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The Sexual Correlations of Poetic Genius

By Professor Rémond

In the course of a paper published last year in collaboration with one of my pupils, Dr. Voivenel, in which we studied the phenomena which favour the development of literary genius and those likely to prove prejudicial to it, we had occasion to consider what relations might possibly be apprehended between the development of the higher forms of language and sexual functions.

We observe in a great number of animals correlative manifestations between the annual active phases of the reproductive forces and the appearance of certain qualities, certain physical embellishments. In a large number of others there exist definite characteristics endowing one of the sexes, usually the male, with more elegant forms, brighter colouring, more powerful armature.

In the human race it is only at the period of puberty that definite secondary characteristics proper to each develop in the sexes. In the male the most important phenomenon which precedes or accompanies the evolution of all the rest is the modification, or "breaking," of the voice. This evidently indicates the existence of a close connection between the development of sex and the phonetic organs; and the problem which remains is to discover, by a more minute analysis of the general conditions of this evolution, what degree of connection there may be between the two great functions which determine, one the intellectual development of the race, and the other its perpetuity.

Language is the distinctive characteristic of the human race; at least it is only among human beings that we find the notion of Verbs, which are its most important element. Those animals which, anatomically and intellectually, are

nearest akin to mankind, are capable of giving distinct external expression to certain states which may be termed psychic: but as a general proposition we may regard language as the most recent acquisition of animal life in its slow ascent to the human type. With greater certainty we may say that while language is the distinctive characteristic of man, it is also his ornament. It is by the various manifestations of this faculty that he is able to externalise all his dreams and to express his will. Music, drawing, writing, speech, mimicry, are all the offspring of one function, and are merely different modes of the same, at bottom but little separated one from the other. The same anatomic centre of externalisation directs their mechanism, the grey substance of the frontal circumvolutions 2 and 3, itself divided into a certain number of more clearly differentiated points of convergence. This property of the frontal lobe of being the threshold where the diverse elements of sensibility congregate to produce external psychic manifestations is, moreover, noticeable not in man alone. In animals sufficiently removed from him, in the dog for instance, we find in the anterior portion of the paracentral lobe a veritable language centre, the centre regulating the lateral movements of the tail, which are psychic movements. The movements which constitute the elements of the externalisation of thought, the wagging of a dog's tail, the movement of a man's hand when he writes or draws, of his phonetic organs when he speaks, of the facial muscles in mimicry, belong indifferently to both lobes, while it is only in the left frontal lobe of man that we can localise that which imparts to these movements their special psychic value, their language value. These nuclei of externalisation have corresponding centres of reception. The eye and ear of man are specially fitted to receive the sensations necessary, if not to the acquisition, at least to the development of this faculty of language. In dogs we must look to the olfactory centre, which is more directly connected with the motor centre, but which, while still playing an important part, seems nevertheless to have deteriorated in value to a singular degree in man. Broca holds that the diminution of power of the olfactory centre corresponds to the development of those centres more particularly regulating language written and spoken.

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The centres of reception, of sensibility, the education of which commences previous to the organisation of the whole motor system, regulate therefore the orientation of the motor areas necessary to language, as they do that of all the others; and it is, moreover, through them that the left hemisphere of the brain receives the successive elements of its ulterior psychic functions.

But we can distinguish two distinct phases of this education. One corresponds to the infantile period of life, in the course of which the fasciculi of association of the oval centre are organised; during the second phase the sensory and motor centres become connected by the most superficial region of the cortical area, the plexus of Exner. This one is late and slow in its organisation; and while the most active period of its development corresponds to the close of childhood and the first years of adolescence, it continues to evolve perhaps till after the fortieth year. Here then is a system which is developed at the moment of puberty, and which cannot escape from the correlative influence of sex. It is a fragile system, and is apparently the first to suffer in those psychoses—in that disintegration of the intellect which occurs early in such cases of insanity as Kraepelin has termed "praecox." It is a system in continual evolution, thus rendering it possible for certain disorders to repair themselves by the probable creation of means of substitution; clinically we see certain very slight cases of hebephrenies cure themselves. It is at its level that we must probably localise the lesions, still so uncertain, of hysteria.

The correlation with the sexual zone is demonstrated by the fact that in certain cases injury to the organs of reproduction has led to grave disturbance of the sensory and motor co-ordination (anæsthesia, deafness, tremor), while according to Coni's experiments (*Rivista sperimentale di freniatria e medicina legale*, January, 1908) the destruction of the cortical area has led in some animals to atrophy of the reproductive forces.

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expression of the intellect begin to show their individuality. The precociously demented walks, reads, writes, draws, talks, etc. The great motor-sensory affinities there fore remain intact, and the disturbance only affects the more recent acquisitions, those which should constitute the individuality of the ego if the organ regulating them had been evolved normally.

Whatever relations may exist between the language centres and those of sex are, moreover, very close. Ferrier points to the presence of a generative centre situated in the frontal lobe in front of the language centre. Bechterew and Mislawski have shown that there exists also a centre of sexual functions behind the crucial circonvolution in the rear of the gyrus.

In the left frontal lobe we thus find ourselves in the presence of a series of organs which, from the olfactive animals to man, are in close relation with sexuality on the one hand and with psychic externalisation on the other: and the connection between these seems to be all the stronger from the fact that pathologically and physiologically it appears more distinct where sexuality and intellectuality are more highly developed. If we now recur to what we said above to the effect that language is the male's ornament—in the peculiarly sexual sense which the term ornament acquires in the animal kingdom, it necessarily follows that the highest manifestations of language, *i.e.*, those which imply the most complete intellectual development, are precisely those which refer to love. This, indeed, we find to be the case with the poets. On the other hand, when the human animal is mentally tainted from birth, when he is the victim of that general lack of development to which the name of hereditary degeneration is given, it is—if our thesis is correct, and if there exist between the sexual zone and the anomalies presented by the physiological organisation of the plexus of Exner in those degenerates still relatively capable of social life the correlations we indicate—it is, we say, in the reproductive sphere that we should find the first important anomalies. And indeed we find clinically a connection of the highest importance between the manifestations of degeneracy in its first stages and all forms of sexual perversion, masochism, fetichism, sadism, etc. The instability of the one is

matched by the unbalanced condition of the other, just as the most complete cerebral development is allied with the highest developments of language, the language of poets, which receives its most constant inspiration from love.

We must, of course, recognise profound differences between diverse orders of poets. All those who write in verse are not worthy of the name; and in French literature Boileau will never rank as other than a talented *littérateur*. Despite the fact that he wrote about poetic genius, and defined the rules of verse and literary art, using verse as his medium, he is not himself a poet. We may say the same of Pope, who did not venture any further than the French critic did into amorous poetry. The *Lutrin* of the one, the *Rape of the Lock* by the other, are certainly masterpieces in the heroic-burlesque style, and in this respect the English author has even surpassed the French. But despite the medium they chose, and the preference given to verse over unrhymed prose, neither is exempt from Matthew Arnold's criticism of Dryden and Pope, both of whom he regarded merely as prose classics. It is the same with Corneille's dramas. The works of Racine are imbued with more poetry, more tenderness, more lyricism, if I may be allowed this term; but then he was a man of greater sensibility. Nearly all his heroes and heroines are the victims of love, and while he passes in review all human passions, it is in the description of this one that he excels. Thus in the field of drama, so sterile of true poetry, we find in Racine a personality which stands out in bold relief from among his rivals, merely because the sentiment in which he is steeped detaches him from the conventional and neutral background where the others disport themselves.

Moreover, we must remember that poetry can only flourish amid favourable surroundings in the social sense; and in this respect nothing can be more striking than the history of English literature. While the first among English poets, those who really formed the poetic language of the nation, are borne by the same wave of enthusiasm which we regard as the expression *par excellence* of poetic genius, towards the description of human passions, and among these of love, periods of political and religious struggle have the effect of extinguishing these aspirations and of debasing

poetry to a level of general mediocrity, if indeed silence does not engulf it.

To Chaucer (1382) and to his compeer Gower (1393) are due the first poems worthy of the name in the annals of English literature. They are love songs, delicate and melancholy, such as the history of the fair Cressida and the valiant Troilus of Chaucer; while Gower's verses, however, are somewhat spiritless and overloaded. It appears more probable that Chaucer was in love with the Duchess Blanche of Ghent; in any case he was deeply affected by her death.

Following on these two masters we come to the gentle and lovable figure of James the First of Scotland. The *King's Quair* is entirely attributable to the emotion he felt on beholding from the windows of Windsor Castle, where he was held prisoner since the age of 16 or 17 (1423), Joan of Beaufort, with whom he fell in love before he had ever had an opportunity of addressing her. In this case the poem is the direct offspring of the passion, and the fact that for the time it was the only outward expression which could be given to the powerful sentiment which obsessed its author, rendered it the more ardent. Set at liberty a little later, and married to the woman he loved, James the First composed only a few ballads, of which little has survived. Be this due to the cares of the throne or merely to the fact that the *état passionnel* was at an end, the fact remains that the poet was silent when the real cause of his poetic ardour no longer acted as stimulant.

We must go forward to the beginning of the following century to find a poetic movement of any intensity in England, a movement which, by the way, is apparently traceable to Scotch influence. The adventures of Grand Amour in the pursuit of Belle Pucelle in Stephen Hawes' *Pastime of Pleasure* is a romance which, by the style of its composition, appears to have been written in imitation of writings of much earlier date. We should not refer to it if it were not that, in spite of its tediousness and the affectation of its style, it is in reality a love song deformed by bad taste, but genuinely imbued with passion. Towards the same period Skelton published his works. We may name his *Chaplet of Laurel*, which contains passages inspired by a somewhat exaggerated lyricism. But at this

date Wyatt, hopelessly in love with Queen Anne Bullen, enters the field as the first lyric poet. To him we owe the first analysis of the love-malady which appears in English poetry, and his works are instinct with a deeply emotional spirit, as are also those of the Earl of Surrey (1516–47), whose passion for Geraldine, whether real or fictitious, in either case imparted a very sweet savour to his works. These two writers who sang of love, each from a standpoint of deep personal emotion, are so isolated in their period that we can find none to compare with them since James the First till Spenser (1552–1599), whose writings are excessively voluptuous in tone. The passion for beauty, the love and adoration of woman which irradiate from his *Faery Queen* (which did not appear until the close of his life) make of him one of the most remarkable poets of this period of renascence. We should not dissociate him from Sidney, whose *Astrophel and Stella* marks the zenith of the lyric movement, and whose poetry is distinguished by a singularly touching note of amorous tenderness.

We pass over a period of from fifty to sixty years, during which there stood forth one of the most powerful geniuses with whom we have to deal, and to whom we shall return by and by, and, amid the dense silence of mediocrity which followed the great figure of Shakespeare, we come in 1648 to Herrick's *Hesperides*. This poet-clergyman, who dwelt modestly in the country, published some little poems full of love, sparkling and lascivious, which reveal a state of singular exaltation, and an almost pagan love of nature. It may appear strange that we should regard the development of so poetic a mentality in a priest as favourable to our argument. But far from proving contradictory to us, this outburst of Aphrodite-inspired pagan sentiment appears to be the direct result of the continence which the author had on the other hand imposed on himself. Passion, when it takes the form of religion, is not the less passion for that, and these poems of Herrick's are a further proof of this point. After Herrick, poetry fell back into extreme mediocrity. Milton will claim our attention in due course, and we have already given our estimate of Pope's so elegantly rhymed prose. There lies between the dates of Spenser and Sidney and that of Wordsworth and Coleridge a long period of two centuries, during which real poetry

almost entirely disappeared from the domain of English literature. At the period of the French Revolution and under the influence of Ossian the attention of England was once again directed to pure poetry. In this respect Burns marks the first stage of transition (1786); Coleridge, passionate and sentimental, follows (1798) and we reach at last the zenith of love-poetry in one of the greatest of lovers, Byron. From 1809 to 1815 Byron went through a splendid period of genius-inspired productivity, and the impression he produced was all the deeper from the fact that the public was constantly tempted to regard the stories of his poems as autobiographical. This great lover and poet was, moreover, destined to exercise an enormous influence on the Continent over those whose fame rang loudest in the realms of poetry and erotic passion: Lamartine, Vigny, Victor Hugo, and De Musset; De Musset more especially, the most feeling, the most delicate, and the most amorous among the men of this category, found in Byron a master and a model. His work is animated by the Byronic breath, and his entire fame, though quite personal, may be regarded as the highest expression of the reflection which Byron's genius cast over the *élite* of the poets of his age.

To Byron poetry was purely passion. A similar note, but attenuated, is to be found in Shelley (1792–1822). Platonic love found in him an extremely delicate poet in the *Epipsychidion*; he sang of natural beauty in *Alastor*; *Adonaïs*, in the form of an Elegy, is full of highly elevated sentiment; but the author remained obscure and, unlike Byron, caused no *éclat* either by the passions of his life or by those of his writings. His talent did not suffice to enable him to emerge from the shadow cast around him by his great contemporary.

We reach at last quite modern times with Tennyson, who held undisputed sway in the literary field from 1842 to 1892, and who possessed the rare, we might say the unique, merit among poets, of maintaining his position in the first rank throughout his lengthy career.

Maud gives expression to an amorous, sentimental, almost feverish note. Tennyson next turned to drama, but here the poetic quality is less distinct. It reappears during the period from *Tiresias* to the *Death of Oenone*,

but in these the poet is no longer young (1885–1892). The hour of love is now nothing more than a memory, and hence his works give us the impression rather of reminiscences than of actual reality. Like Victor Hugo in the last years of his life, he is rather a clever chiseller manipulating the familiar medium with incomparable technical mastery than a creative genius, comparable in his power to the volcanic ardour of Byron. *Those whom the Gods love die young*: these words of a poet are singularly applicable to poets. At the hour when life flags, talent may survive, but the Muse is silent; and we cannot help thinking that, despite all the admiration with which England surrounded her great poet to the hour of his death, only those works which belong to his youth will ultimately survive.

The reader who has accompanied us thus far will perceive that poetic genius is merely the expression of the *état passionnel*, and that all great poets have been great lovers. There exist, however, especially in the annals of English literature, some notable exceptions, which, without very careful analysis, might appear to invalidate this view. But while we regard passion as the necessary condition for that higher expression of thought which we call poetry, and while this passion very generally takes the shape of love, it is nevertheless certain that the particular psychic condition which usually finds vent in amorous passion may be deviated from its normal course; that love when it is not sexual is none the less love; and that hatred may prove an equally forcible factor in the constitution of poetic genius as the contrary state of the soul.

Thus political and religious passion exalted to the extreme may be regarded as the two forces which inspired the works of such poets as Dante and Milton. The writings of Milton are distinctly the outcome of inspiration; and throughout the course of his life this poet gave sufficient and indisputable proof of the vehemence of his political and religious passions.

The causes which determine the development of poetic genius may anatomically and physiologically be powerful enough to produce from time to time in the history of nations one man whose powers of co-ordination and productive forces are such as to enable him easily to dominate

An eminent French literary critic, M. Jean de Gourmont, has made a study of modern feminine poetry in France, and has passed in review the writings of most of those women who enjoy any renown in contemporary French literature. Now it appears from this study that the poetry of woman, far from translating, as is the case with man, amorous passion in its distinctly sexual sense, expresses rather a kind of uneasiness, an effort after equilibrium, after personal satisfaction and improvement. Woman's object in writing is to describe herself, and she describes herself in order clearly to formulate her need for eurhythmy, which she thus seeks to attain through the complete externalisation of herself. Woman being frequently frigid from the purely sexual point of view, it follows that we encounter this same frigidity in the expression of her cerebral erithism. In man the spinal and cerebral centres cannot remain indifferent to one another, and their reciprocal action is responsible both for poetic orientation and for sexual excitement, but woman's passivity in reproduction and the non-participation of the spinal centre, allow the cerebral centre to free itself easily from this synergic necessity. The erithism of the language centres, instead of bringing into play the sexual centres, merely affects the nearest verbal functions, and the psycho-motor manifestations which result from this express something rather in the nature of a substitution. Women are naturally emotional; and sometimes they succeed in translating their emotions into eloquent language and in a moving form; but the mere manifestation of the emotion suffices for its satisfaction. This manner of laying bare her soul is a gesture neither of offering nor of conquest, and woman contemplates herself in the mirror of her poetry without giving any token of that instinct of struggle and conquest which characterises the poetry of man.

Woman is perhaps also too frequently the victim of her own imagination; she creates for herself a fiction of love which is entirely unreal, and one feels in her poetry the expression of the disillusion she has suffered, and of the void which this quest after an absolute which existed only in her dreams has left her. There is a painful element in the poetic effort thus generated; something in the nature of a regret and of an attempt to reach a clearer under-

standing of its causes through the expression of her sadness. One of the most interesting figures in this respect in French literature is Madame Hélène Picard, whose intimate destiny was no doubt deeply affected by a series of painful events, and in whom the poetic impulse corresponds clearly to a need of expressing herself which life has not accorded her. She is indeed in an analogous position to Elizabeth Barrett, the suffering companion of Robert Browning, of whom we must shortly speak.

Woman is thus mainly preoccupied with herself, with her grievances; she hopes by describing the phases of sensibility to get a better grasp of them, and poetry is to her a kind of music, a contemplative art, when it does not merely take the place of a pastime, the reflection of her surroundings. Certain trivialities in verse, to which M. de Gourmont refers in his book, are not merely the reflection but the direct product of concurrent literary surroundings. The somewhat scoffing significance given in France to the term *blue-stocking* is due to the factitious value given to these products of *salon* collaborations.

If we re-address our attention to English literature, we shall find at the outset, shortly after Chaucer, towards 1450, a woman-writer whose name has not survived, author of the *Flower and the Leaf* and the *Assembly of Ladies*. The style is an imitation of Chaucer, the subject borrowed from two French poets, Eustache Deschamps and Mechault. Thus while we mention it as being a feminine work, it is in fact little more than a sham, and we should not have referred to it if the names of women poets had been less rare during the long series of years we have traversed in speaking of men. It is a striking fact indeed that England has produced very few women poets. We are obliged to mention as such Dorothy Wordsworth, whose intimacy with her brother and with Coleridge gives her the right to be considered as a poet, owing to the influence she exercised over them and the probable share she had in their works. Christina Rossetti may be regarded as the writer who, since Coleridge, best understood poetic song; but with her poetry was rather the manifestation of a quest after purely æsthetic satisfaction, a form of self-assuagement, which makes of her art a kind of music in honour of physical beauty. We can thus only cite as a poet Elizabeth Barrett, whose love for

Browning inspired a masterpiece: the *Sonnets from the Portuguese*. Miss Barrett was deeply in love with the man whose wife she became, yet we find a heavy sadness and a mournful note of complaining in her verses:—

> ". . . But I look on thee . . . on thee,
> Beholding, besides love, the end of love,
> Hearing oblivion beyond memory!
> As one who sits and gazes from above,
> Over the rivers to the bitter sea."

Yet this woman who had studied deeply, and who was swayed by a very lofty poetic ambition, produced beside these delicious verses certain works of which the clumsiness and the vague and obscure form can only be interpreted as the expression of shattered health. She tries to give an impression of force and succeeds only in imparting one of convulsive violence. After her death her husband revealed himself to be a remarkable poet, and it is not the least important confirmation of what we have asserted that in the woman we find love to be the origin of suffering and disharmony, while in the man it produces the expansion of his genius.

The feminine spirit has been far more fertile in England in the field of romance. The admirable Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, and Maria Edgeworth, are all remarkable writers; and it would be unjust not to recognise the influence, and above all the high moral value, of some of their writings. But here we find woman in her educational *rôle*. We are no longer in the domain of poetry, and the very difference which manifests itself so clearly in England between the intellectual trend of the two sexes shows how little poetry is the province of woman, and how artificial is the movement in France towards this kind of production.

Poetry is undoubtedly the highest expression of language, and as such the characteristic of the male, to whom among human beings, as among other animals, appertains the ornament. The anatomic and physiological relations which, as we have shown, prove the connection between the verbal and the sexual spheres, assure to man the same superiority over woman in the realm of letters which he possesses in material respects. In woman, the continual recurrence of physical crises, never indifferent to, and some-

times exercising an important correlative influence over the cerebral functions, does not allow the phases of internal sensibility ever to pass into the second rank; and the effect of this is ceaselessly to deteriorate and divert her poetic genius.

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