With Light Variable Winds*; Cale Young Rice, *The Mad Philosopher*; Edmund Blunden, *Clare's Ghost*.

<sup>3</sup> See fragment CI.

<sup>4</sup> *Dunciad*.



A set o' dull, conceited hashes  
 Confuse their brains in college classes!  
 They gang in sticks and come out asses,  
 Plain truth to speak,  
 And syne they think to climb Parnassus  
 By dint of Greek.<sup>1</sup>

The feud was perhaps at its bitterest between the eighteenth century classicists and such poets as Wordsworth<sup>2</sup> and Burns, but it is by no means stilled at present. Yeats<sup>3</sup> and Vachel Lindsay<sup>4</sup> have written poetry showing the persistence of the quarrel. Though the acrimony of the disputants varies, accordingly as the tone of the poet is predominantly thoughtful or emotional, one does not find any poet of the last century who denies the superiority of poetic intuition to scholarship. Thus Tennyson warns the man of learning that he cannot hope to fathom the depths of the poet's mind.<sup>5</sup> So Richard Gilder maintains of the singer,

He was too wise  
 Either to fear, or follow, or despise  
 Whom men call science—for he knew full well  
 All she had told, or still might live to tell  
 Was known to him before her very birth.<sup>6</sup>

The foundation of the poet's superiority is, of course, his claim that his inspiration gives him mystical

<sup>1</sup> *Epistle to Lapraik.*

<sup>2</sup> See the *Prelude.*

<sup>3</sup> See *The Scholar.*

<sup>4</sup> See *The Master of the Dance.* The hero is a dunce in school.

<sup>5</sup> See *The Poet's Mind.*

<sup>6</sup> *The Poet's Fame.* In the same spirit is *Invitation*, by J. E. Flecker.

experience of the things which the scholar can only remotely speculate about. Therefore Percy Mackaye makes Sappho vaunt over the philosopher, Pittacus:

Yours is the living pall,  
The aloof and frozen place of listeners  
And lookers-on at life. But mine—ah! mine  
The fount of life itself, the burning fount  
Pierian. I pity you.<sup>1</sup>

Very likely Pittacus had no answer to Sappho's boast, but when the average nondescript verse-writer claims that his intuitions are infinitely superior to the results of scholarly research, the man of reason is not apt to keep still. And one feels that the poet, in many cases, has earned such a retort as that recorded by Young:

How proud the poet's billow swells!  
The God! the God! his boast:  
A boast how vain! what wrecks abound!  
Dead bards stench every coast.<sup>2</sup>

There could be no more telling blow against the poet's view of inspiration than this. Even so pronounced a romanticist as Mrs. Browning is obliged to admit that the poet cannot always trust his vision. She muses over the title of poet:

The name

Is royal, and to sign it like a queen  
Is what I dare not—though some royal blood  
Would seem to tingle in me now and then

<sup>1</sup> *Sappho and Phaon*, a drama.

<sup>2</sup> *Resignation*.

With sense of power and ache,—with imposthumes  
 And manias usual to the race. Howbeit  
 I dare not: 'tis too easy to go mad  
 And ape a Bourbon in a crown of straws;  
 The thing's too common.<sup>1</sup>

Has the poet, then, no guarantee for the genuineness of his inspiration? Must he wait as ignorantly as his contemporaries for the judgment of posterity? One cannot conceive of the grandly egoistic poet saying this. Yet the enthusiast must not believe every spirit, but try them whether they be of God. What is his proof?

Emerson suggests a test, in a poem by that name. He avers,

I hung my verses in the wind.  
 Time and tide their faults may find.  
 All were winnowed through and through:  
 Five lines lasted sound and true;  
 Five were smelted in a pot  
 Than the south more fierce and hot.<sup>2</sup>

The last lines indicate, do they not, that the depth of the poet's passion during inspiration corresponds with the judgment pronounced by time upon his verses? William Blake quaintly tells us that he was once troubled over this question of the artist's infallibility, and that on a certain occasion when he was dining with the prophet Elijah, he inquired, "Does

<sup>1</sup> *Aurora Leigh*. See also the lines in the same poem,

For me, I wrote  
 False poems, like the rest, and thought them true  
 Because myself was true in writing them.

<sup>2</sup> *The Test*.

a firm belief that a thing is so make it so?" To which Elijah gave the comforting reply, "Every poet is convinced that it does."<sup>1</sup> To the cold critic, such an answer as Emerson's and Blake's is doubtless unsatisfactory, but to the poet, as to the religious enthusiast, his own ecstasy is an all-sufficient evidence.

The thoroughgoing romanticist will accept no other test. The critic of the Johnsonian tradition may urge him to gauge the worth of his impulse by its seemliness and restraint, but the romantic poet's utter surrender to a power from on high makes unrestraint seem a virtue to him. So with the critic's suggestion that the words coming to the poet in his season of madness be made to square with his returning reason. Emerson quotes, and partially accepts the dictum, "Poetry must first be good sense, though it is something more."<sup>2</sup> But the poet is more apt to account for his belief in his visions by Tertullian's motto, *Credo quod absurdum*.

If overwhelming passion is an absolute test of true inspiration, whence arises the uncertainty and confusion in the poet's own mind, concerning matters poetical? Why is a writer so stupid as to include one hundred pages of trash in the same volume with his one inspired poem? The answer seems to be that no writer is guided solely by inspiration. Not that he ever consciously falsifies or modifies the

<sup>1</sup> *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, "A Memorable Fancy."

<sup>2</sup> See the essay on *Imagination*.



revelation given him in his moment of inspiration, but the revelation is ever hauntingly incomplete.

The slightest adverse influence may jar upon the harmony between the poet's soul and the spirit of poetry. The stories of Dante's "certain men of business," who interrupted his drawing of Beatrice, and of Coleridge's visitors who broke in upon the writing of *Kubla Khan*, are notorious. Tennyson, in *The Poet's Mind*, warns all intruders away from the singer's inspired hour. He tells them,

In your eye there is death;  
There is frost in your breath  
Which would blight the plants.

In the heart of the garden the merry bird chants;  
It would fall to the ground if you came in.

But it is not fair always to lay the shattering of the poet's dream to an intruder. The poet himself cannot account for its departure, so delicate and evanescent is it. Emerson says,

There are open hours  
When the God's will sallies free,  
And the dull idiot might see  
The flowing fortunes of a thousand years;—  
Sudden, at unawares,  
Self-moved, fly to the doors,  
Nor sword of angels could reveal  
What they conceal.<sup>1</sup>

What is the poet, thus shut out of Paradise, to do? He can only make a frenzied effort to record

<sup>1</sup> *Merlin*.

his vision before its very memory has faded from him. Benvenuto Cellini has told us of his tantrums while he was finishing his bronze statue of Perseus. He worked with such fury, he declares, that his workmen believed him to be no man, but a devil. But the poet, no less than the molder of bronze, is under the necessity of casting his work into shape before the metal cools. And his success is never complete. Shelley writes, "When composition begins, inspiration is already on the decline, and the most glorious poetry that has ever been communicated to the world is probably a feeble shadow of the original conceptions of the poet."<sup>1</sup>

Hence may arise the pet theory of certain modern poets, that a long poem is an impossibility. Short swallow flights of song only can be wholly sincere, they say, for their ideal is a poem as literally spontaneous as Sordello's song of Elys. In proportion as work is labored, it is felt to be dead.

There is no lack of verse suggesting that extemporaneous composition is most poetical,<sup>2</sup> but is there nothing to be said on the other side? Let us reread Browning's judgment on the matter:

Touch him ne'er so lightly, into song he broke.  
Soil so quick receptive,—not one feather-seed,  
Not one flower-dust fell but straight its fall awoke

<sup>1</sup> *The Defense of Poetry.*

<sup>2</sup> See Scott's accounts of his minstrels' composition. See also, Bayard Taylor, *Ad Amicos*, and *Proem Dedicatory*; Edward Dowden, *The Singer's Plea*; Richard Gilder, *How to the Singer Comes the Song*; Joaquin Miller, *Because the Skies are Blue*; Emerson, *The Poet*; Longfellow, *Envoi*; Robert Bridges, *A Song of My Heart*.

Vitalizing virtue: song would song succeed  
 Sudden as spontaneous—prove a poet soul!  
 Indeed?

Rock's the song soil rather, surface hard and bare:  
 Sun and dew their mildness, storm and frost their rage  
 Vainly both expend,—few flowers awaken there:  
 Quiet in its cleft broods—what the after-age  
 Knows and names a pine, a nation's heritage.<sup>1</sup>

Is it possible that the one epic poem which is a man's life work may be as truly inspired as is the lyric that leaps to his lips with a sudden gush of emotion? Or is it true, as Shelley seems to aver, that such a poem is never an ideal unity, but a collection of inspired lines and phrases connected "by the intertexture of conventional phrases?"<sup>2</sup>

It may be that the latter view seems truer to us only because we misunderstand the manner in which inspiration is limited. Possibly poets bewail the incompleteness of the flash which is revealed to them, not because they failed to see all the glories of heaven and earth, but because it was a vision merely, and the key to its expression in words was not given them. "Passion and expression are beauty itself," says William Blake, and the passion, so far from making expression inevitable and spontaneous, may by its intensity be an actual handicap, putting the poet into the state "of some fierce thing replete with too much rage."

<sup>1</sup> *Epilogue to the Dramatic Idyls*. The same thought is in the sonnet, "I ask not for those thoughts that sudden leap," by James Russell Lowell, and *Overnight, a Rose*, by Caroline Giltman.

<sup>2</sup> *The Defense of Poetry*.

Surely we have no right to condemn the poet because a perfect expression of his thought is not immediately forthcoming. Like any other artist, he works with tools, and is handicapped by their inadequacy. According to Plato, language affords the poet a more flexible implement than any other artist possesses,<sup>1</sup> yet, at times, it appears to the maker stubborn enough. To quote Francis Thompson,

Our untempered speech descends—poor heirs!  
Grimy and rough-cast still from Babel's brick-layers;  
Curse on the brutish jargon we inherit,  
Strong but to damn, not memorize a spirit!<sup>2</sup>

Walt Whitman voices the same complaint:

Speech is the twin of my vision: it is unequal to  
measure itself;  
It provokes me forever; it says sarcastically,  
"Walt, you contain enough, why don't you let it out  
then?"<sup>3</sup>

Accordingly there is nothing more common than verse bewailing the singer's inarticulateness.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See *The Republic*, IX, 588 D.

<sup>2</sup> *Her Portrait*.

<sup>3</sup> *Song of Myself*.

<sup>4</sup> See Tennyson, *In Memoriam*, "For words, like nature, half reveal"; Oliver Wendell Holmes, *To my Readers*; Mrs. Browning, *The Soul's Expression*; Jean Ingelow, *A Lily and a Lute*; Coventry Patmore, *Dead Language*; Swinburne, *The Lute and the Lyre, Plus Intra*; Francis Thompson, *Daphne*; Joaquin Miller, *Ina*; Richard Gilder, *Art and Life*; Alice Meynell, *Singers to Come*; Edward Dowden, *Unuttered*; Max Ehrmann, *Tell Me*; Alfred Noyes, *The Sculptor*; William Rose Benét, *Thwarted Utterance*; Robert Silliman Hillyer, *Even as Love Grows More*; Daniel Henderson, *Lover and*



Frequently these confessions of the impossibility of expression are coupled with the bitterest tirades against a stupid audience, which refuses to take the poet's genius on trust, and which remains utterly unmoved by his avowals that he has much to say to it that lies too deep for utterance. Such an outlet for the poet's very natural petulance is likely to seem absurd enough to us. It is surely not the fault of his hearers, we are inclined to tell him gently, that he suffers an impediment in his speech. Yet, after all, we may be mistaken. It is significant that the singers who are most aware of their inarticulateness are not the romanticists, who, supposedly, took no thought for a possible audience; but they are the later poets, who are obsessed with the idea that they have a message. Emily Dickinson, herself as untroubled as any singer about her public, yet puts the problem for us. She avers,

I found the phrase to every thought  
 I ever had, but one;  
 And that defies me,—as a hand  
 Did try to chalk the sun.

To races nurtured in the dark;—  
 How would your own begin?  
 Can blaze be done in cochineal,  
 Or noon in mazarin?

"To races nurtured in the dark." There lies a prolific source to the poet's difficulties. His task is *Lyre*; Dorothea Lawrence Mann, *To Imagination*; John Hall Wheelock, *Rossetti*; Sara Teasdale, *The Net*; Lawrence Bin-  
 yon, *If I Could Sing the Song of Her*.

not merely to ensure the permanence of his own resplendent vision, but to interpret it to men who take their darkness for light. As Emerson expresses it in his translation of Zoroaster, the poet's task is "inscribing things unapparent in the apparent fabrication of the world."<sup>1</sup>

Here is the point where poets of the last one hundred years have most often joined issues. As writers of the eighteenth century split on the question whether poetry is the product of the human reason, or of a divine visitation, literal "inspiration," so poets of the nineteenth century and of our time have been divided as to the propriety of adapting one's inspiration to the limitations of one's hearers. It too frequently happens that the poet goes to one extreme or the other. He may either despise his audience to such a degree that he does not attempt to make himself intelligible, or he may quench the spark of his thought in the effort to trim his verse into a shape that pleases his public.

Austin Dobson takes malicious pleasure, often, in championing the less aristocratic side of the controversy. His *Advice to a Poet* follows, throughout, the tenor of the first stanza:

My counsel to the budding bard  
Is, "Don't be long," and "Don't be hard."  
Your "gentle public," my good friend,  
Won't read what they can't comprehend.

This precipitates us at once into the marts of the money changers, and one shrinks back in distaste.

<sup>1</sup> *Essay on Imagination.*

If this is what is meant by keeping one's audience in mind during composition, the true poet will have none of it. Poe's account of his deliberate composition of the *Raven* is enough to estrange him from the poetic brotherhood. Yet we are face to face with an issue that we, as the "gentle reader," cannot ignore. Shall the poet, then, inshrine his visions as William Blake did, for his own delight, and leave us unenlightened by his apocalypse?

There is a middle ground, and most poets have taken it. For in the intervals of his inspiration the poet himself becomes, as has been reiterated, a mere man, and except for the memories of happier moments that abide with him, he is as dull as his reader. So when he labors to make his inspiration articulate he is not coldly manipulating his materials, like a pedagogue endeavoring to drive home a lesson, but for his own future delight he is making the spirit of beauty incarnate. And he will spare no pains to this end. Keats cries,

O for ten years, that I may overwhelm  
Myself in poesy; so I may do the deed  
My soul has to herself decreed.<sup>1</sup>

Bryant warns the poet,

Deem not the framing of a deathless lay  
The pastime of a drowsy summer day;  
But gather all thy powers  
And wreak them on the verse that thou dost weave.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Sleep and Poetry*. See also the letter to his brother George, April, 1817.

<sup>2</sup> *The Poet*.

It is true that not all poets agree that these years of labor are of avail. Even Bryant, just quoted, warns the poet,

Touch the crude line with fear  
But in the moments of impassioned thought.<sup>1</sup>

Indeed the singer's awe of the mysterious revelation given him may be so deep that he dares not tamper with his first impetuous transcription of it. But as a sculptor toils over a single vein till it is perfect, the poet may linger over a word or phrase, and so long as the pulse seems to beat beneath his fingers, no one has a right to accuse him of artificiality. Sometimes, indeed, he is awkward, and when he tries to wreathe his thoughts together, they wither like field flowers under his hot touch. Or, in his zeal, he may fashion for his forms an embroidered robe of such richness that like heavy brocade it disguises the form which it should express. In fact, poets are apt to have an affection, not merely for their inspiration, but for the words that clothe it. Keats confessed, "I look upon fine phrases as a lover." Tennyson delighted in "jewels fine words long, that on the stretched forefinger of all time sparkle forever." Rossetti spoke no less sincerely than these others, no doubt, even though he did not illustrate the efficacy of his search, when he described his interest in reading old manuscripts with the hope of "pitching on some stunning words for poetry."

Ever and anon there is a rebellion against con-

<sup>1</sup> *The Poet,*



scious elaboration in dressing one's thoughts. We are just emerging from one of the noisiest of these. The vers-librists insist that all adornment and disguise be stripped off, and the idea be exhibited in its naked simplicity. The quarrel with more conservative writers comes, not from any disagreement as to the beauty of ideas in the nude, but from a doubt on the part of the conservatives as to whether one can capture ideal beauty without an accurately woven net of words. Nor do the vers-librists prove that they are less concerned with form than are other poets. "The poet must learn his trade in the same manner, and with the same painstaking care, as the cabinet maker," says Amy Lowell.<sup>1</sup> The disagreement among poets on this point is proving itself to be not so great as some had supposed. The ideal of most singers, did they possess the secret, is to do as Mrs. Browning advises them,

Keep up the fire  
And leave the generous flames to shape themselves.<sup>2</sup>

Whether the poet toils for years to form a shrine for his thought, or whether his awe forbids him to touch his first unconscious formulation of it, there comes a time when all that he can do has been done, and he realizes that he will never approximate his vision more closely than this. Then, indeed, as high as was his rapture during the moment of revelation, so deep is likely to be his discouragement with

<sup>1</sup> Preface to *Sword Blades and Poppy Seed*.

<sup>2</sup> *Aurora Leigh*.

his powers of creation, for, however fair he may feel his poem to be, it yet does not fill the place of what he has lost. Thus Francis Thompson sighs over the poet,

When the embrace has failed, the rapture fled,  
Not he, not he, the wild sweet witch is dead,  
And though he cherisheth  
The babe most strangely born from out her death,  
Some tender trick of her it hath, maybe,  
It is not she.<sup>1</sup>

We have called the poet an egotist, and surely, his attitude toward the blind rout who have had no glimpse of the heavenly vision, is one of contemptuous superiority. But like the priest in the temple, all his arrogance vanishes when he ceases to harangue the congregation, and goes into the secret place to worship. And toward anyone who sincerely seeks the revelation, no matter how feeble his powers may be, the poet's attitude is one of tenderest sympathy and comradeship. Alice Cary pleads,

Hear me tell  
How much my will transcends my feeble powers,  
As one with blind eyes feeling out in flowers  
Their tender hues.<sup>2</sup>

And there is not a poet in the last century of such prominence that he does not reverence such a confession,<sup>3</sup> and aver that he too is an earnest and

<sup>1</sup> *Sister Songs.*

<sup>2</sup> *To the Spirit of Song.*

<sup>3</sup> Some poems showing the similarity in such an attitude of great and small alike, follow: *Epistle to Charles C. Clarke*, Keats; *The Soul's Expression*, Mrs. Browning; *Memorial Verses to Wm. B. Scott*, Swinburne; *Sister Songs*, Proemion

humble suppliant in the temple of beauty. For the clearer his glimpse of the transcendent vision has been, the more conscious he is of his blindness after the glory has passed, and the more unquenchable is his desire for a new and fuller revelation.

*to Love in Dian's Lap, A Judgment in Heaven*, Francis Thompson; *Urania*, Matthew Arnold; *There Have Been Vast Displays of Critic Wit*, Alexander Smith; *Invita Minerva* and *L'Envoi to the Muse*, J. R. Lowell; *The Voiceless*, O. W. Holmes; *Fata Morgana*, and *Epimetheus, or the Poet's Afterthought*, Longfellow; *L'Envoi*, Kipling; *The Apology*, and *Gleam on Me, Fair Ideal*, Lewis Morris; *Dedication to Austin Dobson*, E. Gosse; *A Country Nosegay*, and *Gleaners of Fame*, Alfred Austin; *Another Tattered Rhymster in the Ring*, G. K. Chesterton; *To Any Poet*, Alice Meynell; *The Singer*, and *To a Lady on Chiding Me For Not Writing*, Richard Realf; *The Will and the Wing* and *Though Dowered with Instincts Keen and High*, P. H. Haynes; *Dull Words*, Trumbull Stickney; *The Inner Passion*, Alfred Noyes; *The Veiled Muse*, William Winter; *Sonnet*, William Bennett; *Tell Me*, Max Ehrmann; *The Singer's Plea*, Edward Dowden; *Genius*, R. H. Horne; *My Country*, George Woodberry; *Uncalled*, Madison Cawein; Thomas Bailey Aldrich, *At the Funeral of a Minor Poet*; Robert Haven Schauffler, *Overtones, The Silent Singers*; Stephen Vincent Benét, *A Minor Poet*; Alec de Candole, *The Poets*.

## V

### THE POET'S MORALITY

IF English poets of the last century are more inclined to parade their moral virtue than are poets of other countries, this may be the result of a singular persistency on the part of England in searching out and punishing sins ascribed to poetic temperament. Byron was banished; Shelley was judged unfit to rear his own children; Keats was advertised as an example of "extreme moral depravity";<sup>1</sup> Oscar Wilde was imprisoned; Swinburne was castigated as "an unclean fiery imp from the pit."<sup>2</sup> These are some of the most conspicuous examples of a refusal by the British public to countenance what it considers a code of morals peculiar to poets. It is hardly to be wondered at that verse-writers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have not been inclined to quarrel with Sir Philip Sidney's statement that "England is the stepmother of poets,"<sup>3</sup> and that through their writings should run a vein of aggrieved protest against an unfair discrimination in dragging their failings ruthlessly out to the light.

<sup>1</sup> By *Blackwoods*.

<sup>2</sup> By *The Saturday Review*.

<sup>3</sup> *Apology for Poetry*.



It cannot, however, be maintained that England is unique in her prejudice against poetic morals. The charges against the artist have been long in existence, and have been formulated and reformulated in many countries. In fact Greece, rather than England, might with some justice be regarded as the parent of the poet's maligners, for Plato has been largely responsible for the hue and cry against the poet throughout the last two millennia. Various as are the counts against the poet's conduct, they may all be included under the declaration in the *Republic*, "Poetry feeds and waters the passions instead of withering and starving them; she lets them rule instead of ruling them."<sup>1</sup>

Though the accusers of the poet are agreed that the predominance of passion in his nature is the cause of his depravity, still they are a heterogeneous company, suffering the most violent disagreement among themselves as to a valid reason for pronouncing his passionate impulses criminal. Their unfortunate victim is beset from so many directions that he is sorely put to it to defend himself against one band of assailants without exposing himself to attack from another quarter.

This hostile public may be roughly divided into three camps, made up, respectively, of philistines, philosophers, and puritans. Within recent years the distinct grievance of each group has been made articulate in a formal denunciation of the artist's morals.

<sup>1</sup> Book X, 606, Jowett translation.

There is, first, that notorious indictment, *Degeneration*, by Max Nordau. Nordau speaks eloquently for all who claim the name "average plain citizen," all who would hustle off to the gallows anyone found guilty of breaking the lockstep imposed upon men by convention. Secondly, there is a severe criticism of the poet from an ostensibly unbiased point of view, *The Man of Genius*, by Césaire Lombroso. Herein are presented the arguments of the thinkers, who probe the poet's foibles with an impersonal and scientific curiosity. Last, there is the severe arraignment, *What Is Art?* by Tolstoi. In this book are crystallized the convictions of the ascetics, who recognize in beauty a false goddess, luring men from the stern pursuit of holiness.

How does it come about that, in affirming the perniciousness of the poet's passionate temperament, the man of the street, the philosopher, and the puritan are for the nonce in agreement? The man of the street is not averse to feeling, as a rule, even when it is carried to egregious lengths of sentimentality. A stroll through a village when all the victrolas are in operation would settle this point unequivocally for any doubter. It seems that the philistine's quarrel with the poet arises from the fact that, unlike the makers of phonograph records, the poet dares to follow feeling in defiance of public sentiment. Like the conservative that he is, the philistine gloats over the poet's lapses from virtue because, in setting aside mass-feeling as a gauge of right and wrong, and in setting up, instead, his own

individual feelings as a rule of conduct, the poet displays an arrogance that deserves a fall. The philosopher, like the philistine, may tolerate feeling within limits. His sole objection to the poet lies in the fact that, far from making emotion the handmaiden of the reason, as the philosopher would do, the poet exalts emotion to a seat above the reason, thus making feeling the supreme arbiter of conduct. The puritan, of course, gives vent to the most bitter hostility of all, for, unlike the philistine and the philosopher, he regards natural feeling as wholly corrupt. Therefore he condemns the poet's indulgence of his passionate nature with equal severity whether he is within or without the popular confines of proper conduct, or whether or not his conduct may be proved reasonable.

Much of the inconsistency in the poet's exhibitions of his moral character may be traced to the fact that he is addressing now one, now another, of his accusers. The sobriety of his arguments with the philosopher has sometimes been interpreted by the man of the street as cowardly side-stepping. On the other hand, the poet's bravado in defying the man of the street might be interpreted by the philosopher as an acknowledgment of imperviousness to reason.

It seems as though the first impulse of the poet were to set his back against the wall and deal with all his antagonists at once, by challenging their right to pry into his private conduct. It is true that certain poets of the last century have believed

it beneath their dignity to pay any attention to the insults and persecution of the public. But though a number have maintained an air of stolid indifference so long as the attacks have remained personal, few or none have been content to disregard defamation of a departed singer.

The public cannot maintain, in many instances, that this vicarious indignation arises from a sense of sharing the frailties of the dead poet who is the direct object of attack. Not thus may one account for the generous heat of Whittier, of Richard Watson Gilder, of Robert Browning, of Tennyson, in rebuking the public which itches to make a posthumous investigation of a singer's character.<sup>1</sup> Tennyson affords a most interesting example of sensitiveness with nothing, apparently, to conceal. There are many anecdotes of his morbid shrinking from public curiosity, wholly in key with his cry of abhorrence,

Now the poet cannot die  
Nor leave his music as of old,  
But round him ere he scarce be cold  
Begins the scandal and the cry:  
Proclaim the faults he would not show,  
Break lock and seal; betray the trust;  
Keep nothing sacred; 'tis but just  
The many-headed beast should know.

In protesting against the right of the public to judge their conduct, true poets refuse to bring themselves to a level with their accusers by making the

<sup>1</sup> See Whittier, *My Namesake*; Richard W. Gilder, *A Poet's Protest*, and *Desecration*; Robert Browning, *House*; Tennyson, *In Memoriam*.



easiest retort, that they are made of exactly the same clay as is the *hoi polloi* that assails them. This sort of recrimination is characteristic of a certain blustering type of claimant for the title of poet, such as Joaquin Miller, a rather disorderly American of the last generation, who dismissed attacks upon the singer with the words,

Yea, he hath sinned. Who hath revealed  
That he was more than man or less?<sup>1</sup>

The attitude is also characteristic of another anomalous type which flourished in America fifty years ago, whose verse represents an attempted fusion of emasculated poetry and philistine piety. A writer of this type moralizes impartially over the erring bard and his accusers,

Sin met thy brother everywhere,  
And is thy brother blamed?  
From passion, danger, doubt and care  
He no exemption claimed.<sup>2</sup>

But genuine poets refuse to compromise themselves by admitting that they are no better than other men.

They are not averse, however, to pointing out the unfitness of the public to cast the first stone. So unimpeachable a citizen as Longfellow finds even in the notoriously spotted artist, Benvenuto Cellini, an advantage over his maligners because

He is not  
That despicable thing, a hypocrite.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Burns and Byron.*

<sup>2</sup> *Ebenezer Eliot, Burns.*

<sup>3</sup> *Michael Angelo.*

Most of the faults charged to them, poets aver, exist solely in the evil minds of their critics. Coleridge goes so far as to expurgate the poetry of William Blake, "not for the want of innocence in the poem, but from the too probable want of it in the readers."<sup>1</sup>

The nakedness of any frailties which poets may possess, makes it the more contemptible, they feel, for the public to wrap itself in the cloak of hypocrisy before casting stones. The modern poet's weakness for autobiographical revelation leaves no secret corners in his nature in which surreptitious vices may lurk. One might generalize what Keats says of Burns, "We can see horribly clear in the work of such a man his whole life, as if we were God's spies."<sup>2</sup> The Rousseau-like nudity of the poet's soul is sometimes put forward as a plea that the public should close its eyes to possible shortcomings. Yet, as a matter of fact, it is precisely in the lack of privacy characterizing the poet's life that his enemies find their justification for concerning themselves with his morality. Since by flaunting his personality in his verse he propagates his faults among his admirers, the public is surely justified in pointing out and denouncing his failings.

Poets cannot logically deny this. To do so, they would have to confess that their inspirations are wholly unaffected by their personalities. But this

<sup>1</sup> Letter to Charles Augustus Tulk, Highgate, Thursday Evening, 1818, p. 684, Vol. II, *Letters*, ed. E. Hartley Coleridge.

<sup>2</sup> Sidney Colvin, *John Keats*, p. 285.

is, naturally, a very unpopular line of defense. That unhappy worshiper of puritan morals and of the muses, J. G. Holland, does make such a contention, averring,

God finds his mighty way  
 Into his verse. The dimmest window panes  
 Let in the morning light, and in that light  
 Our faces shine with kindled sense of God  
 And his unwearied goodness, but the glass  
 Gets little good of it; nay, it retains  
 Its chill and grime beyond the power of light  
 To warm or whiten . . .  
 . . . The psalmist's soul  
 Was not a fitting place for psalms like his  
 To dwell in overlong, while wanting words.<sup>1</sup>

But the egotism of the average poet precludes this explanation. No more deadly insult could be offered him than forgiveness of his sins on the ground of their unimportance. Far from holding that his personality does not affect his verse, he would have us believe that the sole worth of his poetry lies in its reflection of his unique qualities of soul. Elizabeth Barrett, not Holland, exhibits the typical poetic attitude when she asks Robert Browning, "Is it true, as others say, that the productions of an artist do not partake of his real nature,—that in the minor sense, man is not made in the image of God? It is *not* true, to my mind."<sup>2</sup>

The glass houses in which the poet's accusers may reside really have nothing to do with the question.

<sup>1</sup> *Kathrina*.

<sup>2</sup> Letter to Robert Browning, February 3, 1845.

The immorality of these men is of comparatively slight significance, whereas the importance of the poet's personality is enormous, because it takes on immortality through his works. Not his contemporaries alone, but readers of his verse yet unborn have a right to call him to account for his faults. Though Swinburne muses happily over the sins of Villon,

But from thy feet now death hath washed the mire,<sup>1</sup>

it is difficult to see how he could seriously have advanced such a claim, inasmuch as, assuming Villon's sincerity, the reader, without recourse to a biography, may reconstruct the whole course of his moral history from his writings.

Unquestionably if the poet wishes to satisfy his enemies as to the ethical worth of his poetry, he is under obligation to prove to them that as "the man of feeling" he possesses only those impulses that lead him toward righteousness. And though puritans, philosophers and philistines quarrel over technical points in their conceptions of virtue, still, if the poet is not a criminal, he should be able, by making a plain statement of his innocence, to remove the most heinous charges against him, which bind his enemies into a coalition.

There is no doubt that poets, as a class, have acknowledged the obligation of proving that their lives are pure. But the effectiveness of their statements has been largely dissipated by the fact that their voices have been almost drowned by the clamor

<sup>1</sup> *A Ballad of François Villon.*



of a small coterie which finds its chief delight in brazenly exaggerating the vices popularly ascribed to it, then defending them as the poet's exclusive privilege.

So perennially does this group flourish, and so shrill-voiced are its members in self-advertisement, that it is useless for other poets to present their case, till the claims of the ostentatiously wicked are heard. One is inclined, perhaps, to dismiss them as pseudo-poets, whose only chance at notoriety is through enunciating paradoxes. In these days when the school has shrunk to Ezra Pound and his followers, vaunting their superiority to the public, "whose virgin stupidity is untemptable,"<sup>1</sup> it is easy to dismiss the men and their verse thus lightly. But what is one to say when one encounters the decadent school in the last century, flourishing at a time when, in the words of George Augustus Scala, the public had to choose between "the clever (but I cannot say moral) Mr. Swinburne, and the moral (but I cannot say clever) Mr. Tupper?"<sup>2</sup> What is one to say of a period wherein the figure of Byron, with his bravado and contempt for accepted morality, towers above most of his contemporaries?

Whatever its justification, the excuse for the poets flaunting an addiction to immorality lies in the obnoxiousness of the philistine element among their enemies. When mass feeling, mass-morality, becomes too oppressive, poets are wont to escape

<sup>1</sup> Ezra Pound, *Tensone*.

<sup>2</sup> See E. Gosse, *Life of Swinburne*, p. 162.

from its trammelling conventions at any cost. Rather than consent to lay their emotions under the rubber-stamp of expediency; they are likely to aver, with the sophists of old, that morality is for slaves, whereas the rulers among men, the poets, recognize no law but natural law.

Swinburne affords an excellent example of this type of reaction. Looking back tolerantly upon his early prayers to the pagan ideal to

Come down and redeem us from virtue,

upon his youthful zest in leaving

The lilies and languors of virtue  
For the roses and raptures of vice,

he tried to dissect his motives. "I had," he said, "a touch of Byronic ambition to be thought an eminent and terrible enemy to the decorous life and respectable fashion of the world, and, as in Byron's case, there was mingled with a sincere scorn and horror of hypocrisy a boyish and voluble affectation of audacity and excess."<sup>1</sup>

So far, so good. There is little cause for disagreement among poets, however respectable or the reverse their own lives may be, in the contention that the first step toward sincerity of artistic expression must be the casting off of external restraints. Even the most conservative of them is not likely to be seriously concerned if, for the time being, he finds

<sup>1</sup> E. Gosse, *Life of Swinburne*, p. 309.

among the younger generation a certain exaggeration of the pose of unrestraint. The respectability of Oliver Wendell Holmes did not prevent his complacent musing over Tom Moore:

If on his cheek unholy blood  
 Burned for one youthful hour,  
 'Twas but the flushing of the bud  
 That bloomed a milk-white flower.<sup>1</sup>

One may lay it down as an axiom among poets that their ethical natures must develop spontaneously, or not at all. An attempt to force one's moral instincts will inevitably cramp and thwart one's art. It is unparalleled to find so great a poet as Coleridge plaintively asserting, "I have endeavored to feel what I ought to feel,"<sup>2</sup> and his brothers have recoiled from his words. His declaration was, of course, not equivalent to saying, "I have endeavored to feel what the world thinks I ought to feel," but even so, one suspects that the philosophical part of Coleridge was uppermost at the time of this utterance, and that his obligatory feelings did not flower in a *Christabel* or a *Kubla Khan*.

The real parting of the ways between the major and minor contingents of poets comes when certain writers maintain, not merely their freedom from conventional moral standards, but a perverse inclination to seek what even they regard as evil. This is, presumably, a logical, if unconscious, outgrowth of the romantic conception of art as "strangeness added

<sup>1</sup> *After a Lecture on Moore.*

<sup>2</sup> Letter to the Reverend George Coleridge, March 21, 1794.

to beauty." For the decadents conceive that the loveliness of virtue is an age-worn theme which has grown so obvious as to lose its æsthetic appeal, whereas the manifold variety of vice contains unexplored possibilities of fresh, exotic beauty. Hence there has been on their part an ardent pursuit of hitherto undreamed-of sins, whose aura of suggestiveness has not been rubbed off by previous artistic expression.

The decadent's excuse for his vices is that his office is to reflect life, and that indulgence of the senses quickens his apprehension of it. He is apt to represent the artist as "a martyr for all mundane moods to tear,"<sup>1</sup> and to indicate that he is unable to see life steadily and see it whole until he has experienced the whole gamut of crime.<sup>2</sup> Such a view has not, of course, been confined to the nineteenth century. A characteristic renaissance attitude toward life and art was caught by Browning in a passage of *Sordello*. The hero, in a momentary reaction from idealism, longs for the keener sensations arising from vice and exclaims,

Leave untried  
Virtue, the creaming honey-wine; quick squeeze  
Vice, like a biting serpent, from the lees  
Of life! Together let wrath, hatred, lust,  
All tyrannies in every shape be thrust  
Upon this now.

<sup>1</sup> See John Davidson, *A Ballad in Blank Verse*.

<sup>2</sup> See Oscar Wilde, *Ravenna*; John Davidson, *A Ballad in Blank Verse on the Making of a Poet, A Ballad of an Artist's Wife*; Arthur Symons, *There's No Lust Like to Poetry*.



Naturally Browning does not allow this thirst for evil to be more than a passing impulse in Sordello's life.

The weakness of this recipe for poetic achievement stands revealed in the cynicism with which expositions of the frankly immoral poet end. If the quest of wickedness is a powerful stimulus to the emotions, it is a very short-lived one. The blasé note is so dominant in Byron's autobiographical poetry,—the lyrics, *Childe Harold* and *Don Juan*—as to render quotation tiresome. It sounds no less inevitably in the decadent verse at the other end of the century. Ernest Dowson's *Villanelle of the Poet's Road* is a typical expression of the mood. Dowson's biography leaves no doubt of the sincerity of his lines,

Wine and women and song,  
Three things garnish our way:  
Yet is day overlong.  
Three things render us strong,  
Vine-leaves, kisses and bay.  
Yet is day overlong.

Since the decadents themselves must admit that delight in sin kills, rather than nurtures, sensibility, a popular defense of their practices is to the effect that sin, far from being sought consciously, is an inescapable result of the artist's abandonment to his feelings. Moreover it is useful, they assert, in stirring up remorse, a very poetic feeling, because it heightens one's sense of the beauty of holiness. This view attained to considerable popularity during

the Victorian period, when sentimental piety and worship of Byron were sorely put to it to exist side by side. The prevalence of the view that remorse is the most reliable poetic stimulant is given amusing evidence in the *Juvenalia* of Tennyson<sup>1</sup> and Clough,<sup>2</sup> wherein these youths of sixteen and seventeen, whose later lives were to prove so innocuous, represent themselves as racked with the pangs of repentance for mysteriously awful crimes. Mrs. Browning, an excellent recorder of Victorian public opinion, ascribed a belief in the deplorable but inevitable conjunction of crime and poetry to her literary friends, Miss Mitford and Mrs. Jameson. Their doctrine, Mrs. Browning wrote, "is that everything put into the poetry is taken out of the man and lost utterly by him."<sup>3</sup> Naturally, Mrs. Browning wholly repudiated the idea, and Browning concurred in her judgment. "What is crime," he asked, "which would have been prevented but for the 'genius' involved in it?—Poor, cowardly, mis-created creatures abound—if you could throw genius into their composition, they would become more degraded still, I suppose."<sup>4</sup>

Burns has been the great precedent for verse depicting the poet as yearning for holiness, even while his importunate passions force him into evil courses. One must admit that in the verse of Burns

<sup>1</sup> See *Poems of Two Brothers*.

<sup>2</sup> See *An Evening Walk in Spring*.

<sup>3</sup> See letters to Robert Browning, February 17, 1846; May 1, 1846.

<sup>4</sup> Letter to Elizabeth Barrett, April 4, 1846.

himself, a yearning for virtue is not always obvious, for he seems at times to take an unholy delight in contemplating his own failings, as witness the *Epistle to Lapraik*, and his repentance seems merely perfunctory, as in the lines,

There's ae wee faut they whiles lay to me,  
I like the lassies—Gude forgie me.

But in *The Vision* he accounts for his failings as arising from his artist's temperament. The muse tells him,

I saw thy pulses' maddening play,  
Wild, send thee Pleasure's devious way,  
And yet the light that led astray  
Was light from Heaven.

And in *A Bard's Epitaph* he reveals himself as the pathetic, misguided poet who has been a favorite in verse ever since his time.

Sympathy for the well-meaning but misguided singer reached its height about twenty years ago, when new discoveries about Villon threw a glamor over the poet of checkered life.<sup>1</sup> At the same time Verlaine and Baudelaire in France,<sup>2</sup> and Lionel Johnson, Francis Thompson, Ernest Dowson, and James Thomson, B. V., in England, appeared to prove the inseparability of genius and especial temptation. At this time Francis Thompson, in his poetry, presented one of the most moving cases for the poet of frail morals, and concluded

<sup>1</sup> See Edwin Markham, *Villon*; Swinburne, *Burns, A Ballad of François Villon*.

<sup>2</sup> See Richard Hovey, *Verlaine*; Swinburne, *Ave atque Vale*.

What expiating agony  
May for him damned to poesy  
Shut in that little sentence be,—  
What deep austerities of strife, —  
He lived his life. He lived his life.<sup>1</sup>

Such sympathetic portrayal of the erring poet perhaps hurts his case more than does the bravado of the extreme decadent group. Philistines, puritans and philosophers alike are prone to turn to such expositions as the one just quoted and point out that it is in exact accord with their charge against the poet,—namely, that he is more susceptible to temptation than is ordinary humanity, and that therefore the proper course for true sympathizers would be, not to excuse his frailties, but to help him crush the germs of poetry out of his nature. "Genius is a disease of the nerves," is Lombroso's formulation of the charge.<sup>2</sup> Nordau points out that the disease is steadily increasing in these days of specialization, and that the overkeenness of the poet's senses in one particular direction throws his nature out of balance, so that he lacks the poise to withstand temptation.

Fortunately, it is a comparatively small number of poets that surrenders to the enemy by conceding either the poet's deliberate indulgence in sin, or his pitiable moral frailty. If one were tempted to believe that this defensive portrayal of the sinful poet is in any sense a major conception in English poetry, the

<sup>1</sup> *A Judgment in Heaven.*

<sup>2</sup> *The Man of Genius.*



volley of repudiative verse greeting every outcropping of the degenerate's self-exposure would offer a sufficient disproof. In the romantic movement, for instance, one finds only Byron (among persons of importance) to uphold the theory of the perverted artist, whereas a chorus of contradiction greets each expression of his theories.

In the van of the recoil against Byronic morals one finds Crabbe,<sup>1</sup> Præd<sup>2</sup> and Landor.<sup>3</sup> Later, when the wave of Byronic influence had time to reach America, Longfellow took up the cudgels against the evil poet.<sup>4</sup> Protest against the group of decadents who flourished in the 1890's even yet rocks the poetic waves slightly, though these men did not succeed in making the world take them as seriously as it did Byron. The cue of most present-day writers is to dismiss the professedly wicked poet lightly, as an aspirant to the laurel who is unworthy of serious consideration. A contemporary poet reflects of such would-be riders of Pegasus:

There will be fools that in the name of art  
Will wallow in the mire, crying, "I fall,  
I fall from heaven!" fools that have only heard  
From earth, the murmur of those golden hooves  
Far, far above them.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See *Edmund Shore, Villars*.

<sup>2</sup> See *The Talented Man, To Helen with Crabbe's Poetry*.

<sup>3</sup> See *Few Poets Beckon, Apology for Gebir*.

<sup>4</sup> See his treatment of Aretino, in *Michael Angelo*.

<sup>5</sup> Alfred Noyes, *At the Sign of the Golden Shoe*. See also Richard Le Gallienne, *The Decadent to his Soul, Proem to the Reader in English Poems*; Joyce Kilmer, *A Ballad of New Sins*.

Poets who indignantly repudiate any and all charges against their moral natures have not been unanimous in following the same line of defense. In many cases their argument is empirical, and their procedure is ideally simple. If a verse-writer of the present time is convicted of wrong living, his title of poet is automatically taken away from him; if a singer of the past is secure in his laurels, it is understood that all scandals regarding him are merely malicious fictions. In the eighteenth century this mode of passing judgment was most naïvely manifest in verse. Vile versifiers were invariably accused of having vile personal lives, whereas the poet who basked in the light of fame was conceded, without investigation, to "exult in virtue's pure ethereal flame." In the nineteenth century, when literary criticism was given over to prose-writers, those ostensible friends of the poets held by the same simple formula, as witness the attempts to kill literary and moral reputation at one blow, which were made, at various times, by Lockhart, Christopher North and Robert Buchanan.<sup>1</sup>

It may indicate a certain weakness in this hard and fast rule that considerable difficulty is encountered in working it backward. The highest virtue does not always entail a supreme poetic gift, though poets and their friends have sometimes implied as much. Southey, in his critical writings, is likely to confuse his own virtue and that of his protégé,

<sup>1</sup> Note their respective attacks on Keats, Swinburne and Rossetti.

Kirke White, with poetical excellence. Longfellow's, Whittier's, Bryant's strength of character has frequently been represented by patriotic American critics as guaranteeing the quality of their poetical wares.

Since a claim for the insunderability of virtue and genius seems to lead one to unfortunate conclusions, it has been rashly conceded in certain quarters that the virtue of a great poet may have no immediate connection with his poetic gift. It is conceived by a few nervously moral poets that morality and art dwell in separate spheres, and that the first transcends the second. Tennyson started a fashion for viewing the two excellences as distinct, comparing them, in *In Memoriam*:

Loveliness of perfect deeds,  
More strong than all poetic thought,

and his disciples have continued to speak in this strain. This is the tenor, for instance, of Jean Ingelow's *Letters of Life and Morning*, in which she exhorts the young poet,

Learn to sing,  
But first in all thy learning, learn to be.

The puritan element in American literary circles, always troubling the conscience of a would-be poet, makes him eager to protest that virtue, not poetry, holds his first allegiance.

He held his manly name  
Far dearer than the muse,<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> J. G. Saxe, *A Poet's Elegy*.

we are told of one poet-hero. The good Catholic verse of Father Ryan carries a warning of the merely fortuitous connection between poets' talent and their respectability, averring,

They are like angels, but some angels fell.<sup>1</sup>

Even Whittier is not sure that poetical excellence is worthy to be mentioned in the same breath as virtue, and he writes,

Dimmed and dwarfed, in times like these  
The poet seems beside the man;  
His life is now his noblest strain.<sup>2</sup>

When the poet of more firmly grounded conviction attempts to show reason for his confidence in the poet's virtue, he may advance such an argument for the association of righteousness and genius as has been offered by Carlyle in his essay, *The Hero as Poet*. This is the theory that, far from being an example of nervous degeneration, as his enemies assert, the poet is a superman, possessing will and moral insight in as preëminent a degree as he possesses sensibility. This view, that poetry is merely a by-product of a great nature, gains plausibility from certain famous artists of history, whose versatility appears to have been unlimited. Longfellow has seized upon this conception of the poet in his drama, *Michael Angelo*, as has G. L. Raymond in his drama, *Dante*. In the latter poem the argument for the poet's moral supremacy is baldly set forth.

<sup>1</sup> *Poets*.

<sup>2</sup> *To Bryant on His Birthday*.



Artistic sensibility, Dante says, far from excusing moral laxity, binds one to stricter standards of right living. So when Cavalcanti argues in favor of free love,

Your humming birds may sip the sweet they need  
From every flower, and why not humming poets?

Raymond makes Dante reply,

The poets are not lesser men, but greater,  
And so should find unworthy of themselves  
A word, a deed, that makes them seem less worthy.

Owing to the growth of specialization in modern life, this argument, despite Carlyle, has not attained much popularity. Even in idealized fictions of the poet, it is not often maintained that he is equally proficient in every line of activity. Only one actual poet within our period, William Morris, can be taken as representative of such a type, and he does not afford a strong argument for the poet's distinctive virtue, inasmuch as tradition does not represent him as numbering remarkable saintliness among his numerous gifts.

There is a decided inconsistency, moreover, in claiming unusual strength of will as one of the poet's attributes. The muscular morality resulting from training one's will develops in proportion to one's ability to overthrow one's own unruly impulses. It is almost universally maintained by poets, on the contrary, that their gift depends upon their yielding themselves utterly to every fugitive impulse and

emotion. Little modern verse vaunts the poet's stern self-control. George Meredith may cry,

I take the hap  
Of all my deeds. The wind that fills my sails  
Propels, but I am helmsman.<sup>1</sup>

Henley may thank the gods for his unconquerable soul. On the whole, however, a fatalistic temper is much easier to trace in modern poetry than is this one.

Hardly more popular than the superman theory is another argument for the poet's virtue that appears sporadically in verse. It has occurred to a few poets that their virtue is accounted for by the high subject-matter of their work, which exercises an unconscious influence upon their lives. Thus in the eighteenth century Young finds it natural that in Addison, the author of *Cato*,

Virtues by departed heroes taught  
Raise in your soul a pure immortal flame,  
Adorn your life, and consecrate your fame.<sup>2</sup>

Middle-class didactic poetry of the Victorian era expresses the same view. Tupper is sure that the true poet will live

With pureness in youth and religion in age.<sup>3</sup>

since he conceives as the function of poetry

<sup>1</sup> *Modern Love.*

<sup>2</sup> *Lines to Mr. Addison.*

<sup>3</sup> *What Is a Poet.*

To raise and purify the grovelling soul,

And the whole man with lofty thoughts to fill.<sup>1</sup>

This explanation may account for the piety of a Newman, a Keble, a Charles Wesley, but how can it be stretched to cover the average poet of the last century, whose subject-matter is so largely himself? Conforming his conduct to the theme of his verse would surely be no more efficacious than attempting to lift himself by his own boot straps.

These two occasional arguments leave the real issue untouched. The real ground for the poet's faith in his moral intuitions lies in his subscription to the old Platonic doctrine of the trinity,—the fundamental identity of the good, the true and the beautiful.

There is something in the nature of a practical joke in the facility with which Plato's bitter enemies, the poets, have fitted to themselves his superlative praise of the philosopher's virtue.<sup>2</sup> The moral instincts of the philosopher are unerring, Plato declares, because the philosopher's attention is riveted upon the unchanging idea of the good which underlies the confusing phantasmagoria of the temporal world. The poets retort that the moral instincts of the poet, more truly than of the philosopher, are unerring, because the poet's attention is fixed upon the good in its most ravishing aspect, that of beauty,

<sup>1</sup> *Poetry*.

<sup>2</sup> See the *Republic*, VI, 485, ff.

and in this guise it has an irresistible charm which it cannot hold even for the philosopher.

Poets' convictions on this point have remained essentially unchanged throughout the history of poetry. Granted that there has been a strain of deliberate perversity running through its course, cropping out in the erotic excesses of the late-classic period, springing up anew in one phase of the Italian renaissance, transplanted to France and England, where it appeared at the time of the English restoration, growing again in France at the time of the literary revolution, thence spreading across the channel into England again. Yet this is a minor current. The only serious view of the poet's moral nature is that nurtured by the Platonism of every age. Milton gave it the formulation most familiar to English ears, but Milton by no means originated it. Not only from his Greek studies, but from his knowledge of contemporary Italian æsthetics, he derived the idea of the harmony between the poet's life and his creations which led him to maintain that it is the poet's privilege to make of his own life a true poem.

"I am wont day and night," says Milton, "to seek for this idea of the beautiful through all the forms and faces of things (for many are the shapes of things divine) and to follow it leading me on as with certain assured traces."<sup>1</sup> The poet's feeling cannot possibly lead him astray when his sense of beauty affords him a talisman revealing all the

<sup>1</sup> Prose works, Vol. I, Letter VII, Symons ed.



ugliness and repulsiveness of evil. Even Byron had, in theory at least, a glimmering sense of the anti-poetical character of evil, leading him to cry,

'Tis not in  
The harmony of things—this hard decree,  
This ineradicable taint of sin,  
This boundless upas, this all-blasting tree  
Whose root is earth.<sup>1</sup>

If Byron could be brought to confess the inharmonious nature of evil, it is obvious that to most poets the beauty of goodness has been undeniable. In the eighteenth century Collins and Hughes wrote poems wherein they elaborated Milton's argument for the unity of the good and the beautiful.<sup>2</sup> Among the romantic poets, the Platonism of Coleridge,<sup>3</sup> Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats was unflinching in this particular. The Brownings subscribed to the doctrine. Tennyson's allegiance to scientific naturalism kept him in doubt for a time, but in the end his faith in beauty triumphed, and he was ready to praise the poet as inevitably possessing a nature exquisitely attuned to goodness. One often runs across dogmatic expression of the doctrine in minor poetry. W. A. Percy advises the poet,

O singing heart, think not of aught save song,  
Beauty can do no wrong.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Childe Harold*.

<sup>2</sup> Collins, *Ode on the Poetical Character*; John Hughes, *Ode on Divine Poetry*.

<sup>3</sup> See his essay on Claudian, where he says, "I am pleased to think that when a mere stripling I formed the opinion that true taste was virtue, and that bad writing was bad feeling."

<sup>4</sup> *Song*.

Again one hears of the singer,

Pure must he be ;  
Oh, blessed are the pure ; for they shall hear  
Where others hear not ; see where others see  
With a dazed vision,<sup>1</sup>

and again,

To write a poem, a man should be as pure  
As frost-flowers.<sup>2</sup>

Only recently a writer has pictured the poet as one who

Lived beyond men, and so stood  
Admitted to the brotherhood  
Of beauty.<sup>3</sup>

It is needless to run through the list of poet heroes. Practically all of them look to a single standard to govern them æsthetically and morally. They are the sort of men whom Watts-Dunton praises,

Whose poems are their lives, whose souls within  
Hold naught in dread save Art's high conscience bar,  
Who know how beauty dies at touch of sin.<sup>4</sup>

Such is the poet's case for himself. But no matter how eloquently he presents his case, his quarrel with his three enemies remains almost as bitter as before, and he is obliged to pay some attention to their individual charges.

<sup>1</sup> Henry Timrod, *A Vision of Poesy*.

<sup>2</sup> T. L. Harris, *Lyrics of the Golden Age*.

<sup>3</sup> Madison Cawein, *The Dreamer of Dreams*.

<sup>4</sup> *The Silent Voices*.

The poet's quarrel with the philistine, in particular, is far from settled. The more lyrical the poet becomes regarding the unity of the good and the beautiful, the more skeptical becomes the plain man. What is this about the irresistible charm of virtue? Virtue has possessed the plain man's joyless fidelity for years, and he has never discovered any charm in her. The poet possesses a peculiar power of insight which reveals in goodness hidden beauties to which ordinary humanity is blind? Let him prove it, then, by being as good in the same way as ordinary folk are. If the poet professes to be able to achieve righteousness without effort, the only way to prove it is to conform his conduct to that of men who achieve righteousness with groaning of spirit. It is too easy for the poet to justify any and every aberration with the announcement, "My sixth sense for virtue, which you do not possess, has revealed to me the propriety of such conduct." Thus reasons the philistine.

The beauty-blind philistine doubtless has some cause for bewilderment, but the poet takes no pains to placate him. The more genuine is one's impulse toward goodness, the more inevitably, the poet says, will it bring one into conflict with an artificial code of morals. Shelley indicated this at length in *The Defense of Poetry*, and in both *Rosalind and Helen* and *The Revolt of Islam* he showed his bards offending the world by their original conceptions of purity. Likewise of the poet-hero in *Prince Athanase* Shelley tells us,

Fearless he was, and scorning all disguise.  
What he dared do or think, though men might start,  
He spoke with mild, yet unaverted eyes.

It must be admitted that sometimes, notably in Victorian narrative verse, the fictitious poet's virtue is inclined to lapse into a typically bourgeois respectability. In Mrs. Browning's *Aurora Leigh*, for instance, the heroine's morality becomes somewhat rigid, and when she rebukes the unmarried Marian for bearing a child, and chides Romney for speaking tenderly to her after his supposed marriage with Lady Waldemar, the reader is apt to sense in her a most unpoetical resemblance to Mrs. Grundy. And if Mrs. Browning's poet is almost too respectable, she is still not worthy to be mentioned in the same breath with the utterly innocuous poet set forth by another Victorian, Coventry Patmore. In Patmore's poem, *Olympus*, the bard decides to spend an evening with his own sex, but he is offended by the cigar smoke and the coarse jests, and flees home to

The milk-soup men call domestic bliss.

Likewise, in *The Angel in the House*, the poet follows a most domestic line of orderly living. Only once, in the long poem, does he fall below the standard of conduct he sets for himself. This sin consists of pressing his sweetheart's hand in the dance, and after shamefacedly confessing it, he adds,

And ere I slept, on bended knee  
I owned myself, with many a tear  
Unseasonable, disorderly.



But so distasteful, to the average poet, is such cringing subservience to philistine standards, that he takes delight in swinging to the other extreme, and representing the innocent poet's persecutions at the hands of an unfriendly world. He insists that in venturing away from conventional standards poets merit every consideration, being

Tall galleons,  
Out of their very beauty driven to dare  
The uncompassed sea, founder in starless night.<sup>1</sup>

He is convinced that the public, far from sympathizing with such courage, deliberately tries to drive the poet to desperation. Josephine Preston Peabody makes Marlowe inveigh against the public,

My sins they learn by rote,  
And never miss one; no, no miser of them,  
Avid of foulness, so they hound me out  
Away from blessing that they prate about,  
But never saw, and never dreamed upon,  
And know not how to long for with desire.<sup>2</sup>

In the same spirit Richard Le Gallienne, in lines *On the Morals of Poets*, warns their detractor,

Bigot, one folly of the man you flout  
Is more to God than thy lean life is whole.

If it be true that the poet occasionally commits an error, he points out that it is the result of the

<sup>1</sup> *At the Sign of the Golden Shoe*, Alfred Noyes.

<sup>2</sup> *Marlowe*.

philistine's corruption, not his own. He acknowledges that it is fatally easy to lead him, not astray perhaps, but into gravely compromising himself, because he is characterized by a childlike inability to comprehend the very existence of sin in the world. Of course his environment has a good deal to do with this. The innocent shepherd poet, shut off from crime by many a grassy hill and purling stream, has a long tradition behind him. The most typical pastoral poet of our period, the hero of Beattie's *The Minstrel*, suffers a rude shock when an old hermit reveals to him that all the world is not as fair and good as his immediate environment. The innocence of Wordsworth, and of the young Sordello, were fostered by like circumstances. Arnold conceives of Clough in this way, isolating him in Oxford instead of Arcadia, and represents him as dying from the shock of awakening to conditions as they are. But environment alone does not account for a large per cent of our poet heroes, the tragedy of whose lives most often results from a pathetic inability to recognize evil motives when they are face to face with them.

Insistence upon the childlike nature of the poet is a characteristic nineteenth century obsession. Such temperamentally diverse poets as Mrs. Browning,<sup>1</sup> Swinburne<sup>2</sup> and Francis Thompson<sup>3</sup> agree in stressing this aspect of the poet's virtue. Perhaps it has been overdone, and the resulting picture

<sup>1</sup> See *A Vision of Poets*.

<sup>2</sup> See *A New Year's Ode*.

<sup>3</sup> See *Sister Songs*.

of the singer as "an ineffectual angel, beating his bright wings in the void," is not so noble a conception as was Milton's sterner one, but it lends to the poet-hero a pathos that has had much to do with popularizing the type in literature, causing the reader to exclaim, with Shelley,

The curse of Cain

Light on his head who pierced thy innocent breast  
And scared the angel soul that was its earthly guest.

Of course the vogue of such a conception owes most to Shelley. All the poets appearing in Shelley's verse, the heroes of *Rosalind and Helen*, *The Revolt of Islam*, *Adonais*, *Epipsychidion* and *Prince Athanase*, share the disposition of the last-named one:

Naught of ill his heart could understand,  
But pity and wild sorrow for the same.

It is obvious that all these singers are only veiled expositions of Shelley's own character, as he understood it, and all enthusiastic readers of Shelley's poetry have pictured an ideal poet who is reminiscent of Shelley. Even a poet so different from him, in many respects, as Browning, could not escape from the impress of Shelley's character upon his ideal. Browning seems to have recognized fleeting glimpses of Shelley in *Sordello*, and to have acknowledged them in his apostrophe to Shelley at the beginning of that poem. Browning's revulsion of feeling,

after he discovered Shelley's abandonment of Harriet, did not prevent him from holding to his early ideal of Shelley as the typical poet. A poem by James Thomson, B.V., is characteristic of later poets' notion of Shelley. The scene of the poem is laid in heaven. Shelley, as the most compassionate of the angels, is chosen to go to the earth, to right its evils. He comes to this world and lives with "the saint's white purity," being

A voice of right amidst a world's foul wrong,

With heavenly inspiration, too divine  
For souls besotted with earth's sensual wine.<sup>1</sup>

Consequently he is misunderstood and persecuted, and returns to heaven heart-broken by the apparent failure of his mission.

Aside from Shelley, Marlowe is the historical poet most frequently chosen to illustrate the world's proneness to take advantage of the poet's innocence. In the most famous of the poems about Marlowe, *The Death of Marlowe*, R. H. Horne takes a hopeful view of the world's depravity, for he makes Marlowe's innocence of evil so touching that it moves a prostitute to reform. Other poets, however, have painted Marlowe's associates as villains of far deeper dye. In the drama by Josephine Preston Peabody, the persecutions of hypocritical puritans hound Marlowe to his death.<sup>2</sup>

The most representative view of Marlowe as an

<sup>1</sup> *Shelley.*

<sup>2</sup> *Marlowe.*



innocent, deceived youth is that presented by Alfred Noyes, in *At the Sign of the Golden Shoe*. In this poem we find Nash describing to the Mermaid group the tragic end of Marlowe, who lies

Dead like a dog in a drunken brawl,  
Dead for a phial of paint, a taffeta gown.

While there float in from the street, at intervals,  
the cries of the ballad-mongers hawking their latest doggerel,

Blaspheming Tamborlin must die,  
And Faustus meet his end;  
Repent, repent, or presently  
To hell you must descend,

Nash tells his story of the country lad who walked to London, bringing his possessions carried on a stick over his shoulder, bringing also,

All unshielded, all unarmed,  
A child's heart, packed with splendid hopes and dreams.

His manner,

Untamed, adventurous, but still innocent,

exposed him to the clutches of the underworld. One woman, in particular,

Used all her London tricks  
To coney-catch the country greenhorn.

Won by her pathetic account of her virtues and trials, Marlowe tried to help her to escape from London; then, because he was utterly unused to the wiles of women, and was

Simple as all great, elemental things,

when she expressed an infatuation for him, then

In her treacherous eyes,  
As in dark pools the mirrored stars will gleam,  
Here did he see his own eternal skies.

And all that God had meant to wake one day  
Under the Sun of Love, suddenly woke  
By candle-light, and cried, "The Sun, the Sun."

At last, holding him wrapped in her hair, the woman attempted to tantalize him by revealing her promiscuous amours. In a horror of agony and loathing, Marlowe broke away from her. The next day, as Nash was loitering in a group including this woman and her lover, Archer, someone ran in to warn Archer that a man was on his way to kill him. As Marlowe strode into the place, Nash was struck afresh by his beauty:

I saw his face,  
Pale, innocent, just the clear face of that boy  
Who walked to Cambridge, with a bundle and stick,  
The little cobbler's son. Yet—there I caught  
My only glimpse of how the sun-god looked—

Mourning for his death, the great dramatists agree that

His were, perchance, the noblest steeds of all,  
And from their nostrils blew a fierier dawn  
Above the world. . . . Before his hand  
Had learned to quell them, he was dashed to earth.

Minor writers are most impartial in clearing the names of any and all historical artists by such reasoning as this. By negligible American versifiers one too often finds Burns lauded as one whom "such purity inspires,"<sup>1</sup> and, more astonishingly, Byron conceived of as a misjudged innocent. If one is surprised to hear, in verse on Byron's death,

His cherub soul has passed to its eclipse,<sup>2</sup>

this fades into insignificance beside the consolation offered Byron by another writer for his trials in this world,

Peace awaits thee with caressings,  
Sitting at the feet of Jesus.

Better known poets are likely to admit a streak of imperfection in a few of their number, while maintaining their essential goodness. It is refreshing, after witnessing too much whitewashing of Burns, to find James Russell Lowell bringing Burns down to a level where the attacks of philistines, though unwarranted, are not sacrilegious. Lowell imagines Holy Willie trying to shut Burns out of heaven. He accuses Burns first of irreligion, but

<sup>1</sup> A. S. G., *Burns*.

<sup>2</sup> T. H. Chivers, *On the Death of Byron*.

St. Paul protests against his exclusion on that ground. At the charges of drunkenness, and of yearning "o'er-warmly toward the lasses," Noah and David come severally to his defense. In the end, Burns' great charity is felt to offset all his failings, and Lowell adds, of poets in general,

These larger hearts must feel the rolls  
Of stormier-waved temptation;  
These star-wide souls beneath their poles  
Bear zones of tropic passion.<sup>1</sup>

Browning is willing to allow even fictitious artists to be driven into imperfect conduct by the failure of those about them to live up to their standards. For example, Fra Lippo Lippi, disgusted with the barren virtue of the monks, confesses,

I do these wild things in sheer despite  
And play the fooleries you catch me at  
In sheer rage.

But invariably, whatever a poet hero's failings may be, the author assures the philistine public that it is entirely to blame.

If the poet is unable to find common ground with the plain man on which he can make his morality sympathetically understood, his quarrel with the puritan is foredoomed to unsuccessful issue, for whereas the plain man will wink at a certain type of indulgence, the puritan will be satisfied with noth-

<sup>1</sup> *At the Burns Centennial.*



ing but iron restraint on the poet's part, and systematic thwarting of the impulses which are the breath of life to him.

The poet's only hope of winning in his argument with the puritan lies in the possibility that the race of puritans is destined for extinction. Certainly they were much more numerous fifty years ago than now, and consequently more voluble in their denunciation of the poet. At that time they found their most redoubtable antagonists in the Brownings. Robert Browning devoted a poem, *With Francis Furini*, to exposing the incompatibility of asceticism and art, while Mrs. Browning, in *The Poet's Vow*, worked out the tragic consequences of the hero's mistaken determination to retire from the world,

That so my purged, once human heart,  
From all the human rent,  
May gather strength to pledge and drink  
Your wine of wonderment,  
While you pardon me all blessingly  
The woe mine Adam sent.

In the end Mrs. Browning makes her poet realize that he is crushing the best part of his nature by thus thwarting his human instincts.

No, the poet's virtue must not be a pruning of his human nature, but a flowering of it. Nowhere are the Brownings more in sympathy than in their recognition of this fact. In *Pauline*, Browning traces the poet's mistaken effort to find goodness in

self-restraint and denial. It is a failure, and the poem ends with the hero's recognition that "life is truth, and truth is good." The same idea is one of the leading motives in *Sordello*.

One seems to be coming perilously near the decadent poet's argument again. And there remains to be dealt with a poet more extreme than Browning—Walt Whitman, who challenges us with his slogan, "Clear and sweet is my soul, and clear and sweet is all that is not my soul,"<sup>1</sup> and then records his zest in throwing himself into all phases of life.

It is plain, at any rate, how the abandon of the decadent might develop from the poet's insistence upon his need to follow impulse utterly, to develop himself in all directions. The cry of Browning's poet in *Pauline*,

I had resolved  
No age should come on me ere youth was spent,  
For I would wear myself out,

Omar Khayyam's

While you live  
Drink!—for once dead you never shall return,

Swinburne's cry of despair,

Thou has conquered, O pale Galilean; the world has  
grown gray with thy breath;  
We have drunken of things Lethean, and fed on the  
fullness of death,<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Song of Myself*.

<sup>2</sup> *Hymn to Proserpine*.

show that in a revulsion from the asceticism of the puritan, no less than in a revulsion from the stupidity of the plain man, it may become easy for the poet to carry his *carpe diem* philosophy very far. His talisman, pure love of beauty, must be indeed unerring if it is to guide aright his

principle of restlessness

That would be all, have, see, know, taste, feel, all.<sup>1</sup>

The puritan sees, with grim pleasure, that an occasional poet confesses that his sense of beauty is not strong enough to lead him at all times. Emerson admits this, telling us, in *The Poet*, that although the singer perceives ideals in his moments of afflatus which

Turn his heart from lovely maids,  
And make the darlings of the earth  
Swainish, coarse, and nothing worth,

these moments of exaltation pass, and the singer finds himself a mere man, with an unusually rich sensuous nature,

Eager for good, not hating ill;  
On his tense chords all strokes are felt,  
The good, the bad, with equal zeal.

It is not unheard-of to find a poet who, despite occasional expressions of confidence in the power of beauty to sustain him, loses his courage at other times, and lays down a system of rules for his

<sup>1</sup> *Pauline.*

guidance that is quite as strict as any which puritans could formulate. Wordsworth's *Ode to Duty* does not altogether embody the æsthetic conception of effortless right living. One may, perhaps, explain this poem on the grounds that Wordsworth is laying down principles of conduct, not for poets, but for the world at large, which is blind to æsthetic principles. Not thus, however, may one account for the self-tortures of Arthur Clough, or of Christina Rossetti, who was fully aware of the disagreeableness of the standards which she set up for herself. She reflected grimly,

Does the road wind uphill all the way?  
 Yes, to the very end!  
 Will the day's journey take the whole long day?  
 From morn till night, my friend.<sup>1</sup>

It cannot be accidental, however, that wherever a poet voices a stern conception of virtue, he is a poet whose sensibility to physical beauty is not noteworthy. This is obviously true in the case of both Clough and Christina Rossetti. At intervals it was true of Wordsworth, whereas in the periods of his inspiration he expressed his belief that goodness is as a matter of good taste. The pleasures of the imagination were then so intense that they destroyed in him all desire for dubious delights. Thus in the *Prelude* he described an unconscious purification of his life by his worship of physical beauty, saying of nature,

<sup>1</sup> *Uphill*.



If in my youth I have been pure in heart,  
If, mingling with the world, I am content  
With my own modest pleasures, and have lived  
With God and Nature communing, removed  
From little enmities and low desires,  
The gift is yours.

Dante Gabriel, not Christina, possessed the most purely poetical nature in the Rossetti family, and his moral conceptions were the typical æsthetic ones, as incomprehensible to the puritan as they were to Ruskin, who exclaimed, "I don't say you do wrong, because you don't seem to know what is wrong, but you do just whatever you like as far as possible—as puppies and tomtits do."<sup>1</sup> To poets themselves however, there appears nothing incomprehensible about the inevitable rightness of their conduct, for they have not passed out of the happy stage of Wordsworth's *Ode to Duty*,

When love is an unerring light,  
And joy its own felicity.

For the most part, whenever the puritan imagines that the poet has capitulated, he is mistaken, and the apparent self-denial in the poet's life is really an exquisite sort of epicureanism. The likelihood of such misunderstanding by the world is indicated by Browning in *Sordello*, wherein the hero refuses to taste the ordinary pleasures of life, because he wishes to enjoy the flavor of the highest pleasure untainted. He resolves,

<sup>1</sup> See E. L. Cary, *The Rossettis*, p. 79.

The world shall bow to me conceiving all  
 Man's life, who see its blisses, great and small  
 Afar—not tasting any; no machine  
 To exercise my utmost will is mine,  
 Be mine mere consciousness: Let men perceive  
 What I could do, a mastery believe  
 Asserted and established to the throng  
 By their selected evidence of song,  
 Which now shall prove, whate'er they are, or seek  
 To be, I am.

The claims of the puritans being set aside, the poet must, finally, meet the objection of his third disputant, the philosopher, the one accuser whose charges the poet is wont to treat with respect. What validity, the philosopher asks, can be claimed for apprehension of truth, of the good-beautiful, secured not through the intellect, but through emotion? What proof has the poet that feeling is as unerring in detecting the essential nature of the highest good as is the reason?

There is great variance in the breach between philosophers and poets on this point. Between the philosopher of purely rationalistic temper, and the poet who

dares to take

Life's rule from passion craved for passion's sake,<sup>1</sup>

there is absolutely no common ground, of course. Such a poet finds the rigid ethical system of a rationalistic philosophy as uncharacteristic of the ac-

<sup>1</sup> Said of Byron. Wordsworth, *Not in the Lucid Intervals*.

tual fluidity of the world as ever Cratylus did. Feeling, but not reason, may be swift enough in its transformations to mirror the world, such a poet believes, and he imitates the actual flux of things, not with a wagging of the thumb, like Cratylus, but with a flutter of the heart. Thus one finds Byron characteristically asserting, "I hold virtue, in general, or the virtues generally, to be only in the disposition, each a *feeling*, not a principle."<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, one occasionally meets a point of view as opposite as that of Poe, who believed that the poet, no less than the philosopher, is governed by reason solely,—that the poetic imagination is a purely intellectual function.<sup>2</sup> The philosopher could have no quarrel with him. Between the two extremes are the more thoughtful of the Victorian poets,—Browning, Tennyson, Arnold, Clough, whose taste leads them so largely to intellectual pursuits that it is difficult to say whether their principles of moral conduct arise from the poetical or the philosophical part of their natures.

The most profound utterances of poets on this subject, however, show them to be, not rationalists, but thoroughgoing Platonists. The feeling in which they trust is a Platonic intuition which includes the reason, but exists above it. At least this is the view of Shelley, and Shelley has, more largely than any other man, moulded the beliefs of later English poets. It is because he judges imaginative feeling

<sup>1</sup> *Letter to Charles Dallas*, January 21, 1808.

<sup>2</sup> See the *Southern Literary Messenger*, II, 328, April, 1836.

to be always in harmony with the deepest truths perceived by the reason that he advertises his intention to purify men by awakening their feelings. Therefore, in his preface to *The Revolt of Islam* he says, "I would only awaken the feelings, so that the reader should see the beauty of true virtue." In the preface to the *Cenci*, again, he declares, "Imagination is as the immortal God which should take flesh for the redemption of human passion."

The poet, while thus expressing absolute faith in the power of beauty to redeem the world, yet is obliged to take into account the Platonic distinction between the beautiful and the lover of the beautiful.<sup>1</sup> No man is pure poet, he admits, but in proportion as he approaches perfect artistry, his life is purified. Shelley is expressing the beliefs of practically all artists when he says, "The greatest poets have been men of the most spotless virtue, of the most consummate prudence, and, if we would look into the interior of their lives, the most fortunate of men; and the exceptions, as they regard those who possess the poetical faculty in a high, yet an inferior degree, will be found upon consideration to confirm, rather than to destroy, the rule."<sup>2</sup> Sidney Lanier's verse expresses this argument of Shelley precisely. In *The Crystal*, Lanier indicates that the ideal poet has never been embodied. Pointing out the faults of his favorite poets, he contrasts their

<sup>1</sup> *Symposium*, § 204.

<sup>2</sup> *The Defense of Poetry*.



muddy characters with the perfect purity of Christ. And in *Life and Song* he repeats the same idea:

None of the singers ever yet  
Has wholly lived his minstrelsy,  
Or truly sung his true, true thought.

Philosophers may retort that this imperfection in the singer's life arises not merely from the inevitable difference between the lover and the beauty which he loves, but from the fact that the object of the poet's love is not really that highest beauty which is identical with the good. Poets are content with the "many beautiful," Plato charges, instead of pressing on to discover the "one beautiful,"<sup>1</sup>—that is, they are ravished by the beauty of the senses, rather than by the beauty of the ideal.

Possibly this is true. We have had, in recent verse, a sympathetic expression of the final step in Plato's ascent to absolute beauty, hence to absolute virtue. It is significant, however, that this verse is in the nature of a farewell to verse writing. In *The Symbol Seduces*, "A. E." exclaims,

I leave  
For Beauty, Beauty's rarest flower,  
For Truth, the lips that ne'er deceive;  
For Love, I leave Love's haunted bower.

But this is exactly what the poet, as poet, cannot do. It may be, as Plato declared, that he is missing the supreme value of life by clinging to the "many

<sup>1</sup> *Republic*, VI, 507 B.

beautiful," instead of the "one beautiful," but if he does not do so, all the colour of his poetical garment falls away from him, and he becomes pure philosopher. There is an infinite promise in the imperfection of the physical world that fascinates the poet. Life is to him "a dome of many colored glass" that reveals, yet stains, "the white radiance of eternity." If it were possible for him to gaze upon beauty apart from her sensuous embodiment, it is doubtful if he would find her ravishing.

This is only to say that there is no escaping the fundamental æsthetic problem. Is the artist the imitator of the physical world, or the revealer of the spiritual world? He is both, inevitably, if he is a great poet. Hence there is a duality in his moral life. If one aspect of his genius causes him to be rapt away from earthly things, in contemplation of the heavenly vision, the other aspect no less demands that he live, with however pure a standard, in the turmoil of earthly passions. In the period which we have under discussion, it is easy to separate the two types and choose between them. Enthusiasts may, according to their tastes, laud the poet of Byronic worldliness or of Shelleyan otherworldliness. But, of course, this is only because this time boasts of no artist of first rank. When one considers the preëminent names in the history of poetry, it is not so easy to make the disjunction. If the gift of even so great a poet as Milton was compatible with his developing one side of his genius only, we

yet feel that Milton is a great poet with limitations, and cannot quite concede to him equal rank with Shakespeare, or Dante, in whom the hybrid nature of the artist is manifest.

## VI

### *THE POET'S RELIGION*

THERE was a time, if we may trust anthropologists, when the poet and the priest were identical, but the modern zeal for specialization has not tolerated this doubling of function. So utterly has the poet been robbed of his priestly character that he is notorious, nowadays, as possessing no religion at all. At least, representatives of the three strongest critical forces in society, philosophers, puritans and plain men, assert with equal vehemence that the poet has no religion that agrees with their interpretation of that word.

As was the case in their attack upon the poet's morals, so in the refusal to recognize his religious beliefs, the poet's three enemies are in merely accidental agreement. The philosopher condemns the poet as incapable of forming rational theological tenets, because his temper is unspeculative, or at most, carries him no farther than a materialistic philosophy. The puritan condemns the poet as lacking reverence, that is, as having no "religious instinct." The plain man, of course, charges the poet, in this particular as in all others, with failure to conform. The poet shows no respect, he avers, for the orthodox beliefs of society.



The quarrel of the poet and the philosopher has at no time been more in evidence than at present. The unspeculativeness of contemporary poetry is almost a creed. Poets, if they are to be read, must take a solemn pledge to confine their range of subject-matter to fleeting impressions of the world of sense. The quarrel was only less in evidence in the period just before the present one, at the time when the cry, "art for art's sake," held the attention of the public. At that time philosophers could point out that Walter Pater, the mold of poet's opinions, had said, "It is possible that metaphysics may be one of the things which we must renounce, if we would mould our lives to artistic perfection." This narrowness of interest, this deliberate shutting of one's self up within the confines of the physically appealing, has been believed to be characteristic of all poets. The completeness of their satisfaction in what has been called "the æsthetic moment" is the death of their philosophical instincts. The immediate perception of flowers and birds and breezes is so all-sufficing to them that such phenomena do not send their minds racing back on a quest of first principles. Thus argue philosophers.

Such a conclusion the poet denies. The philosopher, to whom a sense-impression is a mere needle-prick, useful only as it starts his thoughts off on a tangent from it to the separate world of ideas, is not unnaturally misled by the poet's total absorption in the world of sense. But the poet is thus absorbed, not, as the philosopher implies, because

he denies, or ignores, the existence of ideas, but because he cannot conceive of disembodied ideas. Walter Pater's reason for rejecting philosophy as a handicap to the poet was that philosophy robs the world of its sensuousness, as he believed. He explained the conception of philosophy to which he objected, as follows:

To that gaudy tangle of what gardens, after all, are meant to produce, in the decay of time, as we may think at first sight, the systematic, logical gardener put his meddling hand, and straightway all ran to seed; to *genus* and *species* and *differentia*, into formal classes, under general notions, and with—yes! with written labels fluttering on the stalks instead of blossoms—a botanic or physic garden, as they used to say, instead of our flower-garden and orchard.<sup>1</sup>

But it is only against this particular conception of philosophy, which is based upon abstraction of the ideal from the sensual, that the poet demurs. Beside the foregoing view of philosophy expressed by Pater, we may place that of another poet, an adherent, indeed, of one of the most purely sensuous schools of poetry. Arthur Symonds states as his belief, "The poet who is not also philosopher is like a flower without a root. Both seek the same infinitude; the one apprehending the idea, the other the image."<sup>2</sup> That is, to the poet, ideality is the hidden life of the sensual.

Wherever a dry as dust rationalizing theology

<sup>1</sup> *Plato and Platonism.*

<sup>2</sup> *The Romantic Movement*, p. 129.

is in vogue, it is true that some poets, in their reaction, have gone to the extreme of subscribing to a materialistic conception of the universe. Shelley is the classic example. Everyone is aware of his revulsion from Paley's theology, which his father sternly proposed to read aloud to him, and of his noisy championing of the materialistic cause, in *Queen Mab*. But Shelley is also the best example that might be cited to prove the incompatibility of materialism and poetry. It might almost be said that Shelley never wrote a line of genuine poetry while his mind was under the bondage of materialistic theory. Fortunately Shelley was scarcely able to hold to the delusion that he was a materialist throughout the course of an entire poem, even in his extreme youth. To Shelley, more truly perhaps than to any other poet, the physical world throbs with spiritual life. His materialistic theories, if more loudly vociferated, were of scarcely greater significance than were those of Coleridge, who declared, "After I had read Voltaire's *Philosophical Dictionary*, I sported infidel, but my infidel vanity never touched my heart."<sup>1</sup>

A more serious charge of atheism could be brought against the poets at the other end of the century. John Davidson was a thoroughgoing materialist, and the other members of the school, made sceptic by their admiration for the sophistic philosophy of Wilde, followed Davidson in his views. But this hardly strengthens the philosopher's charge that materialistic philosophy characterizes poets as a

<sup>1</sup> James Gillman, *Life of Coleridge*, p. 23.

class, for the curiously limited poetry which the 1890 group produced might lead the reader to assume that spiritual faith is indispensable to poets. If idealistic philosophy, as Arthur Symons asserts, is the root of which poetry is the flower, then the artificial and exotic poetry of the *fin de siècle* school bears close resemblance to cut flowers, already drooping.

It is significant that the outstanding materialist among American poets, Poe, produced poetry of much the same artificial temper as did these men. Poe himself was unable to accept, with any degree of complacency, the materialistic philosophy which seemed to him the most plausible explanation of life. One of his best-known sonnets is a threnody for poetry which, he feels, is passing away from earth as materialistic views become generally accepted.<sup>1</sup> Sensuous as was his conception of poetry, he yet felt that one kills it in taking the spirit of ideality out of the physical world. "I really perceive," he wrote in this connection, "that vanity about which most men merely prate,—the vanity of the human or temporal life."<sup>2</sup>

It is obvious that atheism, being pure negation, is not congenial to the poetical temper. The general rule holds that atheism can exist only where the reason holds the imagination in bondage. It was not merely the horrified recoil of orthodox opinion that prevented Constance Naden, the most volu-

<sup>1</sup> See the sonnet, *To Science*.

<sup>2</sup> Letter to James Russell Lowell, July 2, 1844.



minous writer of atheistic verse in the last century, from obtaining lasting recognition as a poet. Verse like hers, which expresses mere denial, is not essentially more poetical than blank paper.

One cannot make so sweeping a statement without at once recalling the notable exception, James Thomson, B.V., the blackness of whose atheistic creed makes up the whole substance of *The City of Dreadful Night*. The preacher brings comfort to the tortured men in that poem, with the words,

And now at last authentic word I bring  
Witnessed by every dead and living thing;  
Good tidings of great joy for you, for all:  
There is no God; no fiend with name divine  
Made us and tortures us; if we must pine  
It is to satiate no Being's gall.

But this poem is a pure freak in poetry. Perhaps it might be asserted of James Thomson, without too much casuistry, that he was, poetically speaking, not a materialist but a pessimist, and that the strength of his poetic gift lay in the thirst of his imagination for an ideal world in which his reason would not permit him to believe. One cannot say of him, as of Coleridge, that "his unbelief never touched his heart." It would be nearer the truth to say that his unbelief broke his heart. Thomson himself would be the first to admit that his vision of the City of Dreadful Night is inferior, as poetry, to the visions of William Blake in the same city, of whom Thomson writes with a certain wistful envy,

He came to the desert of London town,  
 Mirk miles broad;  
 He wandered up and he wandered down,  
 Ever alone with God.<sup>1</sup>

Goethe speaks of the poet's impressions of the outer world, the inner world and the other world. To the poet these impressions cannot be distinct, but must be fused in every æsthetic experience. In his impressions of the physical world he finds, not merely the reflection of his own personality, but the germ of infinite spiritual meaning, and it is the balance of the three elements which creates for him the "æsthetic repose."

Even in the peculiarly limited sensuous verse of the present the third element is implicit. Other poets, no less than Joyce Kilmer, have a dim sense that in their physical experiences they are really tasting the eucharist, as Kilmer indicates in his warning,

Vain is his voice in whom no longer dwells  
 Hunger that craves immortal bread and wine.<sup>2</sup>

Very dim, indeed, it may be, the sense is, yet in almost every verse-writer of to-day there crops out, now and then, a conviction of the mystic significance of the physical.<sup>3</sup> To cite the most extreme example of a rugged persistence of the spiritual life in the truncated poetry of the present, even Carl

<sup>1</sup> *William Blake.*

<sup>2</sup> *Poets.*

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, John Masefield, *Prayer*, and *The Seekers*; and William Rose Benét, *The Falconer of God.*

Sandburg cannot escape the conclusion that his birds are

Summer-saulting for God's sake.

Only the poet seems to possess the secret of the fusion of sense and spirit in the world. To the average eye sense-objects are opaque, or, at best, transmit only a faint glimmering of an idea. To Dr. Thomas Arnold's mind Wordsworth's concern with the flower which brought "thoughts which do often lie too deep for tears" was ridiculously excessive, since, at most, a flower could be only the accidental cause of great thoughts, a push, as it were, that started into activity ideas which afterward ran on by their own impulsion. Tennyson has indicated, however, that the poetical feeling aroused by a flower is, in its utmost reaches, no more than a recognition of that which actually abides in the flower itself. He muses,

Flower in the crannied wall,  
I pluck you out of the crannies;—  
I hold you here, root and all, in my hand,  
Little flower—but if I could understand  
What you are, root and all and all in all,  
I should know what God and man is.

By whatever polysyllabic name the more consciously speculative poets designate their philosophical creed, this belief in the infinite meaning of every object in the physical world is pure pantheism, and the instinctive poetical religion is inevitably a pantheistic one. All poetical metaphor is a confession of this

fact, for in metaphor the sensuous and the spiritual are conceived as one.

A pantheistic religion is the only one which does not hamper the poet's unconscious and unhampering morality. He refuses to die to this world as Plato's philosopher and the early fathers of the church were urged to do, for it is from the physical world that all his inspiration comes. If he attempts to turn away from it, he is bewildered, as Christina Rossetti was, by a duality in his nature, by

The foolishest fond folly of a heart  
Divided, neither here nor there at rest,  
That hankers after Heaven, but clings to earth.<sup>1</sup>

On the other hand, if he tries to content himself with the merely physical aspects of things, he finds that he cannot crush out of his nature a mysticism quite as intense as that of the most ascetic saint. Only a religion which maintains the all-pervasive oneness of both elements in his nature can wholly satisfy him.

Not infrequently, poets have given this instinctive faith of theirs a conscious formulation. Coleridge, with his indefatigable quest of the unity underlying "the Objective and Subjective," did so. Shelley devoted a large part of *Prometheus Unbound* and the conclusion of *Adonais* to his pantheistic views. Wordsworth never wavered in his worship of the sense world which was yet spiritual,

<sup>1</sup> *Later Life*, Sonnet 24.



The Being that is in the clouds and air,  
That is in the green leaves among the groves,<sup>1</sup>

and was led to the conclusion,

It is my faith that every flower  
Enjoys the air it breathes.<sup>2</sup>

Tennyson, despite the restlessness of his speculative temper, was ever returning to a pantheistic creed. The same is true of the Brownings. Arnold is, of course, undecided upon the question, and now approves, now rejects the pessimistic view of pantheism expressed in *Empedocles on Ætna*, in accordance with his change of mood putting the poem in and out of the various editions of his works. But wherever his poetry is most worthy, his worship of nature coincides with Wordsworth's pantheistic faith. Swinburne's *Hertha* is one of the most thoroughgoing expressions of pantheism. At the present time, as in much of the poetry of the past, the pantheistic feeling is merely implicit. One of the most recent conscious formulations of it is in Le Gallienne's *Natural Religion*, wherein he explains the grounds of his faith,

Up through the mystic deeps of sunny air  
I cried to God, "Oh Father, art thou there?"  
Sudden the answer like a flute I heard;  
It was an angel, though it seemed a bird.

On the whole the poet might well wax indignant over the philosopher's charge. It is hardly fair

<sup>1</sup> *Hart Leap Well.*

<sup>2</sup> *Lines Written in Early Spring.*

to accuse the poet of being indifferent to the realm of ideas, when, as a matter of fact, he not only tries to establish himself there, but to carry everything else in the universe with him.

The charge of the puritan appears no more just to the poet than that of the philosopher. How can it be true, as the puritan maintains it to be, that the poet lacks the spirit of reverence, when he is constantly incurring the ridicule of the world by the awe with which he regards himself and his creations? No power, poets aver, is stronger to awaken a religious mood than is the quietude of the beauty which they worship. Wordsworth says that poetry can never be felt or rightly estimated "without love of human nature and reverence for God,"<sup>1</sup> because poetry and religion are of the same nature. If religion proclaims cosmos against chaos, so also does poetry, and both derive the harmony and repose that inspire reverence from this power of revelation.

But, the puritan objects, the overweening pride which is one of the poet's most distinctive traits renders impossible the humility of spirit characteristic of religious reverence.

It is true that the poet repudiates a religion that humbles him; this is one of the strongest reasons for his pantheistic leanings.

There is no God, O son!  
If thou be none,<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Letter to Lady Beaumont, May 21, 1807.

<sup>2</sup> *On the Downs.*

Swinburne represents nature as crying to man, and this suits the poet exactly. Perhaps Swinburne's prose shows more clearly than his poetry the divergence of the puritan temper and the poetical one in the matter of religious humility. "We who worship no material incarnation of any qualities," he wrote, "no person, may worship the Divine Humanity; the ideal of human perfection and aspiration, without worshipping any god, any person, any fetish at all. Therefore I might call myself, if I wished, a kind of Christian (of the Church of Blake and Shelley) but assuredly in no sense a theist." <sup>1</sup>

Nothing less than complete fusion of the three worlds spoken of by Goethe, will satisfy the poet. If fusion of the outer world and the other world results in the pantheistic color of the poet's religion, the third element, the inner world, makes it imperative that the poet's divinity should be a personal one, no less, in fact, than a deification of his own nature. This tendency of the poet to create God in his own image is frankly acknowledged by Mrs. Browning in prayer to the "Poet God." <sup>2</sup>

Of all English writers, William Blake affords the clearest revelation of the poet's instinctive attitude, because he is most courageous in carrying the implications of poetic egotism to their logical conclusion. In the *Prophetic Books*, in particular, Blake boldly expresses all that is implicit in the

<sup>1</sup> Edmund Gosse, *Swinburne*, p. 309.

<sup>2</sup> *A Vision of Poets*.

poet's yearning for a religion which will not humble and thwart his nature, but will exalt and magnify it.

Even the puritan cannot affirm that the poet's demand for recognition, in his religious belief, of every phase of his existence, has not flowered, once, at least, in most genuinely religious poetry, for the puritan himself feels the power of Emily Brontë's *Last Lines*, in which she cries with proud and triumphant faith,

Though earth and man were gone,  
And suns and universes ceased to be,  
And Thou wert left alone,  
Every existence would exist in Thee.

There is not room for Death,  
Nor atom that his might could render void;  
Thou, Thou art Being and Breath,  
And what Thou art may never be destroyed.

There remains the plain man to be dealt with. What, he reiterates, has the poet to say for his orthodoxy? If he can combine his poetical illusions about the divinity of nature and the superlative and awesome importance of the poet himself with regular attendance at church; if these phantasies do not prevent him from sincerely and thoughtfully repeating the Apostle's creed, well and good. The plain man's religious demands upon the poet are really not excessive, yet the poet, from the romantic period onward, has taken delight in scandalizing him,



In the eighteenth century poets seem not to have been averse to placating their enemies by publishing their attendance upon the appointed means of grace. Among the more conservative poets, this attitude lasted over into the earlier stages of the romantic movement. So late a poet as Bowles delighted to stress the "churchman's ardor" of the poet.<sup>1</sup> Southey also was ready to exhibit his punctilious orthodoxy. Yet poor Southey was the unwitting cause of the impiety of his brothers for many years, inasmuch as Byron's *A Vision of Judgment*, with its irresistible satire on Southey, sounded the death-knell of the narrowly religious poet.

The vogue which the poet of religious ill-repute enjoyed during the romantic period was, of course, a very natural phase of "the renaissance of wonder." The religious "correctness" of the eighteenth century inevitably went out of fashion, in poetic circles, along with the rest of its formalism. Poets vied with one another in forming new and daring conceptions of God. There was no question, in the romantic revolt, of yielding to genuine atheism. "The worst of it is that I *do* believe," said Byron, discussing his bravery under fear of death. "Anything but the Church of England," was the attitude by which Byron shocked the orthodox. "I think," he wrote, "people can never have enough of religion, if they are to have any. I incline myself very much to the Catholic doctrine."<sup>2</sup> *Cain*, how-

<sup>1</sup> See his verse on Southey and Milton.

<sup>2</sup> Letter to Tom Moore, March 4, 1822. See also the letter to Robert Charles Dallas, January 21, 1808.

ever, is not a piece of Catholic propaganda, and the chief significance of Byron's religious poetry lies in his romantic delight in arraigning the Almighty as well as Episcopalians.

Shelley comes out even more squarely than Byron against conventional religion. In *Julian and Maddalo*, he causes Byron to say of him,

You were ever still  
Among Christ's flock a perilous infidel.

Shelley helped to foster the tradition, too, that the poet was persecuted by the church. In *Rosalind and Helen*, the hero was hated by the clergy,

For he made verses wild and queer  
Of the strange creeds priests hold so dear,

and this predilection for making them wild and queer resulted in Lionel's death, for

The ministers of misrule sent  
Seized on Lionel and bore  
His chained limbs to a dreary tower,  
For he, they said, from his mind had bent  
Against their gods keen blasphemy.

The most notable illustration of this phase of Shelley's thought is *The Revolt of Islam*, wherein the poets, Laon and Cythna, are put to death by the priests, who regard them as their worst enemies.

Burns, also, took a certain pleasure in unorthodoxy, and later poets have gloried in his attitude.

Swinburne, in particular, praises his daring, in that he

Smote the God of base men's choice  
At God's own gate.<sup>1</sup>

Young poets have not yet lost their taste for religious persecution. It is a great disappointment to them to find it difficult to strike fire from the faithful in these days. Swinburne in his early poetry denounced the orthodox God with such vigor that he roused a momentary flutter of horror in the church, but nowadays the young poet who craves to manifest his spiritual daring is far more likely to find himself in the position of Rupert Brooke, of whom someone has said, "He imagines the poet as going on a magnificent quest to curse God on his throne of fire, and finding—nothing."

The poet's youthful zest in scandalizing the orthodox is likely, however, to be early outgrown. As the difficulties in the way of his finding a God worthy of his adoration become manifest to him, it may be, indeed, with a sigh that he turns from the conventional religion in which so many men find certitude and place. This is the mood, frequently, of Browning,<sup>2</sup> of Tennyson,<sup>3</sup> of Arnold,<sup>4</sup> of Clough.<sup>5</sup> So, too, James Thomson muses with regret,

<sup>1</sup> Burns.

<sup>2</sup> See *Christmas Eve* and *Easter Day*.

<sup>3</sup> See *In Memoriam*.

<sup>4</sup> See *Dover Beach*.

<sup>5</sup> See *The New Sinai, Qui Laborat Orat, Hymnos Amnos, Epistrausium*.

How sweet to enter in, to kneel and pray  
 With all the others whom we love so well!  
 All disbelief and doubt might pass away,  
 And peace float to us with its Sabbath bell.  
 Conscience replies, There is but one good rest,  
 Whose head is pillowed upon Truth's pure breast.<sup>1</sup>

In fact, as the religious world grows more broad-minded, the mature poet sometimes appeals to the orthodox for sympathy when his daring religious questing threatens to plunge him into despair. The public is too quick to class him with those whose doubt is owing to lassitude of mind, rather than too eager activity. Tennyson is obliged to remind his contemporaries,

There lives more faith in honest doubt,  
 Believe me, than in half the creeds.

Browning, as always, takes a hopeful view of human stupidity when he expresses his belief that men will not long "persist in confounding, any more than God confounds, with genuine infidelity and atheism of the heart those passionate impatient struggles of a boy toward truth and love."<sup>2</sup>

The reluctance of the world to give honor too freely to the poet who prefers solitary doubt to common faith is, probably enough, due to a shrewd suspicion that the poet finds religious perplexity a very satisfactory poetic stimulus. In his character as man of religion as in that of lover, the poet is

<sup>1</sup> *The Recluant.*

<sup>2</sup> *Preface* to the Letters of Shelley (afterwards proved spurious).



apt to feel that his thirst, not the quenching of it, is the æsthetic experience. There is not much question that since the beginning of the romantic movement, at least, religious doubt has been more prolific of poetry than religious certainty has been. Even Cowper, most orthodox of poets, composed his best religious poetry while he was tortured by doubt. One does not deny that there is good poetry in the hymn books, expressing settled faith, but no one will seriously contend, I suppose, that any contentedly orthodox poet of the last century has given us a body of verse that compares favorably, in purely poetical merit, with that of Arnold.

Against the imputation that he deliberately dallies with doubt, the poet can only reply that, again as in the case of his human loves, longing is strong enough to spur him to poetic achievement, only when it is a thirst driving him mad with its intensity. The poet, in the words of a recent poem, is "homesick after God," and in the period of his blackest doubt beats against the wall of his reason with the cry,

Ah, but there should be one!

There should be one. And there's the bitterness  
Of this unending torture-place for men,  
For the proud soul that craves a perfectness  
That might outwear the rotting of all things  
Rooted in earth.<sup>1</sup>

The public which refuses to credit the poet with earnestness in his quest of God may misconceive

<sup>1</sup> Josephine Preston Peabody, *Marlowe*.

the dignified attempts of Arnold to free himself from the tangle of doubt, and deem his beautiful gestures purposely futile, but before condemning the poetic attitude toward religion it must also take into account the contrary disposition of Browning to kick his way out of difficulties with entire indifference to the greater dignity of an attitude of resignation; and no more than Arnold does Browning ever depict a poet who achieves religious satisfaction. Thus the hero of *Pauline* comes to no triumphant issue, though he maintains,

I have always had one lode-star; now  
As I look back, I see that I have halted  
Or hastened as I looked towards that star,  
A need, a trust, a yearning after God.

The same bafflement is Sordello's, over whom the author muses,

Of a power above you still,  
Which, utterly incomprehensible,  
Is out of rivalry, which thus you can  
Love, though unloving all conceived by man—  
What need! And of—none the minutest duct  
To that out-nature, naught that would instruct  
And so let rivalry begin to live—  
But of a Power its representative  
Who, being for authority the same,  
Communication different, should claim  
A course, the first chosen, but the last revealed,  
This human clear, as that Divine concealed—  
What utter need!

There is, after all, small need that the public should charge the poet with deliberate failure to

gain a satisfactory view of the deity. The quest of a God who satisfies the poet's demand that He shall include all life, satisfy every impulse, be as personal as the poet himself, and embody only the harmony of beauty, is bound to be a long one. It appears inevitable that the poet should never get more than incomplete and troubled glimpses of such a deity, except, perhaps, in

The too-bold dying song of her whose soul  
Knew no fellow for might,  
Passion, vehemence, grief,  
Daring, since Byron died.<sup>1</sup>

A complete view of the poet's deity is likely always to be as disastrous as was that of Lucretius, as Mrs. Browning conceived of him,

Who dropped his plummet down the broad  
Deep universe, and said, "No God,"  
Finding no bottom.<sup>2</sup>

If the poet's independent quest of God is doomed to no more successful issue than this, it might seem advisable for him to tolerate the conventional religious systems of his day. Though every poet must feel with Tennyson,

Our little systems have their day,  
They have their day and cease to be;  
They are but broken lights of thee,  
And thou, O Lord, art more than they,<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Said of Emily Brontë. Arnold, *Haworth Churchyard*.

<sup>2</sup> *A Vision of Poets*.

<sup>3</sup> *In Memoriam*.

yet he may feel, with Rossetti, that it is best to

Let lore of all theology  
Be to thy soul what it can be.<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, many of the lesser poets have capitulated to overtures of tolerance and not-too-curious inquiry into their private beliefs on the part of the church.

In America, the land of religious tolerance, the poet's break with the church was never so serious as in England, and the shifting creeds of the evangelical churches have not much hampered poets. In fact, the frenzy of the poet and of the revivalist have sometimes been felt as akin. Noteworthy in this connection is George Lansing Raymond, who causes the heroes of two pretentious narrative poems, *A Life in Song*, and *The Real and the Ideal*, to begin by being poets, and end by becoming ministers of the gospel. The verse of J. G. Holland is hardly less to the point. The poet-hero of Holland's *Bitter Sweet* is a thoroughgoing evangelist, who, in the stress of temptation by a woman who would seduce him, falls upon his knees and saves his own soul and hers likewise. In *Kathrina*, though the hero, rebellious on account of the suicide of his demented parents, remains agnostic till almost the end of the poem, this is clearly regarded by Holland as the cause of his incomplete success as a poet, and in the end the hero becomes an irreproachable churchman. At present Vachel Lindsay keeps up the tradition of the poet-revivalist.

<sup>1</sup> *Soothsayer*.



Even in England, the orthodox poet has not been nonexistent. Christina Rossetti portrays such an one in her autobiographical poetry. Jean Ingelow, in *Letters of Life and Morning*, offers most conventional religious advice to the young poet. And in Coventry Patmore's *The Angel in the House*, one finds as orthodox a poet as any that the eighteenth century could afford.

The Catholic church too has some grounds for its title, "nursing mother of poets." The rise of the group of Catholic poets, Francis Thompson, Alice Meynell, and Lionel Johnson, in particular, has tended to give a more religious cast to the recent poet. If Joyce Kilmer had lived, perhaps verse on the Catholic poet would have been even more in evidence. But it is likely that Joyce Kilmer would only have succeeded in inadvertently bringing the religious singer once more into disrepute. There is perhaps nothing nocuous in his creed, as he expressed it in a formal interview: "I hope . . . poetry . . . is reflecting faith . . . in God and His Son and the Holy Ghost."<sup>1</sup> But Kilmer went much farther and advocated the suppression of all writings, by Catholics, which did not specifically advertise their author's Catholicism.<sup>2</sup> And such a doctrine immediately delivers the poet's freedom of inspiration into the hands of censors.

Perhaps a history of art would not square with

<sup>1</sup> Letter to Howard Cook, June 28, 1918, *Joyce Kilmer: Poems, Essays and Letters*, ed. Robert Cortes Holliday.

<sup>2</sup> See his letter to Aline Kilmer, April 21, 1918, *Joyce Kilmer, Poems, Essays and Letters*, ed. Robert Cortes Holliday.

the repugnance one feels toward such censorship. Conformance to the religious beliefs of his time certainly does not seem to have handicapped Homer or Dante, to say nothing of the preëminent men in other fields of art, Phidias, Michael Angelo, Raphael, etc. Yet in the modern consciousness, the theory of art for art's sake has become so far established that we feel that any compromise of the purely æsthetic standard is a loss to the artist. The deity of the artist and the churchman may be in some measure the same, since absolute beauty and absolute goodness are regarded both by poets and theologians as identical, but there is reason to believe that the poet may not go so far astray if he cleaves to his own immediate apprehension of absolute beauty as he will if he fashions his beliefs upon another man's stereotyped conception of the absolute good.

Then, too, it is not unlikely that part of the poet's reluctance to embrace the creed of his contemporaries arises from the fact that he, in his secret heart, still hankers for his old title of priest. He knows that it is the imaginative faculty of the poet that has been largely instrumental in building up every religious system. The system that holds sway in society is apt to be the one that he himself has just outgrown; he has, accordingly, an artist's impatience for its immaturity. There is much truth to the poet's nature in verses entitled *The Idol Maker Prays*:

Grant thou, that when my art hath made thee known  
And others bow, I shall not worship thee,  
But as I pray thee now, then let me pray  
Some greater god,—like thee to be conceived  
Within my soul.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> By Arthur Guiterman.

## VII

### *THE PRAGMATIC ISSUE*

NO matter how strong our affection for the ingratiating ne'er-do-well, there are certain charges against the poet which we cannot ignore. It is a serious thing to have an alleged madman, inebriate, and experimenter in crime running loose in society. But there comes a time when our patience with his indefatigable accusers is exhausted. Is not society going a step too far if, after the poet's positive faults have been exhausted, it institutes a trial for his sins of omission? Yet so it is. If the poet succeeds in proving to the satisfaction of the jury that his influence is innocuous, he must yet hear the gruff decision, "Perhaps, as you say, you are doing no real harm. But of what possible use are you? Either become an efficient member of society, or cease to exist." Must we tamely look on, while the "light, winged, and holy creature," as Plato called the poet, is harnessed to a truck wagon, and made to deliver the world's bread and butter? Would that it were more common for poets openly to defy society's demands for efficiency, as certain children and malaperts of the poetic world have done! It is pleasant to hear the naughty advice which that especially impractical



poet, Emily Dickinson, gave to a child: "Be sure to live in vain, dear. I wish I had."<sup>1</sup> And one is hardly less pleased to hear the irrepressible Ezra Pound instruct his songs,

But above all, go to practical people, go, jangle their door-bells.

Say that you do no work, and that you will live forever.<sup>2</sup>

Surely no one else has had so bad a time with efficiency experts as has the poet, even though everyone whose occupation does not bring out sweat on the brow is likely to fall under their displeasure. The scholar, for instance, is given no rest from their querulous complaints, because he has been sitting at his ease, with a book in his hand, while they have dug the potatoes for his dinner. But the poet is the object of even bitterer vituperation. He, they remind him, does not even trouble to maintain a decorous posture during his fits of idleness. Instead, he is often discovered flat on his back in the grass, with one foot swinging aloft, wagging defiance at an industrious world. What right has he to loaf and invite his soul, while the world goes to ruin all about him?

The poet reacts variously to these attacks. Sometimes with (it must be confessed) aggravating meekness, he seconds all that his beraters say of his idle

<sup>1</sup> Gamaliel Bradford, *Portraits of American Women*, p. 248 (Mrs. Bianchi, p. 37).

<sup>2</sup> *Salutation the Second*.

ways.<sup>1</sup> Sometimes he gives them the plaintive assurance that he is overtaxed with imaginary work. But occasionally he seems to be really stung by their reproaches, and tries to convince them that by following a strenuous avocation he has done his bit for society, and has earned his hours of idleness as a poet.

When the modern poet tries to establish his point by exhibiting singers laboring in the business and professional world, he cannot be said to make out a very good case for himself. He has dressed an occasional fictional bard in a clergyman's coat, in memory, possibly, of Donne and Herbert.<sup>2</sup> In politics, he has exhibited in his verses only a few scattered figures,—Lucan,<sup>3</sup> Petrarch,<sup>4</sup> Dante,<sup>5</sup> Boccaccio, Walter Map,<sup>6</sup> Milton<sup>7</sup>—and these, he must admit, belong to remote periods. Does D'Annunzio bring the poet-politician down to the present? But poets have not yet begun to celebrate D'Annunzio in verse. Really there is only one figure, a protean

<sup>1</sup> For verse dealing with the idle poet see James Thomson, *The Castle of Indolence* (Stanzas about Samuel Patterson, Dr. Armstrong, and the author); Barry Cornwall, *The Poet and the Fisher*, and *Epistle to Charles Lamb on His Emancipation from the Clerkship*; Wordsworth, *Expostulation and Reply*; Emerson, *Apology*; Whitman, *Song of Myself*; Helen Hunt Jackson, *The Poet's Forge*; P. H. Hayne, *An Idle Poet Dreaming*; Henry Timrod, *They Dub Thee Idler*; Washington Allston, *Sylphs of the Seasons*; C. W. Stoddard, *Utopia*; Alan Seeger, *Oneata*; J. G. Neihardt, *The Poet's Town*.

<sup>2</sup> See G. L. Raymond, *A Life in Song*, and *The Real and the Ideal*.

<sup>3</sup> See *Nero*, Robert Bridges.

<sup>4</sup> See Landor, *Giovanna of Naples*, and *Andrea of Hungary*.

<sup>5</sup> See G. L. Raymond, *Dante*.

<sup>6</sup> See *A Becket*, Tennyson.

<sup>7</sup> See *Milton*, Bulwer Lytton; *Milton*, George Meredith.

one, in the realm of practical life, to whom the poet may look to save his reputation. Shakespeare he is privileged to represent as following many callings, and adorning them all. Or no, not quite all, for a recent verse-writer has gone to the length of representing Shakespeare as a pedagogue, and in this profession the master dramatist is either inept, or three centuries in advance of his time, for the citizens of Stratford do not take kindly to his scholastic innovations.<sup>1</sup>

If the poet does not appear a brilliant figure in the business world, he may turn to another field with the confidence that here his race will vindicate him from the world's charges of sluggishness or weakness. He is wont proudly to declare, with Joyce Kilmer,

When you say of the making of ballads and songs that  
it is a woman's work,  
You forget all the fighting poets that have been in every  
land.  
There was Byron, who left all his lady-loves, to fight  
against the Turk,  
And David, the singing king of the Jews, who was  
born with a sword in his hand.  
It was yesterday that Rupert Brooke went out to the  
wars and died,  
And Sir Philip Sidney's lyric voice was as sweet as his  
arm was strong,  
And Sir Walter Raleigh met the axe as a lover meets  
his bride,

<sup>1</sup> See *William Shakespeare, Pedagogue and Poacher*, a drama, Richard Garnett.

Because he carried in his heart the courage of his song.<sup>1</sup>

It was only yesterday, indeed, that Rupert Brooke, Francis Ledwidge, Alan Seeger and Joyce Kilmer made the memory of the soldier poet lasting. And it cannot be justly charged that the draft carried the poet, along with the street-loafer, into the fray, an unwilling victim. From Æschylus and David to Byron and the recent war poets, the singer may find plenty of names to substantiate his claim that he glories in war as his natural element.<sup>2</sup> A recent writer has said, "The poet must ever go where the greatest songs are singing,"<sup>3</sup> and nowhere is the poetry of life so manifest as where life is in constant hazard. The verse of Rupert Brooke and Alan Seeger surely makes it plain that warfare was the

<sup>1</sup> Joyce Kilmer, *The Proud Poet*.

<sup>2</sup> For poetry dealing with the poet as a warrior see Thomas Moore, *The Minstrel Boy, O Blame Not the Bard, The Harp That Once Through Tara's Halls, Shall the Harp then be Silent, Dear Harp of My Country*; Præd, *The Eve of Battle*; Whitman, *Song of the Banner at Daybreak*; E. C. Stedman, *Jean Prouvaire's Song at the Barricade*, Byron; G. L. Raymond, *Dante, A Song of Life*; S. K. Wiley, *Dante and Beatrice*; Oscar Wilde, *Ravenna*; Richard Realf, *Vates, Written on the Night of His Suicide*; Cale Young Rice, *David, Aeschylus*; Swinburne, *The Sisters*; G. E. Woodberry, *Requiem*; Rupert Brooke, 1914; Joyce Kilmer, *In Memory of Rupert Brooke, The Proud Poet*; Alan Seeger, *I Have a Rendez-vous with Death, Sonnet to Sidney, Liebestod*; John Bunker, *On Bidding Farewell to a Poet Gone to the Wars*; Jessie Rittenhouse, *To Poets Who Shall Fall in Battle*; Ros-siter Johnson, *A Soldier Poet*; Herbert Kaufman, *Hell Gate of Soissons*; Herbert Asquith, *The Volunteer*; Julian Gren-fil, *Into Battle*; Grace Hazard Conkling, *Francis Ledwidge*; Richard Mansfield, 2d, *Song of the Artists*; Norreys Jephson O'Connor, *In Memoriam: Francis Ledwidge*; Donald F. Goold Johnson, *Rupert Brooke*.

<sup>3</sup> See Christopher Morley, *Essay on Joyce Kilmer*.



spark which touched off their genius, even as it might have done Byron's,

When the true lightning of his soul was bared,  
Long smouldering till the Mesolonghi torch.<sup>1</sup>

But no matter how heroic the poet may prove himself to be, in his character of soldier, or how efficient as a man of affairs, this does not settle his quarrel with the utilitarians, for they are not to be pacified by a recital of the poet's avocations. They would remind him that the world claims the whole of his time. If, after a day of strenuous activity, he hurries home with the pleasant conviction that he has earned a long evening in which to woo the Muse, the world is too likely to peer through the shutters and exclaim, "What? Not in bed yet? Then come out and do some extra chores." If the poet is to prove his title as an efficient citizen, it is clear that he must reveal some merit in verse-making itself. If he can make no more ambitious claims for himself, he must, at the very least, show that Browning was not at fault when he excused his occupation:

I said, to do little is bad; to do nothing is worse,  
And wrote verse.<sup>2</sup>

How can the poet satisfy the philistine world that his songs are worth while? Need we ask? Business men will vouch for their utility, if he will but

<sup>1</sup> Stephen Phillips, *Emily Brontë*.

<sup>2</sup> *Ferishtah's Fancies*.

conform to business men's ideas of art. Here is a typical expression of their views, couched in verse, for the singer's better comprehension:

The days of long-haired poets now are o'er,  
 The short-haired poet seems to have the floor;  
 For now the world no more attends to rhymes  
 That do not catch the spirit of the times.  
 The short-haired poet has no muse or chief,  
 He sings of corn. He eulogizes beef.<sup>1</sup>

But the poet utterly repudiates such a view of himself as this, for he cannot draw his breath in the commercial world.<sup>2</sup> In vain he assures his would-be friends that the intangibilities with which he deals have a value of their own. Emerson says,

One harvest from thy field  
 Homeward brought the oxen strong;  
 A second crop thine acres yield  
 Which I gather in a song.<sup>3</sup>

But for this second crop the practical man says he can find absolutely no market; hence overtures of friendliness between him and the poet end with sneers and contempt on both sides. Doubtless the best way for the poet to deal with the perennial complaints of the practical-minded, is simply to state brazenly, as did Oscar Wilde, "All art is quite useless."<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> "The Short-haired Poet," in *Common-Sense*, by E. F. Ware.

<sup>2</sup> Several poems lately have voiced the poet's horror of materialism. See Josephine Preston Peabody, *The Singing Man*; Richard Le Gallienne, *To R. W. Emerson*, *Richard Watson Gilder*; Mary Robinson, *Art and Life*.

<sup>3</sup> *Apology*.

<sup>4</sup> Preface to *Dorian Gray*.

Is the poet justified, then, in stopping his ears to all censure, and living unto himself? Not so; when the hub-bub of his sordid accusers dies away, he is conscious of another summons, before a tribunal which he cannot despise or ignore. For once more the poet's equivocal position exposes him to attacks from all quarters. He stands midway between the spiritual and the physical worlds, he reveals the ideal in the sensual. Therefore, while the practical man complains that the poet does not handle the solid objects of the physical world, but transmutes them to airy nothings, the philosopher, on the contrary, condemns the poet because he does not wholly sever connections with this same physical world, but is continually hovering about it, like a homesick ghost.

Like the plain man, the philosopher gives the poet a chance to vindicate his usefulness. Plato's challenge is not so age-worn that we may not requote it. He makes Socrates say, in the *Republic*,

Let us assure our sweet friend (poetry) and the sister arts of imitation that if she will only prove her title to exist in a well-ordered state, we shall be delighted to receive her. . . . We are very conscious of her charms, but we may not on that account betray the truth. . . . Shall I propose, then, that she be allowed to return from exile, but on this condition only, that she makes a defense of herself in lyrical or some other meter? And we may further grant to those of her defenders who are lovers of poetry and yet not poets the permission to speak in prose on her behalf. Let them show not only that she is pleasant

but also useful to states and to human life, and we will listen in a kindly spirit.<sup>1</sup>

One wonders why the lovers of Poetry have been so much more solicitous for her cause than Poetry herself has appeared to be. Aristotle, and after him many others,—in the field of English literature, Sidney, Shelley, and in our own day G. E. Woodberry,—have made most eloquent defenses in prose, but thus far the supreme lyrical defense has not been forthcoming. Perhaps Poetry feels that it is beneath her dignity to attempt a utilitarian justification for herself. Yet in the verse of the last century and a half there are occasional passages which give the impression that Poetry, with childishly averted head, is offering them to us, as if to say, "Don't think I would stoop to defend myself, but here are some things I might say for myself, if I wished."

Since the Platonic philosopher and the practical man stand for antipodal conceptions of reality, it really seems too bad that Plato will not give the poet credit for a little merit, in comparison with his arch-enemy. But as a matter of fact, the spectator of eternity and the sense-blinded man of the street form a grotesque fraternity, for the nonce, and the philosopher assures the plain man that he is far more to his liking than is the poet. Plato's reasoning is, of course, that the plain man at least does not tamper with the objects of sense, through which the philosopher may discern gleams of the

<sup>1</sup> *Republic*, Book X, 607.



spiritual world, whereas the poet distorts them till their real significance is obscured. The poet pretends that he is giving their real meaning, even as the philosopher, but his interpretation is false. He is like a man who, by an ingenious system of cross-lights and reflections, creates a wraithlike image of himself in the mirror, and alleges that it is his soul, though it is really only a misleading and worthless imitation of his body.

Will not Plato's accusation of the poet's inferiority to the practical man be made clearest if we stay by Plato's own humble illustration of the three beds? One, he says, is made by God, one by the carpenter, and one by the poet.<sup>1</sup> Now the bed which a certain poet, James Thomson, B. V., made, is fairly well known. It speaks, in "ponderous bass," to the other furniture in the room:

"I know what is and what has been;  
Not anything to me comes strange,  
Who in so many years have seen  
And lived through every kind of change.  
I know when men are bad or good,  
When well or ill," he slowly said,  
"When sad or glad, when sane or mad  
And when they sleep alive or dead."<sup>2</sup>

Plato would say of this majestic four-poster, with its multifarious memories "of births and deaths and marriage nights," that it does not come so near the essential idea of bedness as does the most non-

<sup>1</sup> See the *Republic* X, 596 B ff.

<sup>2</sup> *In the Room.*

descript product of the carpenters' tools. James Thomson's poem, he would say, is on precisely the same plane as the reflection of one's bed in the mirror across the room. Therefore he inquires, "Now do you suppose that if a person were able to make the original as well as the image, he would seriously devote himself to the image-making branch? Would he allow imitation to be the ruling principle of his life, as if he had nothing higher in him? . . . Imitation is only a kind of play or sport."<sup>1</sup>

It has long been the fashion for those who care for poetry to shake their heads over Plato's aberration at this point. It seems absurd enough to us to hear the utility of a thing determined by its number of dimensions. What virtue is there in merely filling space? We all feel the fallacy in such an adaptation of Plato's argument as Longfellow assigns to Michael Angelo, causing that versatile artist to conclude:

Painting and sculpture are but images;  
Are merely shadows cast by outward things  
On stone or canvas, having in themselves  
No separate existence. Architecture,  
As something in itself, and not an image,  
A something that is not, surpasses them  
As substance shadow.<sup>2</sup>

Yet it may be that the homeliness of Plato's illustration has misled us as to the seriousness of the prob-

<sup>1</sup> *Republic X*, 599 A.

<sup>2</sup> *Michael Angelo*.

lem. Let us forget about beds and buildings and think of actual life in the more dignified way that has become habitual to us since the war. Then it must appear that Plato's charge is as truly a live issue here and now as it ever was in Athens.

The claims for the supremacy of poetry, set forth by Aristotle, Sidney and the rest, seem to weaken, for the time being, at least, when we find that in our day the judgment that poetry is inferior to life comes, not from outsiders, but from men who were at one time most ardent votaries of the muse. Repudiation by verse-writers of poetry's highest claims we have been accustomed to dismiss, until recently, as betrayal of a streak of commonness in the speaker's nature,—of a disposition to value the clay of life more highly than the fire. We were not, perhaps, inclined to take even so great a poet as Byron very seriously when he declared, "I by no means rank poets or poetry high in the scale of the intellect. It is the lava of the imagination, whose eruption prevents an earthquake. I prefer the talents of action." But with the outbreak of the world war one met unquestionably sincere confession from more than one poet that he found verse-writing a pale and anemic thing. Thus "A. E." regretted the time that he spent on poetry, sighing,

He who might have wrought in flame  
Only traced upon the foam.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Epilogue.*

In the same spirit are Joyce Kilmer's words, written shortly before his death in the trenches: "I see daily and nightly the expression of beauty in action instead of words, and I find it more satisfactory."<sup>1</sup> Also we have the decision of Francis Ledwidge, another poet who died a soldier:

A keen-edged sword, a soldier's heart,  
Are greater than a poet's art,  
And greater than a poet's fame  
A little grave that has no name.<sup>2</sup>

Is not our idealization of poets who died in war a confession that we ourselves believe that they chose the better part,—that they did well to discard imitation of life for life itself?

It is not fair to force an answer to such a question till we have more thoroughly canvassed poets' convictions on this matter. Do they all admit the justice of Plato's characterization of poetry as a sport, comparable to golf or tennis? In a few specific instances, poets have taken this attitude toward their own verse, of course. There was the "art for art's sake" cry, which at the end of the last century surely degenerated into such a conception of poetry. There have been a number of poets like Austin Dobson and Andrew Lang, who have frankly regarded their verse as a pastime to while away an idle hour. There was Swinburne, who characterized many of his poems as being idle and light as

<sup>1</sup> Letter, May 7, 1918. See Joyce Kilmer's works, edited by Richard Le Gallienne.

<sup>2</sup> *Soliloquy*.



white butterflies.<sup>1</sup> But when we turn away from these prestidigitators of rhymes and rhythms, we find that no view of poetry is less acceptable than this one to poets in general. They are far more likely to earn the world's ridicule by the deadly seriousness with which they take verse writing. If the object of his pursuit is a sport, the average poet is as little aware of it as is the athlete who suffers a nervous collapse before the big game of the season.

But Plato's more significant statement is untouched. Is poetry an imitation of life? It depends, of course, upon how broadly we interpret the phrase, "imitation of life." In one sense almost every poet would say that Plato was right in characterizing poetry thus. The usual account of inspiration points to passive mirroring of life. Someone has said of the poet,

As a lake

Reflects the flower, tree, rock, and bending heaven,  
Shall he reflect our great humanity.<sup>2</sup>

And these lines are not false to the general view of the poet's function, but they leave us leeway to quarrel over the nature of the reflection mentioned, just as we quarrel over the exact connotations of Plato's and Aristotle's word, imitation.

Even if we hold to the narrower meaning of imitation, there are a few poets who intimate that imitation alone is their aim in writing poetry. Denying that life has an ideal element, they take pains to

<sup>1</sup> See the *Dedication to Christina Rossetti*, and *Envoi*.

<sup>2</sup> Alexander Smith, *A Life Drama*.

mirror it, line for line, and blemish for blemish. How can they meet Plato's question as to their usefulness? If life is a hideous, meaningless thing, as they insinuate, it is not clear what merit can abide in a faithful reflection of it. Let us take the case of Robert Service, who prided himself upon the realism of his war poetry.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps his defense depends, more truly than he realized, upon the implication contained in his two lines,

If there's good in war and crime,  
There may be in my bits of rhyme.<sup>2</sup>

Yet the realist may find a sort of justification for himself; at least James Thomson, B.V., thinks he has found one for him. The most thoroughly hopeless exposition of the world's meaninglessness, in English poetry, is doubtless Thomson's *City of Dreadful Night*. Why does the author give such a ghastly thing to the world? In order, he says, that some other clear-eyed spectator of the nightmare of existence may gain a forlorn comfort from it, since he will know that a comrade before him has likewise seen things at their blackest and worst. But would Plato accept this as a justification for realistic poetry? It is doubtful. No one could be comforted by a merely literal rendering of life. The comfort must derive from the personal equation, which is the despair engendered in the author by dreams of

<sup>1</sup> See *Rhymes of a Red Cross Man*.

<sup>2</sup> See *Ibid.*

something better than reality; therefore whatever merit resides in such poetry comes not from its realism, but from the idealism of the writer.

We must not think that all poets who regard their poetry as a reflection of this world alone, agree in praising glaring realism as a virtue. Rather, some of them say, the value of their reflection lies in its misty indistinctness. Life may be sordid and ugly at first hand, but let the artist's reflection only be remote enough, and the jagged edges and dissonances of color which mar daily living will be lost in the purple haze of distance. Gazing at such a reflection, men may perhaps forget, for a space, how dreary a thing existence really is.

And they shall be accounted poet-kings  
Who simply tell the most heart-easing things,<sup>1</sup>

said Keats in his youth. Such a statement of the artist's purpose inevitably calls up William Morris:

Dreamer of dreams, born out of my due time,  
Why should I strive to set the crooked straight?  
Let it suffice me that my murmuring rhyme  
Beats with light wing against the ivory gate,  
Telling a tale, not too importunate  
To those who in the sleepy region stay,  
Lulled by the singer of an empty day.<sup>2</sup>

Would Plato scoff at such a formulation of the artist's mission? He would rather condemn it, as

<sup>1</sup> *Sleep and Poetry.*

<sup>2</sup> *Prologue to the Earthly Paradise.*

fostering illusion and falsehood in men's minds. But we moderns are perhaps more world-weary, less sanguine about ideal truth than the ancients. With one of our war poets, we often plead for "song that turneth toil to rest,"<sup>1</sup> and agree with Keats that, whether art has any other justification or not, it has one "great end, to soothe the cares of man."<sup>2</sup>

We are not to imagine that many of our poets are content with the idea that poetry has so minor a function as this. They play with the thought of life's possible insignificance and leave it, for idealism is the breath of life to poets, and their adherence to realism amounts to suicide. Poetry may be comforting without being illusive. Emerson says,

'Tis the privilege of art  
 Thus to play its cheerful part  
 Man on earth to acclimate  
 And bend the exile to his fate.<sup>3</sup>

It is not, obviously, Emerson's conception that the poetry which brings this about falsifies. Like most poets, he indicates that art accomplishes its end, not merely by obscuring the hideous accidents of life, but by enabling us to glimpse an ideal element which abides in it, and is its essence.

Is the essence of things really a spiritual meaning? If so, it seems strange that Plato should have so belittled the poet's capacity to render the spir-

<sup>1</sup> Madison Cawein, *Preludes*.

<sup>2</sup> *Sleep and Poetry*.

<sup>3</sup> *Art*.



itual meaning in verse. But it is possible that the artist's view as to the relation of the ideal to the physical does not precisely square with Plato's. Though poets are so constitutionally Platonic, in this one respect they are perhaps more truly Aristotelians. Plato seems to say that ideality is not, as a matter of fact, the essence of objects. It is a light reflected upon them, as the sun's light is reflected upon the moon. So he claims that the artist who portrays life is like one who, drawing a picture of the moon, gives us only a map of her craters, and misses entirely the only thing that gives the moon any meaning, that is, moonlight. But the poet, that lover of the sensuous, cannot quite accept such a view as this. Ideality is truly the essence of objects, he avers, though it is overlaid with a mass of meaningless material. Hence the poet who gives us a representation of things is not obscuring them, but is doing us a service by simplifying them, and so making their ideality clearer. All that the most idealistic poet need do is to imitate; as Mrs. Browning says,

Paint a body well,  
You paint a soul by implication.<sup>1</sup>

This firm faith that the sensual is the dwelling-place of the spiritual accounts for the poet's impatience with the contention that his art is useless unless he points a lesson, by manipulating his ma-

<sup>1</sup> *Aurora Leigh*.

terials toward a conscious moral end. The poet refuses to turn objects this way and that, until they catch a reflection from a separate moral world. If he tries to write with two distinct purposes, hoping to "suffice the eye and save the soul beside,"<sup>1</sup> as Browning puts it, he is apt to hide the intrinsic spirituality of things under a cloak of ready-made moral conceptions. In his moments of deepest insight the poet is sure that his one duty is to reveal beauty clearly, without troubling himself about moralizing, and he assures his readers,

If you get simple beauty and naught else,  
You get about the best thing God invents.<sup>2</sup>

Probably poets have always felt, in their hearts, what the radicals of the present day are saying so vehemently, that the poet should not be expected to sermonize: "I wish to state my firm belief," says Amy Lowell, "that poetry should not try to teach, that it should exist simply because it is created beauty."<sup>3</sup>

Even conceding that the ideal lives within the sensual, it may seem that the poet is too sanguine in his claim that he is able to catch the ideal and significant feature of a thing rather than its accidents. Why should this be? Apparently because his thirst is for balance, proportion, harmony—what you will—leading him to see life as a unity.

<sup>1</sup> *The Ring and the Book.*

<sup>2</sup> *Fra Lippo Lippi.*

<sup>3</sup> Preface to *Sword Blades and Poppy Seed.* See also Joyce Kilmer, Letter to Howard W. Cook, June 28, 1918.

The artist's eyes are able to see life in focus, as it were, though it has appeared to men of less harmonious spirit as

A many-sided mirror,  
Which could distort to many a shape of error  
This true, fair world of things.<sup>1</sup>

It is as if the world were a jumbled picture puzzle, which only the artist is capable of putting together, and the fact that the essence of things, as he conceives of them, thus forms a harmonious whole is to him irrefutable proof that the intuition that leads him to see things in this way is not leading him astray. James Russell Lowell has described the poet's achievement:

With a sorrowful and conquering beauty,  
The soul of all looked grandly from his eyes.<sup>2</sup>

"The soul of all," that is the artist's revelation. To him the world is truly a universe, not a heterogeneity of unrelated things. In different mode from Lowell, Mrs. Browning expresses the same conception of the artist's imitation of life, inquiring,

What is art  
But life upon the larger scale, the higher,  
When, graduating up a spiral line  
Of still expanding and ascending gyres  
It pushes toward the intense significance  
Of all things, hungry for the infinite.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound*.

<sup>2</sup> *Ode*.

<sup>3</sup> *Aurora Leigh*.

The poet cannot accept Plato's characterization of him as an imitator, then, not if this implies that his imitations are inferior to their objects. Rather, the poet proudly maintains, they are infinitely superior, being in fact closer approximations to the meaning of things than are the things themselves. Thus Shelley describes the poet's work:

He will watch from dawn to gloom  
The lake-reflected sun illumine  
The yellow bees in the ivy bloom,  
Nor heed nor see, what things they be;  
But from these create he can  
Forms more real than living man,  
Nurslings of immortality.<sup>1</sup>

Therefore the poet has usually claimed for himself the title, not of imitator, but of seer. To his purblind readers, who see men as trees walking, he is able, with the search-light of his genius, to reveal the essential forms of things. Mrs. Browning calls him "the speaker of essential truth, opposed to relative, comparative and temporal truth";<sup>2</sup> James Russell Lowell calls him "the discoverer and revealer of the perennial under the deciduous";<sup>3</sup> Emerson calls him "the only teller of news."<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Prometheus Unbound*.

<sup>2</sup> *Aurora Leigh*.

<sup>3</sup> *The Function of the Poet*.

<sup>4</sup> *Poetry and Imagination*. The following are some of the poems asserting that the poet is the speaker of ideal truth: Blake, *Hear the Voice of the Ancient Bard*; Montgomery, *A Theme for a Poet*; Bowles, *The Visionary Boy*; Wordsworth, *Personal Talk*; Coleridge, *To Wm. Wordsworth*; Arnold, *The Austerity of Poetry*; Rossetti, *Sonnet, Shelley*; Bulwer Lytton, *The Dispute of the Poets*; Mrs. Browning, *Pan is Dead*;



Here we are, then, at the real point of dispute between the philosopher and the poet. They claim the same vantage-point from which to overlook human life. One would think they might peacefully share the same pinnacle, but as a matter of fact they are continuously jostling one another. In vain one tries to quiet their contentiousness. Turning to the most deeply Platonic poets of our period—Coleridge, Wordsworth, Shelley, Arnold, Emerson,—one may inquire, Does not your description of the poet precisely tally with Plato's description of the philosopher? Yes, they aver, but Plato falsified when he named his seer a philosopher rather than a poet.<sup>1</sup> Surely if the quarrel may be thus reduced to a matter of terminology, it grows trivial, but let us see how the case stands.

From one approach the dispute seems to arise from a comparison of methods. Coleridge praises the truth of Wordsworth's poetry as being

Landor, *To Wordsworth*; Jean Ingelow, *The Star's Monument*; Tupper, *Wordsworth*; Tennyson, *The Poet*; Swinburne, *The Death of Browning* (Sonnet V), *A New Year's Ode*; Edmund Gosse, *Epilogue*; James Russell Lowell, Sonnets XIV and XV on *Wordsworth's Views of Capital Punishment*; Bayard Taylor, *For the Bryant Festival*; Emerson, *Saadi*; M. Clemmer, *To Emerson*; Warren Holden, *Poetry*; P. H. Hayne, *To Emerson*; Edward Dowden, *Emerson*; Lucy Larcom, *R. W. Emerson*; R. C. Robbins, *Emerson*; Henry Timrod, *A Vision of Poesy*; G. E. Woodberry, *Ode at the Emerson Centenary*; Bliss Carman, *In a Copy of Browning*; John Drinkwater, *The Loom of the Poets*; Richard Middleton, *To an Idle Poet*; Shaemas O'Sheel, *The Poet Sees that Truth and Passion are One*.

<sup>1</sup> In rare cases, the poet identifies himself with the philosopher. See Coleridge, *The Garden of Boccaccio*; Kirke White, *Lines Written on Reading Some of His Own Earlier Sonnets*; Bulwer Lytton, *Milton*; George E. Woodberry, *Agathon*.

Not learnt, but native, her own natural notes.<sup>1</sup>

Wordsworth himself boasts over the laborious investigator of facts,

Think you, mid all this mighty sum  
Of things forever speaking,  
That nothing of itself will come,  
We must be ever seeking?<sup>2</sup>

But the dispute goes deeper than mere method. The poet's immediate intuition is superior to the philosopher's toilsome research, he asserts, because it captures ideality alive, whereas the philosopher can only kill and dissect it. As Wordsworth phrases it, poetry is "the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge; the impassioned expression which is in the countenance of all science." Philosophy is useful to the poet only as it presents facts for his synthesis; Shelley states, "Reason is to the imagination as the instrument to the agent, as the body to the spirit, as the shadow to the substance."<sup>3</sup>

To this the philosopher may rejoin that poetry, far from making discoveries beyond the bourne of philosophy, is a mere popularization, a sugar-coating, of the philosopher's discoveries. Tolstoi contends,

True science investigates and brings to human perception such truths and such knowledge as the people

<sup>1</sup> *To William Wordsworth.*

<sup>2</sup> *Expostulation and Reply.*

<sup>3</sup> *A Defense of Poetry.*

of a given time and society consider most important. Art transmits these truths from the region of perception to the region of emotion. And thus a false activity of science inevitably causes a correspondingly false activity of art.<sup>1</sup>

Such criticisms have sometimes incensed the poet till he has refused to acknowledge any indebtedness to the dissecting hand of science, and has pronounced the philosopher's attitude of mind wholly antagonistic to poetry.

Philosophy will clip an angel's wings,  
Conquer all mysteries by rule and line,<sup>2</sup>

Keats once complained. "Sleep in your intellectual crust!"<sup>3</sup> Wordsworth contemptuously advised the philosopher, and not a few other poets have felt that philosophy deadens life as a crust of ice deadens a flowing stream. That reason kills poetry is the unoriginal theme of a recent poem. The poet scornfully characterizes present writers,

We are they who dream no dreams,  
Singers of a rising day,  
Who undaunted,  
Where the sword of reason gleams,  
Follow hard, to hew away  
The woods enchanted.<sup>4</sup>

One must turn to Poe for the clearest statement of the antagonism. He declares,

<sup>1</sup> *What is Art?*

<sup>2</sup> *Lamia.*

<sup>3</sup> *A Poet's Epitaph.*

<sup>4</sup> J. E. Flecker, *Donde Estan.*

Science, true daughter of Old Time thou art!  
 Who alterest all things with thy peering eyes,  
 Why preyest thou thus upon the poet's heart,  
 Vulture, whose wings are dull realities?  
 How should he love thee? Or how deem thee wise,  
 Who wouldst not leave him in his wandering  
 To seek for treasure in the jewelled skies,  
 Albeit he soared with an undaunted wing?  
 Hast thou not dragged Diana from her car,  
 And driven the Hamadryad from the wood  
 To seek for shelter in some happier star?  
 Hast thou not torn the Naiad from her flood,  
 The Elfin from the green grass, and from me  
 The summer dream beneath the tamarund tree?<sup>1</sup>

If this sort of complaint is characteristic of poets, how shall the philosopher refrain from charging them with falsehood? The poet's hamadryad and naiad, what are they, indeed, but cobwebby fictions, which must be brushed away if ideal truth is to be revealed? Critics of the poet like to point out that Shakespeare frankly confessed,

Most true it is that I have looked on truth  
 Askance and strangely,

and that a renegade artist of the nineteenth century admitted, "Lying, the telling of beautiful untrue things, is the proper aim of Art."<sup>2</sup> If poets complain that

all charms fly  
 At the mere touch of cold philosophy,<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *To Science.*

<sup>2</sup> Oscar Wilde, *The Decay of Lying.*

<sup>3</sup> *Lamia.*



are they not admitting that their vaunted revelations are mere ghosts of distorted facts, and that they themselves are merely accomplished liars?

In his rebuttal the poet makes a good case for himself. He has identified the philosopher with the scientist, he says, and rightly, for the philosopher, the seeker for truth alone, can never get beyond the realm of science. His quest of absolute truth will lead him, first, to the delusive rigidity of scientific classification, then, as he tries to make his classification complete, it will topple over like a lofty tower of child's blocks, into the original chaos of things.

What! the philosopher may retort, the poet speaks thus of truth, who has just exalted himself as the supreme truth-teller, the seer? But the poet answers that his truth is not in any sense identical with that of the scientist and the philosopher. Not everything that exists is true for the poet, but only that which has beauty. Therefore he has no need laboriously to work out a scientific method for sifting facts. If his love of the beautiful is satisfied by a thing, that thing is real. "Beauty is truth, truth beauty"; Keats' words have been echoed and re-echoed by poets.<sup>1</sup> If Poe's rejection of

The loftiest star of unascended heaven,  
Pinnacled dim in the intense inane,

<sup>1</sup> A few examples of poems dealing with this subject are Shelley, *A Hymn to Intellectual Beauty*; Mrs. Browning, *Pan Is Dead*; Henry Timrod, *A Vision of Poesy*; Madison Cawein, *Prototypes*.

in favor of attainable "treasures of the jewelled skies" be an offense against truth, it is not, poets would say, because of his non-conformance to the so-called facts of astronomy, but because his sense of beauty is at fault, leading him to prefer prettiness to sublimity. As for the poet's visions, of naiad and dryad, which the philosopher avers are less true than chemical and physical forces, they represent the hidden truth of beauty, which is threaded through the ugly medley of life, being invisible till under the light of the poet's thought it flashes out like a pattern in golden thread, woven through a somber tapestry.

It is only when the poet is not keenly alive to beauty that he begins to fret about making an artificial connection between truth and beauty, or, as he is apt to rename them, between wisdom and fancy. In the eighteenth century when the poet's vision of truth became one with the scientist's, he could not conceive of beauty otherwise than as gaudy ornaments, "fancies," with which he might trim up his thoughts. The befuddled conception lasted over into the romantic period; Beattie<sup>1</sup> and Bowles<sup>2</sup> both warned their poets to include both fancy and wisdom in their poetry. Even Landor reflected,

A marsh, where only flat leaves lie,  
And showing but the broken sky

<sup>1</sup> See *The Minstrel*.

<sup>2</sup> See *The Visionary Boy*.

Too surely is the sweetest lay  
That wins the ear and wastes the day  
Where youthful Fancy pouts alone  
And lets not wisdom touch her zone.<sup>1</sup>

But the poet whose sense of beauty is unerring gives no heed to such distinctions.

If the scientist scoffs at the poet's intuitive selection of ideal values, declaring that he might just as well take any other aspect of things—their number, solidarity, edibility—instead of beauty, for his test of their reality, the poet has his answer ready. After all, this poet, this dreamer, is a pragmatist at heart. To the scientist's charge that his test is absurd, his answer is simply, It works.

The world is coming to acknowledge, little by little, the poet points out, that whatever he presents to it as beauty is likewise truth. "The poet's wish is nature's law,"<sup>2</sup> says Sidney Lanier, and other poets, no less, assert that the poet is in unison with nature. Wordsworth calls poetry "a force, like one of nature's."<sup>3</sup> One of Oscar Wilde's cleverest paradoxes is to the effect that nature imitates art,<sup>4</sup> and in so far as nature is one with human perception, there is no doubt that it is true. "What the imagination seizes as beauty must be truth," Keats wrote, "whether it existed before or not."<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See *To Wordsworth*.

<sup>2</sup> *Poem Outlines*.

<sup>3</sup> *The Prelude*.

<sup>4</sup> See the *Essay on Criticism*.

<sup>5</sup> Letter to B. Baillie, November 17, 1817.

And again, "The imagination may be compared to Adam's dream—he awoke and found it truth."<sup>1</sup>

If the poet's intuitions are false, how does it chance, he inquires, that he has been known, in all periods of the world's history, as a prophet? Shelley says, "Poets are . . . the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present," and explains the phenomenon thus: "A poet participates in the eternal, the infinite, the one; so far as related to his conceptions, time and place and number are not."<sup>2</sup> In our period, verse dealing with the Scotch bard is fondest of stressing the immemorial association of the poet and the prophet, and in much of this, the "pretense of superstition" as Shelley calls it, is kept up, that the poet can foretell specific happenings.<sup>3</sup> But we have many poems that express a broader conception of the poet's gift of prophecy.<sup>4</sup> Holmes' view is typical:

We call those poets who are first to mark  
Through earth's dull mist the coming of the dawn,—  
Who see in twilight's gloom the first pale spark

<sup>1</sup> Letter to B. Baillie, November 17, 1817.

<sup>2</sup> *A Defense of Poetry*.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Gray, *The Bard*; Scott, *The Lady of the Lake*, *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*, *Thomas the Rhymer*; Campbell, *Lochiel's Warning*.

<sup>4</sup> See William Blake, Introduction to *Songs of Experience*, *Hear the Voice of the Bard*; Crabbe, *The Candidate*; Landor, *Dante*; Barry Cornwall, *The Prophet*; Alexander Smith, *A Life Drama*; Coventry Patmore, *Prophets Who Cannot Sing*; J. R. Lowell, *Massaccio*, Sonnet XVIII; Owen Meredith, *The Prophet*; W. H. Burleigh, *Shelley*; O. W. Holmes, *Shakespeare*; T. H. Chivers, *The Poet, Dante*; Alfred Austin, *The Poet's Corner*; Swinburne, *The Statue of Victor Hugo*; Herbert Trench, *Stanzas on Poetry*.



While others only note that day is gone;  
 For them the Lord of light the curtain rent  
 That veils the firmament.<sup>1</sup>

Most of these poems account for the premonitions of the poet as Shelley does; as a more recent poet has phrased it:

Strange hints  
 Of things past, present and to come there lie  
 Sealed in the magic pages of that music,  
 Which, laying hold on universal laws,  
 Ranges beyond these mud-walls of the flesh.<sup>2</sup>

The poet's defense is not finished when he establishes the truth of his vision. How shall the world be served, he is challenged, even though it be true that the poet's dreams are of reality? Plato demanded of his philosophers that they return to the cave of sense, after they had seen the heavenly vision, and free the slaves there. Is the poet willing to do this? It has been charged that he is not. Browning muses,

Ah, but to find  
 A certain mood enervate such a mind,  
 Counsel it slumber in the solitude  
 Thus reached, nor, stooping, task for mankind's good  
 Its nature just, as life and time accord.  
 —Too narrow an arena to reward  
 Emprize—the world's occasion worthless since  
 Not absolutely fitted to evince  
 Its mastery!<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Shakespeare.*

<sup>2</sup> Alfred Noyes, *Tales of the Mermaid Inn.*

<sup>3</sup> *Sordello.*

But one is inclined to question the justice of Browning's charge, at least so far as it applies peculiarly to the poet. Logically, he should devote himself to sense-blinded humanity, not reluctantly, like the philosopher descending to a gloomy cave which is not his natural habitat, but eagerly, since the poet is dependent upon sense as well as spirit for his vision. "This is the privilege of beauty," says Plato, "that, being the loveliest of the ideas, she is also the most palpable to sight."<sup>1</sup> Accordingly the poet has no horror of physical vision as a bondage, but he is fired with an enthusiasm to make the world of sense a more transparent medium of beauty.<sup>2</sup> It is inevitable that every poet's feeling for the world should be that of Shelley, who says to the spirit of beauty,

<sup>1</sup> *Phædrus*.

<sup>2</sup> For poetry dealing with the poet's humanitarian aspect, see Bowles, *The Visionary Boy, On the Death of the Rev. Benwell*; Wordsworth, *The Poet and the Caged Turtle Dove*; Arnold, *Heine's Grave*; George Eliot, *O May I Join the Choir Invisible*; Lewis Morris, *Food Of Song*; George Meredith, *Milton*; Bulwer Lytton, *Milton*; James Thomson, B. V., *Shelley*; Swinburne, *Centenary of Landor, Victor Hugo, Victor Hugo in 1877, Ben Jonson, Thomas Decker*; Whittier, *To J. P.*, and *The Tent on the Beach*; J. R. Lowell, *To the Memory of Hood*; O. W. Holmes, *At a Meeting of the Burns Club*; Emerson, *Solution*; R. Realf, *Of Liberty and Charity*; W. H. Burleigh, *Shelley*; T. L. Harris, *Lyrics of the Golden Age*; Eugene Field, *Poet and King*; C. W. Hubner, *The Poet*; J. H. West, *O Story Teller Poet*; Gerald Massey, *To Hood Who Sang the Song of the Shirt*; Bayard Taylor, *A Friend's Greeting to Whittier*; Sidney Lanier, *Wagner, Clover*; C. A. Pierce, *The Poet's Ideal*; E. Markham, *The Bard, A Comrade Calling Back, An April Greeting*; G. L. Raymond, *A Life in Song*; Richard Gilder, *The City, The Dead Poet*; E. L. Cox, *The Master, Overture*; R. C. Robbins, *Wordsworth*; Carl McDonald, *A Poet's Epitaph*.

Never joy illumed my brow  
 Unlinked with hope that thou wouldst free  
 This world from its dark slavery.<sup>1</sup>

For, unlike the philosopher, the poet has never departed from the world of sense, and it is hallowed to him as the incarnation of beauty. Therefore he is eager to make other men ever more and more transparent embodiments of their true selves, in order that, gazing upon them, the poet may have ever deeper inspiration. This is the central allegory in *Enydmon*, that the poet must learn to help humanity before the mystery of poetship shall be unlocked to him. Browning comments to this effect upon Sordello's unwillingness to meet the world:

But all is changed the moment you descry  
 Mankind as half yourself.

Matthew Arnold is the sternest of modern poets, perhaps, in pointing out the poet's responsibility to humanity:

The poet, to whose mighty heart  
 Heaven doth a quicker pulse impart,  
 Subdues that energy to scan  
 Not his own course, but that of man.  
 Though he move mountains, though his day  
 Be passed on the proud heights of sway,  
 Though he hath loosed a thousand chains,  
 Though he hath borne immortal pains,  
 Action and suffering though he know,  
 He hath not lived, if he lives so.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty.*

<sup>2</sup> *Resignation.*

It is obvious that in the poet's opinion there is only one means by which he can help humanity, and that is by helping men to express their essential natures; in other words, by setting them free. Liberty is peculiarly the watch-word of the poets. To the philosopher and the moralist, on the contrary, there is no merit in liberty alone. Men must be free before they can seek wisdom or goodness, no doubt, but something beside freedom is needed, they feel, to make men good or evil. But to the poet, beauty and liberty are almost synonymous. If beauty is the heart of the universe (and it must be, the poet argues, since it abides in sense as well as spirit), there is no place for the corrupt will. If men are free, they are expressing their real natures; they are beautiful.

Is this our poet's view? But hear Plato: "The tragic poets, being wise men, will forgive us, and any others who live after our manner, if we do not receive them into our state, because they are the eulogists of tyranny."<sup>1</sup> Few enemies of poets nowadays would go so far as to make a charge like this one, though Thomas Peacock, who locked horns with Shelley on the question of poetry, asserted that poets exist only by virtue of their flattery of earth's potentates.<sup>2</sup> Once, it must be confessed, one of the poets themselves brought their name into disrepute. In the heat of his indignation over at-

<sup>1</sup> *Republic*.

<sup>2</sup> See *The Four Ages of Poetry*.



tacks made upon his friend Southey, Landor was moved to exclaim,

If thou hast ever done amiss  
It was, O Southey, but in this,  
That, to redeem the lost estate  
Of the poor Muse, a man so great  
Abased his laurels where some Georges stood  
Knee-deep in sludge and ordure, some in blood.  
Was ever genius but thyself  
Friend or befriended of a Guelf?

But these are insignificant exceptions to the general characterization of the modern poet as liberty-lover.

Probably Plato's equanimity would not be upset, even though we presented to him an overwhelming array of evidence bearing upon the modern poet's allegiance to democracy. Certainly, he might say, the modern poet, like the ancient one, reflects the life about him. At the time of the French revolution, or of the world war, when there is a popular outcry against oppression, what is more likely than that the poet's voice should be the loudest in the throng? But as soon as there is a reaction toward monarchical government, poets will again scramble for the post of poet-laureate.

The modern poet can only repeat that this is false, and that a résumé of history proves it. Shelley traces the rise and decadence of poetry during periods of freedom and slavery. He points out, "The period in our history of the grossest degradation of the drama is the reign of Charles II, when all the forms in which poetry had been accustomed to be expressed

became hymns to the triumph of kingly power over liberty and virtue." Gray, in *The Progress of Poesy*, draws the same conclusion as Shelley:

Her track, where'er the goddess roves,  
 Glory pursue, and generous shame,  
 The unconquerable will, and freedom's holy flame.

Other poets, if they do not base their conclusions upon history, assert no less positively that every true poet is a lover of freedom.<sup>1</sup> It is to be expected that in the romantic period poets should be almost unanimous in this view, though even here

<sup>1</sup> See Gray, *The Bard*; Burns, *The Vision*; Scott, *The Bard's Incantation*; Moore, *The Minstrel Boy, O Blame Not the Bard, The Harp That Once Through Tara's Halls, Shall the Harp then be Silent, Dear Harp of My Country*; Wordsworth, *The Brownies' Cell, Here Pause*; Tennyson, *Epilogue, The Poet*; Swinburne, *Victor Hugo, The Centenary of Landon, To Catullus, The Statue of Victor Hugo, To Walt Whitman in America*; Browning, *Sordello*; Barry Cornwall, *Miriam*; Shelley, *To Wordsworth, Alastor, The Revolt of Islam, Hymn to Intellectual Beauty, Prometheus Unbound*; S. T. Coleridge, *Ode to France*; Keats, *Epistle to His Brother George*; Philip Freneau, *To a Writer Who Inscribes Himself a Foe to Tyrants*; J. D. Percival, *The Harper*; J. R. Lowell, *Ode, L'Envoi, Sonnet XVII, Incident in a Railway Car, To the Memory of Hood*; Whittier, *Proem, Eliot, Introduction to The Tent on the Beach*; Longfellow, *Michael Angelo*; Whitman, *Starting from Paumaak, By Blue Ontario's Shore, For You, O Democracy*; W. H. Burleigh, *The Poet*; W. C. Bryant, *The Poet*; Bayard Taylor, *A Friend's Greeting to Whittier*; Richard Realf, *Of Liberty and Charity*; Henry van Dyke, *Victor Hugo, To R. W. Gilder*; Simon Kerl, *Burns*; G. L. Raymond, *Dante, A Life in Song*; Charles Kent, *Lamar-tine in February*; Robert Underwood Johnson, *To the Spirit of Byron, Shakespeare*; Francis Carlin, *The Dublin Poets, MacSweeney the Rhymer, The Poetical Saints*; Daniel Henderson, *Joyce Kilmer, Alan Seeger, Walt Whitman*; Rhys Carpenter, *To Rupert Brooke*; William Ellery Leonard, *As I Listened by the Lilacs*; Eden Phillpotts, Swinburne, *The Grave of Landon*.

it is something of a surprise to hear Keats, whose themes are usually so far removed from political life, exclaiming,

Where's the poet? Show him, show him,  
Muses mine, that I may know him!  
'Tis the man who with a man  
Is an equal, be he king  
Or poorest of the beggar clan.<sup>1</sup>

Wordsworth's devotion to liberty was doubted by some of his brothers, but Wordsworth himself felt that, if he were not a democrat, he would be false to poetry, and he answers his detractors,

Here pause: the poet claims at least this praise,  
That virtuous Liberty hath been the scope  
Of his pure song.

In the Victorian period the same view holds. The Brownings were ardent champions of democracy. Mrs. Browning averred that the poet's thirst for ubiquitous beauty accounts for his love of freedom:

Poets (hear the word)  
Half-poets even, are still whole democrats.  
Oh, not that they're disloyal to the high,  
But loyal to the low, and cognizant  
Of the less scrutable majesties.<sup>2</sup>

Tennyson conceived of the poet as the author of democracy.<sup>3</sup> Swinburne prolonged the Victorian pæan

<sup>1</sup> *The Poet.*

<sup>2</sup> *Aurora Leigh.*

<sup>3</sup> See *The Poet.*

to the liberty-loving poet<sup>1</sup> till our new group of singers appeared, whose devotion to liberty is self-evident.

It is true that to the poet liberty is an inner thing, not always synonymous with suffrage. Coleridge, Southey, Wordsworth, all came to distrust the machinery of so-called freedom in society. Likewise Browning was not in favor of too radical social changes, and Mrs. Browning went so far as to declare, "I love liberty so much that I hate socialism." Mob rule is as distasteful to the deeply thoughtful poet as is tyranny, for the liberty which he seeks to bring into the world is simply the condition in which every man is expressing the beauty of his truest self.

If the poet has proved that his visions are true, and that he is eager to bring society into harmony with them, what further charge remains against him? That he is "an ineffectual angel, beating his bright wings in the void." He may see a vision of Utopia, and long that men shall become citizens there, but the man who actually perfects human society is he who patiently toils at the "dim, vulgar, vast, unobvious work"<sup>2</sup> of the world, here amending a law, here building a settlement house, and so on. Thus the reformer charges the poet. Mrs. Browning, in *Aurora Leigh*, makes much of the issue, and there the socialist, Romney Leigh, sneers

<sup>1</sup> See *Mater Triumphalis*, *Prelude*, *Epilogue*, *Litany of Nations*, and *Hertha*.

<sup>2</sup> See *Sordello*.



at the poet's inefficiency, telling Aurora that the world

Forgets

To rhyme the cry with which she still beats back  
Those savage hungry dogs that hunt her down  
To the empty grave of Christ . . .

. . . Who has time,  
An hour's time—think!—to sit upon a bank  
And hear the cymbal tinkle in white hands.<sup>1</sup>

The poet has, occasionally, plunged into the maelstrom of reform and proved to such objectors that he can work as efficiently as they. Thomas Hood, Whittier, and other poets have challenged the respect of the Romney Leighs of the world. Yet one hesitates to make specialization in reform the gauge of a poet's merit. Where, in that case, would Keats be beside Hood? In our day, where would Sara Teasdale be beside Edwin Markham? Is there not danger that the poet, once launched on a career as an agitator, will no longer have time to dream dreams? If he bases his claims of worth on his ability as a "carpet-duster,"<sup>2</sup> as Mrs. Browning calls the agitator, he is merely unsettling society,—for what end? He himself will soon have forgotten—will have become as salt that has lost its savor. Nothing is more disheartening than to see men straining every nerve to make other men righteous, who have themselves not the faintest appreciation

<sup>1</sup> *Aurora Leigh*. See also the letter to Robert Browning, February 17, 1845.

<sup>2</sup> See *Aurora Leigh*.

of the beauty of holiness. Let reformers beware how they assert the poet's uselessness, our singers say, for it is an indication that they themselves are blind to the light toward which they profess to be leading men. The work of the reformer inevitably degenerates into the mere strenuosity of the campaign,

Unless the artist keep up open roads  
Betwixt the seen and unseen, bursting through  
The best of our conventions with his best,  
The speakable, imaginable best  
God bids him speak, to prove what lies beyond  
Both speech and imagination.<sup>1</sup>

Thus speaks Mrs. Browning.

The reforms that make a stir in the world, being merely external, mean little or nothing apart from the impulse that started them, and the poet alone is powerful to stir the impulse of reform in humanity. "To be persuaded rests usually with ourselves," said Longinus, "but genius brings force sovereign and irresistible to bear upon every hearer."<sup>2</sup> The poet, in ideal mood, is as innocent of specific designs upon current morality as was Pippa, when she wandered about the streets of Asolo, but the power of his songs is ever as insuperable as was that of hers. It is for this reason that Emerson advises the poet to leave hospital building and statute revision for men of duller sight than he:

<sup>1</sup> *Aurora Leigh*.

<sup>2</sup> *On the Sublime*.

Oft shall war end and peace return  
And cities rise where cities burn  
Ere one man my hill shall climb  
Who can turn the golden rhyme.  
Let them manage how they may,  
Heed thou only Saadi's lay.<sup>1</sup>

Here the philosopher may demur. If the poet were truly an idealist,—if he found for the world conceptions as pure as those of mathematics, which can be applied equally well to any situation, then, indeed, he might regard himself as the author of progress. But it is the poet's failing that he gives men no vision of abstract beauty. He represents his visions in the contemporary dress of his times. Thus he idealizes the past and the present, showing beauty shining through the dullness and error of human history. Is he not, then, the enemy of progress, since he will lead his readers to imagine that things are ideal as they are?

Rather, men will be filled with reverence for the idealized portrait of themselves that the poet has drawn, and the intervention of the reformer will be unnecessary, since they will voluntarily tear off the shackles that disfigure them. The poet, said Shelley, "redeems from decay the visitations of the divinity in man." Emerson said of Wordsworth, "He more than any other man has done justice to the divine in us." Mrs. Browning said (of Carlyle) "He fills the office of a poet—by analyzing humanity back into its elements, to the destruction

<sup>1</sup> Saadi.

of the conventions of the hour." <sup>1</sup> This is what Matthew Arnold meant by calling poetry "a criticism of life." Poetry is captivating only in proportion as the ideal shines through the sensual; consequently men who are charmed by the beauty incarnate in poetry, are moved to discard all conventions through which beauty does not shine.

Therefore, the poet repeats, he is the true author of reform. Tennyson says of freedom,

No sword  
Of wrath her right arm whirled,  
But one poor poet's scroll, and with his word  
She shook the world.<sup>2</sup>

This brings us back to our war poets who have so recently died. Did they indeed disparage the Muse whom they deserted? Did they not rather die to fulfill a poet's prophesy of freedom? A poet who did not carry in his heart the courage of his song—what could be more discreditable to poetry than that? The soldier-poets were like a general who rushes into the thick of the fight and dies beside a private. We reverence such a man, but we realize that it was not his death, but his plan for the engagement, that saved the day.

If such is the poet's conception of his service to mankind, what is his reward? The government of society, he returns. Emerson says,

<sup>1</sup> Letter to Robert Browning, February 27, 1845.

<sup>2</sup> *The Poet.*



The gods talk in the breath of the woods,  
 They talk in the shaken pine,  
 And fill the long reach of the old seashore  
 With dialogue divine.  
 And the poet who overhears  
 Some random word they say  
 Is the fated man of men  
 Whom the nations must obey.<sup>1</sup>

What is the poet's reward? Immortality. He is confident that if his vision is true he shall join

The choir invisible

Of those immortal dead who live again  
 In minds made better by their presence: live  
 In pulses stirred to generosity,  
 In thoughts sublime that pierce the night like stars,  
 And with their mild persistence urge man's search  
 To vaster issues.<sup>2</sup>

Does this mean simply the immortality of fame? It is a higher thing than that. The beauty which the poet creates is itself creative, and having the principle of life in it, can never perish. Whitman cries,

Poets to come! orators, singers, musicians to come!  
 Not today is to justify me and answer what I am for,  
 But you, a new brood, native, athletic, continental,  
     greater than before known,  
 Arouse! for you must justify me!<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Fragment on *The Poet*.

<sup>2</sup> George Eliot, *The Choir Invisible*.

<sup>3</sup> *Poets to Come*.

Browning made the only apparent trace of Sordello left in the world, the snatch of song which the peasants sing on the hillside. Yet, though his name be lost, the poet's immortality is sure. For like Socrates in the *Symposium*, his desire is not merely for a fleeting vision of beauty, but for birth and generation in beauty. And the beauty which he is enabled to bring into the world will never cease to propagate itself. So, though he be as fragile as a windflower, he may assure himself,

I shall not die; I shall not utterly die,  
For beauty born of beauty—that remains.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Madison Cawein, *To a Windflower*.

## VIII

### *A SOBER AFTERTHOUGHT*

NOT even a paper shortage has been potent to give the lie to the author of *Ecclesiastes*, but it has fanned into flame the long smouldering resentment of those who are wearily conscious that of making many books there is no end. No longer is any but the most confirmed writer suffered to spin out volume after volume in complacent ignorance of his readers' state of mind, for these victims of eye-strain and nerves turn upon the newest book, the metaphorical last straw on the camel's load, with the exasperated cry, Why? Why? and again Why?

Fortunately for themselves, most of the poets who have taken the poet's character as their theme, indulged their weakness for words before that long-suffering bookworm, the reader, had turned, but one who at the present day drags from cobwebby corners the accusive mass of material on the subject, must seek to justify, not merely the loquacity of its authors, but one's own temerity as well, in forcing it a second time upon the jaded attention of the public.

If one had been content merely to make an anthology of poems dealing with the poet, one's deed would perhaps have been easier to excuse, for the

public has been so often assured that anthologies are an economical form of publication, and a time-saving form of predigested food, that it usually does not stop to consider whether the material was worth collecting in the first place. Gleaner after gleaner has worked in the field of English literature, sorting and sifting, until almost the last grain, husk, straw and thistle have been gathered and stored with their kind. But instead of making an anthology, we have gone on the assumption that something more than accidental identity of subject-matter holds together the apparently desultory remarks of poets on the subject of the poet's eyebrows, his taste in liquors, his addiction to midnight rambles, and what-not. We have followed a labyrinthine path through the subject with faith that, if we were but patient in observing the clues, we should finally emerge at a point of vantage on the other side of the woods.

The primary grounds of this faith may have appeared to the skeptic ridiculously inadequate. Our faith was based upon the fact that, more than two thousand years ago, a serious accusation had been made against poets, against which they had been challenged to defend themselves. This led us to conclude that there must be unity of intention in poetry dealing with the poet, for we believed that when English poets talked of themselves and their craft, they were attempting to remove the stigma placed upon the name of poet by Plato's charge.

Now it is easy for a doubter to object that many of the poems on the subject show the poet, not ar-



raying evidence for a trial, but leaning over the brink of introspection in the attitude of Narcissus. One need seek no farther than self-love, it may be suggested, to find the motive for the poet's absorption in his reflection. Yet it is incontrovertible that the self-infatuation of our Narcissus has its origin in the conviction that no one else understands him, and that this conviction is founded upon a very real attitude of hostility on the part of his companions. The lack of sympathy between the English poet and the public is so notorious that Edmund Gosse is able to state as a truism :

While in France poetry has been accustomed to reflect the general tongue of the people, the great poets of England have almost always had to struggle against a complete dissonance between their own aims and interests and those of the nation. The result has been that England, the most inartistic of the modern races, has produced the largest number of exquisite literary artists.<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, even though everyone may agree that a lurking sense of hostile criticism is back of the poet's self-absorption, another ground for skepticism may lie in our assumption that Plato is the central figure in the opposition. It is usually with purpose to excite the envy of contemporary enemies that poets call attention to their graces, the student may discover. Frequently the quarrels leading them to flaunt their personalities in their verses

<sup>1</sup> *French Profiles*, p. 344.

have arisen over the most personal and ephemeral of issues. Indeed, we may have appeared to falsify in classifying their enemies under general heads, when for Christopher North, Judson, Belfair, Friend Naddo, Richard Bame, we substituted faces of cipher foolishness, abstractions which we named the puritan, the philosopher, the philistine. Possibly by so doing we have given the impression that poets are beating the air against an abstraction when they are in reality delivering thumping blows upon the body of a personal enemy. And if these generalizations appear indefensible, still more misleading, it may be urged, is an attempt to represent that the poet, when he takes issue with this and that opponent, is answering a challenge hidden away from the unstudious in the tenth book of Plato's *Republic*. It is doubtful even whether a number of our poets are aware of the existence of Plato's challenge, and much more doubtful whether they have it in mind as they write.

Second thought must make it clear, however, that to prove ignorance of Plato's accusation on the part of one poet and another does not at all impair the possibility that it is his accusation which they are answering. So multiple are the threads of influence leading from the *Republic* through succeeding literatures and civilizations that it is unsafe to assert, offhand, that any modern expression of hostility to poetry may not be traced, by a patient untangler of evidence, to a source in the *Republic*. But even this is aside from the point. One might

concede that the wide-spread modern antagonism to poetry would have been the same if Plato had never lived, and still maintain that in the *Republic* is expressed for all time whatever in anti-æsthetic criticism is worthy of a serious answer. Whether poets themselves are aware of it or not, we have a right to assert that in concerning themselves with the character of the ideal poet, they are responding to Plato's challenge.

This may not be enough to justify our faith that these defensive expositions lead us anywhere. Let us agree that certain poets of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have answered Plato's challenge. But has the Poet likewise answered it? If from their independent efforts to paint the ideal poet there has emerged a portrait as sculpturally clear in outline as is Plato's portrait of the ideal philosopher, we shall perhaps be justified in saying, Yes, the Poet, through a hundred mouths, has spoken.

Frankly, the composite picture which we have been considering has not sculptural clarity. To the casual observer it bears less resemblance to an alto-relief than to a mosaic; no sooner do distinct patterns spring out of myriad details than they shift under the onlooker's eyes to a totally different form. All that we can claim for the picture is excellence as a piece of impressionism, which one must scan with half-closed eyes at a calculated distance, if one would appreciate its central conception.

Apparently readers of English poetry have not taken the trouble to scan it with such care. They

may excuse their indifference by declaring that an attempt to discover a common æsthetic principle in a collection of views as catholic as those with which we have dealt is as absurd as an attempt to discover philosophical truth by taking a census of general opinion. Still, obvious as are the limitations of a popular vote in determining an issue, it has a certain place in the discovery of truth. One would not entirely despise the benefit derived from a general survey of philosophers' convictions, for instance. Into the conclusions of each philosopher, even of the greatest, there are bound to enter certain personal whimsicalities of thought, which it is profitable to eliminate, by finding the common elements in the thought of several men. If the quest of a universal least common denominator forces one to give up everything that is of significance in the views of philosophers, there is profit, at least, in learning that the title of philosopher does not carry with it a guarantee of truth-telling. On the other hand if we find universal recognition of some fundamental truth, a common *cogito ergo sum*, or the like, acknowledged by all philosophers, we have made a discovery as satisfactory in its way as is acceptance of the complex system of philosophy offered by Plato or Descartes. There seems to be no real reason why it should not be quite as worth while to take a similar census of the views of poets.

After hearkening to the general suffrage of poets on the question of the poet's character, we must bring a serious charge against them if a deafening



clamor of contradiction reverberates in our ears. In such a case their claim that they are seers, or masters of harmony, can be worth little. The unbiased listener is likely to assure us that clamorous contradiction is precisely what the aggregate of poets' speaking amounts to, but we shall be slow to acknowledge as much. Have we been merely the dupe of pretty phrasing when we felt ourselves insured against discord by the testimony of Keats? Hear him:

How many bards gild the lapses of time!

. . . Often, when I sit me down to rhyme,  
These will in throngs before my mind intrude,  
But no confusion, no disturbance rude  
Do they occasion; 'tis a pleasing chime.

However incompatible the characteristics of the poets celebrated by Wordsworth and by Swinburne, by Christina Rossetti and by Walt Whitman may have seemed in immediate juxtaposition, we have trusted that we need only retire to a position where "distance of recognizance bereaves" their individual voices, in order to detect in their mingled notes "pleasing music, and not wild uproar."

The critic who condemns as wholly discordant the variant notes of our multitudinous verse-writers may point out that we should have had more right to expect concord if we had shown some discernment in sifting true poets from false. Those who have least claim to the title of poet have fre-

quently been most garrulous in voicing their convictions. Moreover, these pseudo-poets outnumber genuine poets one hundred to one, yet no one in his right mind would contend that their expressions of opinion represent more than a straw vote, if they conflict with the judgment of a single true poet.

Still, our propensity for listening to the rank breath of the multitude is not wholly indefensible. In the first place pseudo-poets have not created so much discord as one might suppose. A lurking sense of their own worthlessness has made them timid of utterance except as they echo and prolong a note that has been struck repeatedly by singers of reputation. This echoing, it may be added, has sometimes been effective in bringing the traditions of his craft to the attention of a young singer as yet unaware of them. Thus Bowles and Chivers, neither of whom has very strong claim to the title of bard, yet were in a measure responsible for the minor note in Coleridge's and Poe's description of the typical poet.

Even when the voices of spurious bards have failed to chime with the others, the resulting discord has not been of serious moment. A counterfeit coin may be as good a touchstone for the detection of pure silver, as is pure silver for the detection of counterfeit. Not only are a reader's views frequently clarified by setting a poetaster beside a poet as a foil, but poets themselves have clarified their views because they have been incited by declarations in false verse to express their convictions more

unreservedly than they should otherwise have done. Pseudo-poets have sometimes been of genuine benefit by their exaggeration of some false note which they have adopted from poetry of the past. No sooner do they exaggerate such a note, than a concerted shout of protest from true poets drowns the erroneous statement, and corrects the misleading impression which careless statements in earlier verse might have left with us. Thus the morbid singer exhibited in minor American verse of the last century, and the vicious singer lauded in one strain of English verse, performed a genuine service by calling forth repudiation, by major poets, of traits which might easily lead a singer in the direction of morbidity and vice.

The confusion of sound which our critic complains of is not to be remedied merely by silencing the chorus of echoic voices. If we dropped from consideration all but poets of unquestionable merit, we should not be more successful in detecting a single clear note, binding all their voices together. When the ideal poet of Shelley is set against that of Byron, or that of Matthew Arnold against that of Browning, there is no more unison than when great and small in the poetic world are allowed to speak indiscriminately.

Does this prove that only the supreme poet speaks truly, and that we must hush all voices but his if we would learn what is the essential element in the poetic character? Then we are indeed in a hard case. There is no unanimity of opinion among

us regarding the supreme English poet of the last century, and if we dared follow personal taste in declaring one of higher altitude than all the others, only a small percentage of readers would be satisfied when we set up the *Prelude* or *Adonais* or *Childe Harold* or *Sordello* beside the *Republic* as containing the one portrait of the ideal singer worthy to stand beside the portrait of the ideal philosopher. And this is not the worst of the difficulty. Even if we turn from Shelley to Byron, from Wordsworth to Browning, in quest of the one satisfactory conception of the poet, we shall not hear in anyone of their poems the single clear ringing note for which we are listening. When anyone of these men is considering the poetic character, his thought behaves like a pendulum, swinging back and forth between two poles.

Thus we ourselves have admitted the futility of our quest of truth, the critic may conclude. But no, before we admit as much, let us see exactly what constitutes the lack of unity which troubles us. After its persistence in verse of the same country, the same period, the same tradition, the same poet, even, has led us to the brink of despair, its further persistence rouses in us fresh hope, or at least intense curiosity, for what impresses us as the swinging of a pendulum keeps up its rhythmical beat, not merely in the mind of each poet, but in each phase of his thought. We find the same measured antithesis of thought, whether he is considering the singer's en-



vironment or his health, his inspiration or his mission.

In treatment even of the most superficial matters related to the poet's character, this vibration forces itself upon our attention. Poets are so far from subscribing to Taine's belief in the supreme importance of environment as mold of genius that the question of the singer's proper habitat is of comparative indifference to them, yet the dualism that we have noted runs as true to form here as in more fundamental issues. When one takes the suffrage of poets in general on the question of environment, two voices are equally strong. Genius is fostered by solitude, we hear; but again, genius is fostered by human companionship. At first we may assume that this divergence of view characterizes separate periods. Writers in the romantic period, we say, praised the poet whose thought was turned inward by solitude; while writers in the Victorian period praised the poet whose thought was turned upon the spectacle of human passions. But on finding that this classification is true only in the most general way, we go farther. Within the Victorian period Browning, we say, is the advocate of the social poet, as Arnold is the advocate of the solitary one. But still our classification is inadequate. Is Browning the expositor of the gregarious poet? It is true that he feels it necessary for the singer to "look upon men and their cares and hopes and fears and joys."<sup>1</sup> But he makes Sordello flee

<sup>1</sup> *Pauline.*

like a hunted creature back to Goito and solitude in quest of renewed inspiration. Is Arnold the expositor of the solitary poet? True, he urges him to fly from "the strange disease of modern life."<sup>1</sup> Yet he preaches that the duty of the poet is

to scan  
Not his own course, but that of man.<sup>2</sup>

Within the romantic period the same phenomenon is evident. Does Wordsworth paint the ideal poet dwelling apart from human distractions? Yet he declares that his deepest insight is gained by listening to "the still sad music of humanity." In Keats, Shelley, Byron, the same antithesis of thought is not less evident.

We cannot justly conclude that a compromise between contradictions, an avoidance of extremes, is what anyone of these poets stands for. It is complete absorption in the drama of human life that makes one a poet, they aver; but again, it is complete isolation that allows the inmost poetry of one's nature to rise to consciousness. At the same time they make it clear that the supreme poet needs the gifts of both environments. To quote Walt Whitman,

When the full-grown poet came,  
Out spake pleased Nature (the round impassive globe  
with all its shows of day and night) saying, He  
is mine;

<sup>1</sup> *The Scholar Gypsy.*

<sup>2</sup> *Resignation.*

But out spake too the Soul of men, proud, jealous  
 and unreconciled, Nay, he is mine alone ;  
 —Then the full-grown poet stood between the two and  
 took each by the hand ;  
 And today and ever so stands, as blender, uniter, tightly  
 holding hands,  
 Which he will never release till he reconciles the two,  
 And wholly and joyously blends them.

The paradox in poets' views was equally perplexing, no matter what phase of the poetic character was considered. A mere resumé of the topics discussed in these essays is enough to make the two horns of the dilemma obtrude themselves. Did we consider the financial status of the poet? We heard that he should experience all the luxurious sensations that wealth can bring; on the other hand we heard that his poverty should shield him from distractions that might call him away from accumulation of spiritual treasure. Did we consider the poet's age? We heard that the freshness of sensation possessed only by youth carries the secret of poetry; on the other hand we heard that the secret lies in depth of spiritual insight possible only to old age. So in the allied question of the poet's body. He should have

The dress

Of flesh that amply lets in loveliness  
 At eye and ear,

that no beauty in the physical world may escape him. Yet he should be absorbed in the other world to such a degree that blindness, even, is a blessing to him, enabling him to "see, no longer blinded by

his eyes." The question of the poet's health arose. He should have the exuberance and aplomb of the young animal; no, he should have a body frail enough to enable him, like the mediæval mystic, to escape from its importunate demands upon the spirit.

In the more fundamental questions that poets considered, relating to the poet's temperament, his loves, his inspiration, his morality, his religion, his mission, the same cleavage invariably appeared. What constitutes the poetic temperament? It is a fickle interchange of joy and grief, for the poet is lifted on the wave of each new sensation; it is an imperturbable serenity, for the poet dwells apart with the eternal verities. What is the distinguishing characteristic of his love? The object of his worship must be embodied, passionate, yet his desire is for purely spiritual union with her. What is the nature of his inspiration? It fills him with trancelike impassivity to sensation; it comes upon him with such overwhelming sensation that he must touch the walls to see whether they or his visions are the reality.<sup>1</sup> How is his moral life different from that of other men? He is more fiercely tempted, because he is more sensitive to human passions; he is shut away from all temptations because his interest is solely in the principle of beauty. What is the nature of his religious instinct? He is mad with thirst for God; he will have no God but his

<sup>1</sup> See Christopher Wordsworth, *Memoirs of Wordsworth*, Vol. II, p. 480.



own humanity. What is his mission? He must awaken men to the wonder of the physical world and fit them to abide therein; he must redeem them from physical bondage, and open their eyes to the spiritual world.

The impatient listener to this lengthy catalogue of the poet's views may assert that it has no significance. It merely shows that there are many kinds of poets, who attempt to imitate many aspects of human life. But surely our catalogue does not show just this. There is no multiform picture of the poet here. The pendulum of his desire vibrates undeviatingly between two points only. Sense and spirit, spirit and sense, the pulse of his nature seems to reiterate incessantly. There is no poet so absorbed in sensation that physical objects do not occasionally fade into unreality when he compares them with the spirit of life. Even Walt Whitman, most sensuous of all our poets, exclaims,

Sometimes how strange and clear to the soul  
That all these solid things are indeed but apparitions, concepts, non-realities.<sup>1</sup>

On the other hand there is no poet whose taste is so purely spiritual that he is indifferent to sensation. The idealism of Wordsworth, even, did not preclude his finding in sensation

An appetite, a feeling and a love  
That had no need of a remoter charm  
By thought supplied.

<sup>1</sup> *Apparitions.*

Is this systole and diastole of the affection from sense to spirit, from spirit to sense, peculiarly characteristic of English poets? There may be some reason for assuming that it is. Historians have repeatedly pointed out that there are two strains in the English blood, the one northern and ascetic, the other southern and epicurean. In the modern English poet the austere prophetic character of the Norse scald is wedded to the impressionability of the troubadour. No wonder there is a battle in his breast when he tries to single out one element or the other as his most distinctive quality of soul. Yet, were it not unsafe to generalize when our data apply to only one country, we should venture the assertion that the dualism of the poet's desires is not an insular characteristic, but is typical of his race in every country.

Because the poet is drawn equally to this world and to the other world, shall we characterize him as a hybrid creature, and assert that an irreconcilable discord is in his soul? We shall prove ourselves singularly deaf to concord if we do so. Poets have been telling us over and over again that the distinctive element in the poetic nature is harmony. What is harmony? It is the reconciliation of opposites, says Eurymachus in the *Symposium*. It is union of the finite and the infinite, says Socrates in the *Philebus*. Do the poet's desires point in opposite directions? But so, it seems, do the poplars that stand tiptoe, breathless, at the edge of the dreaming pool. The whole secret of the æsthetic

repose lies in the duality of the poet's desire. His imagination enables him to see all life as two in one, or one in two; he leaves us uncertain which. His imagination reflects the spiritual in the sensual and the sensual in the spiritual till we cannot tell which is the more tangible or the more meaningful. We sought unity in the poetic character, but we can reduce a nature to complete and barren unity only by draining it of imagination, and it is imagination which enables the poet to find æsthetic unity in the two worlds of sense and spirit, where the rest of us can see only conflict. There is a little poem, by Walter Conrad Arensberg, which is to me a symbol of this power of reflection which distinguishes the poetic imagination. It is called *Voyage à L'Infinie*:

The swan existing  
Is like a song with an accompaniment  
Imaginary.

Across the grassy lake,  
Across the lake to the shadow of the willows  
It is accompanied by an image,  
—as by Debussy's  
"Réflets dans l'eau."

The swan that is  
Reflects  
Upon the solitary water—breast to breast  
With the duplicity:  
"The other one!"

And breast to breast it is confused.  
O visionary wedding! O stateliness  
of the procession!  
It is accompanied by the image of itself  
Alone.

At night  
The lake is a wide silence,  
Without imagination.

But why should poets assume, someone may object, that this mystic answering of sense to spirit and of spirit to sense is to be discovered by the imagination of none but poets? All men are made up of flesh and spirit; do not the desires of all men, accordingly, point to the spiritual and to the physical, exactly as do the poet's? In a sense, yes; but on the other hand all men but the poet have an aim that is clearly either physical or spiritual; therefore they do not stand poised between the two worlds with the perfect balance of interests which marks the poet. The philosopher and the man of religion recognize their goal as a spiritual and ascetic one. If they concern themselves more than is needful with the temporal and sensual, they feel that they are false to their ideal. The scientist and the man of affairs, on the other hand, are concerned with the physical; therefore most of the time they dismiss consideration of the spiritual as being outside of their province. Of course many persons would disagree with this last statement. The genius of



an Edison, they assert, is precisely like the genius of a poet. But if this were true, we should be moved by the mechanism of a phonograph just as we are moved by a poem, and we are not. We may be amazed by the invention, and still find our thoughts tied to the physical world. It is not the instrument, but the voice of an artist added to it that makes us conscious of the two worlds of sense and spirit, reflecting one another.

Supposing that all this is true, what is gained by discovering, from a consensus of poets' views, that the distinctive characteristic of the poet is harmony of sense and spirit? Is not this so obvious as to be a truism? It is perhaps so obvious that like all the truest things in the world it is likely to be ignored unless insisted upon occasionally. Certainly it has been ignored too frequently in the history of English criticism. Whenever men of simpler aims than the poet have written criticism, they have misread the issue in various ways, and have usually ended by condemning the poet in so far as he diverged from their own goal.

It is obvious that the moral obsession which has twisted so much of English criticism is the result of failure to grasp the real nature of the poet's duality. Criticism arose, with Gosson's *School of Abuse*, as an attack upon the ethics of the poet by the puritan, who had cut himself off from the joys of sense. Because champions of poetry were concerned with answering this attack, the bulk of

Elizabethan criticism, that of Lodge,<sup>1</sup> Harrington,<sup>2</sup> Meres,<sup>3</sup> Campion,<sup>4</sup> Daniel,<sup>5</sup> and even in lesser degree of Sidney, obscures the æsthetic problem by turning it into an ethical one.

In the criticism of Sidney, himself a poet, one does find implied a recognition of the twofold significance of the poet's powers. He asserts his spiritual pre-eminence strongly, declaring that the poet, unlike the scientist, is not bound to the physical world.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand he is clearly aware of the need for a sensuous element in poetry, since by it, Sidney declares, the poet may lead men by "delight" to follow the forms of virtue.

The next critic of note, Dryden, in his revulsion from the ascetic character which the puritans would develop in the poet, swung too far to the other extreme, and threw the poetic character out of balance by belittling its spiritual insight. He did justice to the physical element in poetry, defining poetic drama, the type of his immediate concern, as "a just and lively image of human nature, in its actions, passions, and traverses of fortune,"<sup>7</sup> but he appears to have felt the ideal aspect of the poet's nature as merely a negation of the sensual, so that he was driven to the absurdity of recommending a

<sup>1</sup> *Defense of Poetry, Musick and Stage Plays.*

<sup>2</sup> *Apology for Poetry.*

<sup>3</sup> *Palladis Tamia.*

<sup>4</sup> *Observations in the Art of English Poetry.*

<sup>5</sup> *Defense of Rhyme.*

<sup>6</sup> "He is not bound to any such subjection, as scientists, to nature." *Defense of Poetry.*

<sup>7</sup> *English Garner*, III, 513.

purely mechanical device, rhyme, as a means of elevating poetry above the sordid plane of "a bare imitation." In the eighteenth century, Edmund Burke likewise laid too much stress upon the physical aspect of the poet's nature, in accounting for the sublime in poetry as originating in the sense of pain, and the beautiful as originating in pleasure. Yet he comes closer than most critics to laying his finger on the particular point which distinguishes poets from philosophers, namely, their dependence upon sensation.

With the single exception of Burke, however, the critics of the eighteenth century labored under a misapprehension no less blind than the moral obsession which twisted Elizabethan criticism. In the eighteenth century critics were prone to confuse the spiritual element in the poet's nature with intellectualism, and the sensuous element with emotionalism. Such criticism tended to drive the poet either into an arid display of wit, on the one hand, or into sentimental excess, on the other, and the native English distrust of emotion led eighteenth century critics to praise the poet when the intellect had the upper hand. But surely poets have made it clear enough that the intellect is not the distinctive characteristic of the poet. To be intelligent is merely to be human. Intelligence is only a tool, poets have repeatedly insisted, in their quarrel with philosophers. In proportion as one is intelligent within one's own field, one excels, poets would admit. If one is intelligent with respect to fisticuffs one is likely to become

a good prize-fighter, but no matter how far refinement of intelligence goes in this direction, it will not make a pugilist into a poet. Intelligence must belong likewise, in signal degree, to the great poet, but it is neither one of the two essential elements in his nature. Augustan critics starved the spiritual element in poetry, even while they imagined that they were feeding it, for in sharpening his wit the poet came no nearer expressing the "poor soul, the center of his sinful earth" than when he reveled in emotion. We no longer believe that in the most truly poetic nature the intelligence of a Pope is joined with the emotionalism of a Rousseau. We believe that the spirituality of a Crashaw is blent with the sensuousness of a Swinburne.

Nineteenth century criticism, since it is almost entirely the work of poets, should not be thus at odds with the conception of the poet expressed in poetry. But although nineteenth century prose criticism moves in the right direction, it is not entirely adequate. The poet is not at his best when he is working in a prose medium. He works too consciously in prose, hence his intuitive flashes are not likely to find expression. After he has tried to express his buried life there, he himself is likely to warn us that what he has said "is well, is eloquent, but 'tis not true." Even Shelley, the most successful of poet-critics, gives us a more vivid comprehension of the poetical balance of sense and spirit through his poet-heroes than through *The Defense of Poetry*, for he is almost exclusively con-



cerned, in that essay, with the spiritual aspect of poetry. He expresses, in fact, the converse of Dryden's view in that he regards the sensuous as negation or dross merely. He asserts:

Few poets of the highest class have chosen to exhibit the beauty of their conception in naked truth and splendor, and it is doubtful whether the alloy of costume, habit, etc., be not necessary to temper this planetary music to mortal ears.

The harmony in Shelley's nature which made it possible for his contemporaries to believe him a gross sensualist, and succeeding generations to believe him an angel, is better expressed by Browning, who says:

His noblest characteristic I call his simultaneous perception of Power and Love in the absolute, and of beauty and good in the concrete, while he throws, from his poet-station between them both, swifter, subtler and more numerous films for the connection of each with each than have been thrown by any modern artificer of whom I have knowledge.<sup>1</sup>

Yet Browning, likewise, gives a more illuminating picture of the poetic nature in his poetry than in his prose.

The peculiar merit of poetry about the poet is that it makes a valuable supplement to prose criticism. We have been tempted to deny that such poetry is the highest type of art. It has seemed that

<sup>1</sup> Preface to the letters of Shelley (afterward found spurious).

poets, when they are introspective and analytical of their gift, are not in the highest poetic mood. But when we are on the quest of criticism, instead of poetry, we are frankly grateful for such verse. It is analytical enough to be intelligible to us, and still intuitive enough to convince us of its truthfulness. Wordsworth's *Prelude* has been condemned in certain quarters as "a talking about poetry, not poetry itself," but in part, at least, the *Prelude* is truly poetry. For this reason it gives us more valuable ideas about the nature of poetry than does the *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads*. If it is worth while to analyze the poetic character at all, then poetry on the poet is invaluable to us.

Perhaps it is too much for us to decide whether the picture of the poet at which we have been gazing is worthy to be placed above Plato's picture of the philosopher. The poet does not contradict Plato's charge against him. His self-portrait bears out the accusation that he is unable to see "the divine beauty—pure and clear and unalloyed, not clogged with the pollutions of mortality, and all the colors and varieties of human life."<sup>1</sup> Plato would agree with the analysis of the poetic character that Keats once struggled with, when he exclaimed,

What quality went to form a man of achievement, especially in literature, and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously—I mean *Negative Capability*, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching

<sup>1</sup> *Symposium*, 212.

after fact and reason. Coleridge, for instance, would let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Pentralium of mystery, from being incapable of remaining content with half-knowledge—With a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration.

Plato would agree with this,—all but the last sentence. Only, in place of the phrase “negative capability,” he would substitute “incapability,” and reflect that the poet fails to see absolute beauty because he is not content to leave the sensual behind and press on to absolute reality.

It may be that Plato is right, yet one cannot help wishing that sometime a poet may arise of greater power of persuasion than any with whom we have dealt, who will prove to Plato what he appears ever longing to be convinced of, that absolute ideality is not a negation of the sensual, and that poetry, in revealing the union of sense and spirit, is the strongest proof of idealism that we possess. A poet may yet arise who will prove that he is right in refusing to acknowledge that this world is merely a surface upon which is reflected the ideals which constitute reality and which abide in a different realm. The assumption in that conception is that, if men have spiritual vision, they may apprehend ideals directly, altogether apart from sense. On the contrary, the impression given by the poet is that ideality constitutes the very essence of the so-called physical world, and that this essence is continually striving to express itself through refinement and remolding of the

outer crust of things. So, when the world of sense comes to express perfectly the ideal, it will not be a mere representation of reality. It will be reality. If he can prove this, we must acknowledge that, not the rationalistic philosopher, but the poet, grasps reality *in toto*.

However inconclusive his proof, the claims of the poet must fascinate one with their implications. The two aspects of human life, the physical and the ideal, focus in the poet, and the result is the harmony which is art. The fact is of profound philosophical significance, surely, for union of the apparent contradictions of the sensual and the spiritual can only mean that idealism is of the essence of the universe. What is the poetic metaphor but the revelation of an identical meaning in the physical and spiritual world? The sympathetic reader of poetry cannot but see the reflection of the spiritual in the sensual, and the sensual in the spiritual, even as does the poet, and one, as the other, must be by temperament an idealist.



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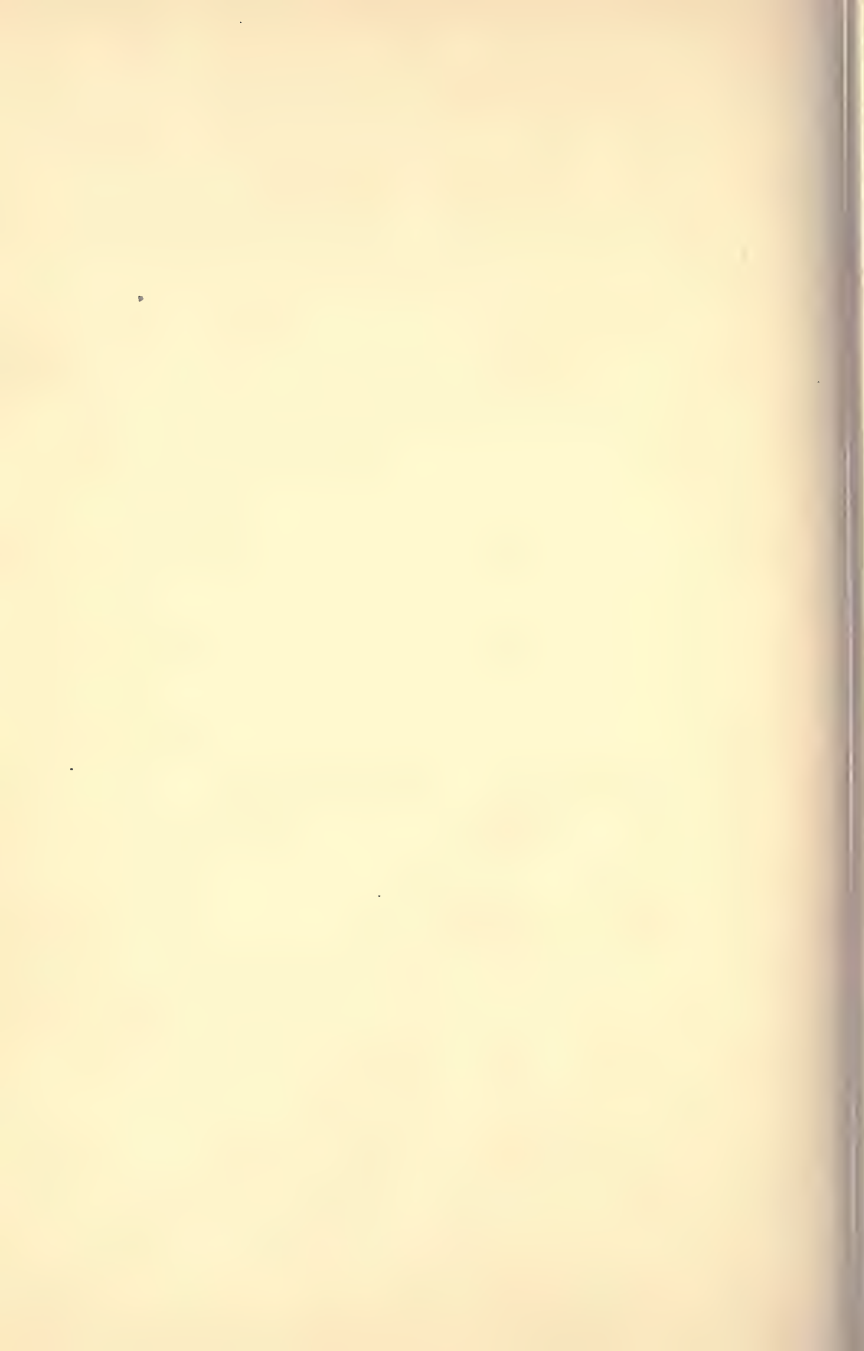
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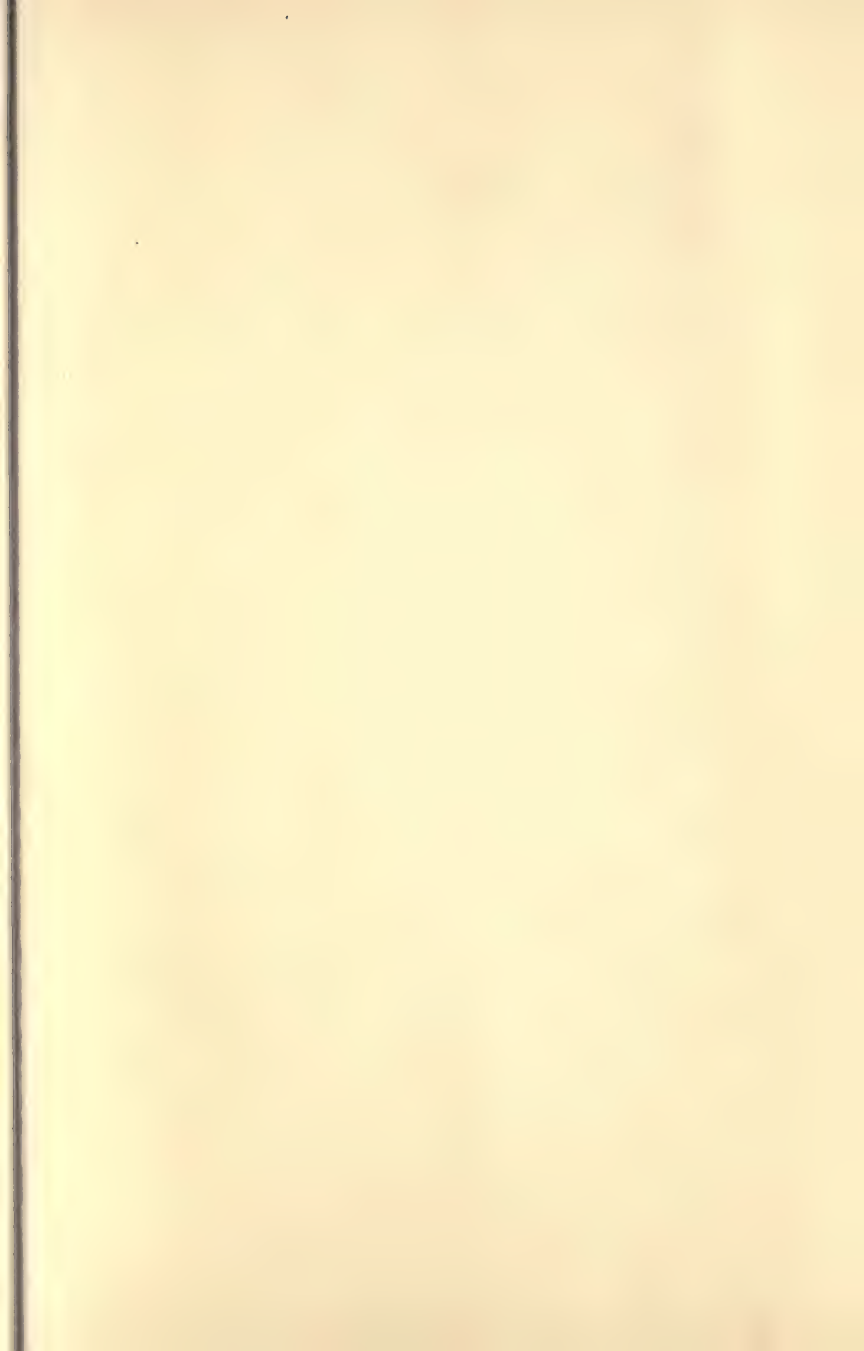
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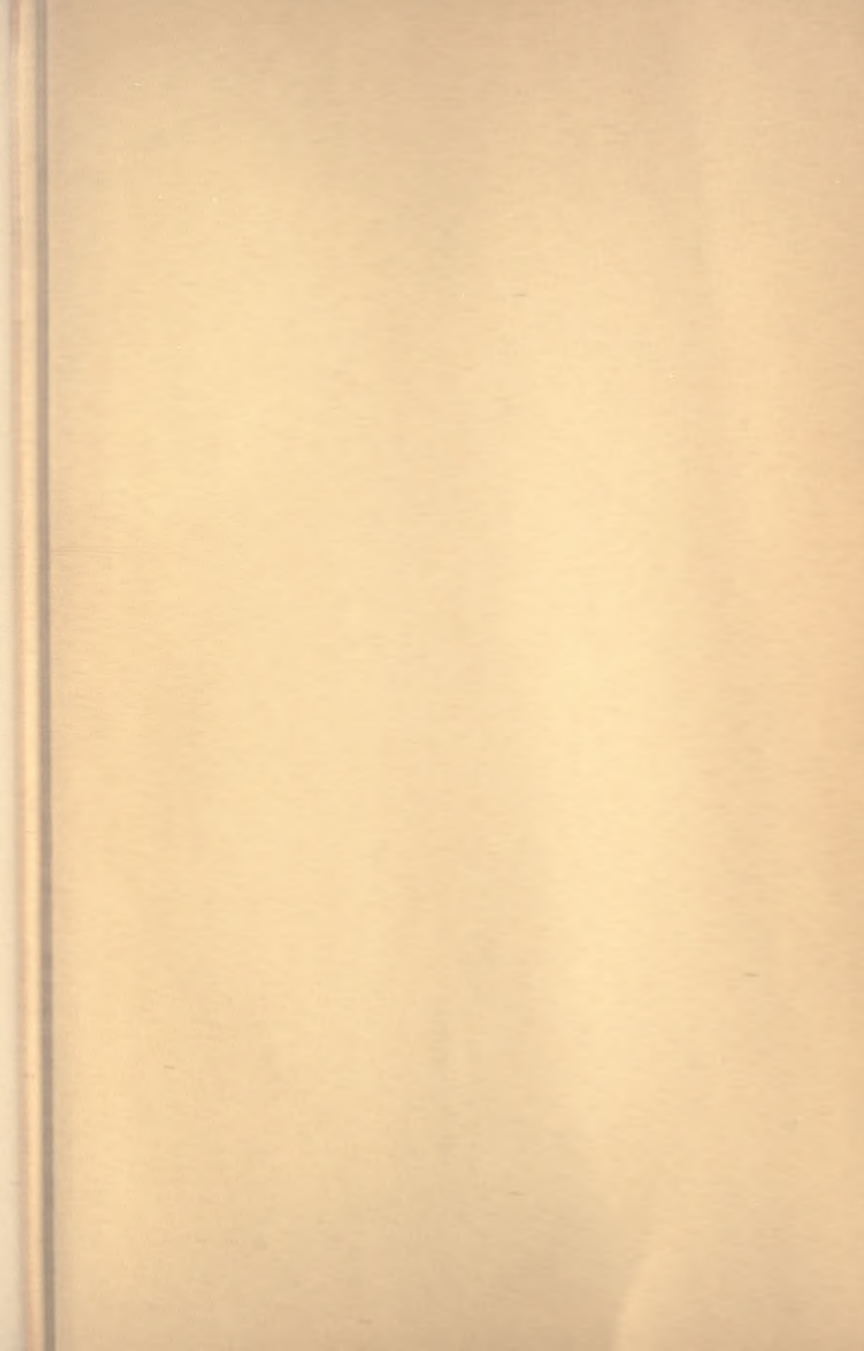
















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