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Hillard  
The Relation of the Poet to  
His Age

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THE RELATION  
OF  
THE POET TO HIS AGE.

A DISCOURSE DELIVERED BEFORE THE  
PHI BETA KAPPA SOCIETY

OF HARVARD UNIVERSITY,  
ON THURSDAY, AUGUST 24, 1813.

BY GEORGE S. HILLARD.

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## DISCOURSE.

Most persons have probably amused themselves with unprofitable speculations upon the relative rank to be assigned to eminence in the several departments of intellectual action, a question, upon which we can never arrive at any definite conclusion, from the want of a common measure of comparison. Sir William Temple esteemed a great poet, the “bright, consummate flower” of humanity, and observes that “of all the members of mankind that live within the compass of a thousand years, for one man that is born capable of making a great poet, there may be a thousand born, capable of making as great generals and ministers of state as any in story.” On the other hand, Sir Walter Scott thought the highest success in literature cheap, in comparison with the deeds of a man like the Duke of Wellington. But, whatever dif-

ference of opinion there may be on these points, all will admit that, among writers and thinkers, the largest field of influence is enjoyed by those who address the moral nature through the medium of the imaginative faculties. Mankind here meet upon a common ground ; and in the pages of the poet and the novelist find refreshment and relaxation, whatever may be their habitual pursuits or the daily business of their minds. The influence of writers of this class begins with the first pulse of intellectual life and ends only with its last throb. They twine themselves around every fibre of the growing mind. They mould and color every man's life. They supply motive and impulse ; give stability to unfixed purposes and direction to irregular aims. They make virtue more lovely or vice more seductive. They weaken or enforce the lessons of moral truth and the sanctions of religion. Whatever elevates or debases man, whatever lifts him to heaven or nails him to earth, whatever embellishes or deforms life, whatever makes it stately, heroic and glorious, or mean, loathsome and brutish, the passions that rage like blasts from hell, the affections that breathe like airs from heaven — all find in them, appropriate food, and draw from them their elements of growth.

To writers of this class we may give the general name of poets, if to poetry be allowed a definition somewhat arbitrary, excluding the form of verse and sufficiently comprehensive to include such works as the Arabian Nights, Ivanhoe and the Sketch-Book. In view of the important influence exerted by these writers upon the public mind, I ask your attention to some observations upon the relation of the poet to his age, the various elements that modify that relation, and the changes wrought in poetry by the progress of society. I need offer no apology for selecting a subject remote from those material and political interests which make up so much of our life. We meet here as scholars. We have left our various posts of duty and occupation to breathe again the untroubled air of contemplation, and to seek the peace that comes from "backward-looking thoughts."

The office of poetry is to idealize human life; to connect the objects of thought with those associations which embellish, dignify and exalt, and to keep out of sight, those which debase and deform; to extract from the common world, which lies at our feet, the elements of the romantic, the impassioned and the imaginative; to arrest and con-

dense the delicate spirit of beauty which hovers over the earth, like an atmosphere, and to give shape, color and movement to its airy essence. Life presents itself to our view in a twofold aspect. It has its poetical and prosaic side; its face and its reverse; and different minds, by a natural affinity, are attracted to one or the other of these aspects; and indeed the same mind often passes from one to the other, as it is swayed by different moods. Hence we have tragedy and farce; the historical picture and the caricature; the poem and the parody; hence the gods of Homer and the gods of Lucian, the romance of chivalry and Don Quixote. A thousand poetical associations invest the ocean, the sailor and the ship; all of which vanish, like a ghost at cock-crow, at the thought of tar, sea-sickness and libels for wages. There are many charming pictures of woodland life in English poetry, as in the early ballads, and best of all, in "As You Like It;" and in reading these, we grant the poet his own terms. We are willing to observe from his point of view, and to overlook the plain facts of the case. We forget the miserable discomforts inseparable from such a life, which must have made it intolerable to natures so delicately organized as those who are



represented as leading it, and think only of the sunshine and the foliage, the fresh turf and the bounding deer. Pastoral life too, has always been a favorite theme with poets, and yet in point of fact, few employments are less poetical than the tending of sheep, and if the uniform testimony of observers is to be relied upon, there are few persons, whose manners and speech are further removed from an ideal standard, than shepherds. Here also we take, without questioning, the poet's statement. We waive all inquiry as impertinent. We accept the imaginative aspect as the true one, and surrender ourselves to the mellow tones of the pastoral reed, whether breathed from the lips of Theocritus, Virgil, or Allan Ramsay.

But though the office of poetry be at all times and everywhere, essentially the same, it will vary in its expression or manifestation, according to the instruments and materials with which the poet works, the scenes in which he is placed, and the social life of which he forms a part. He is emphatically the child of his age. However original his genius may be; however sternly he may refuse to bend his knee to the idols of his time, his mind will unconsciously be moulded and colored by the influences that surround him, even by those which

he resists. His whole intellectual structure would be changed, had the accident of his birth happened thirty years sooner, or thirty years later. A thousand inevitable elements enter into the composition of that verse which seems to flow as spontaneously as the bird sings, or water runs. It is modified by the point of social progress attained by the state in which he lives, by the greater or less amount of personal liberty enjoyed by its citizens, by the troubled or peaceful times in which his lot is cast, by the greater or less consideration in which women are held in the society in which he is reared, by the presence or absence of an hereditary nobility, an established church and the law of primogeniture, by the religious tendencies of his country or age, and even by purely physical elements, by soil, by climate, by a maritime or inland position, by the wild grandeur of mountain scenery or the gentler beauties of cultivated plains.

The quality of two minds is no more alike than the glory of two stars, and yet, as the stars have been grouped into clusters and constellations, so do poets fall into classes and orders, according to the point of view from which they are contemplated, and the principle by which they are arranged. The poets of the same nation have

certain distinctive features of resemblance ; so have those of the same period, and those of the same continent. The poets of the age of Queen Elizabeth have a family likeness ; so have those of Queen Anne ; and those of Queen Victoria. The poetry of Europe is infinitely diversified, yet there are elements common to it all, which distinguish it from oriental poetry. The poet of the north is not like the poet of the south ; each reproduces the scenes which have fed the growth of his own mind. Through the rugged lines of the former, a sound seems to gather and swell, mingled from the roar of mountain torrents, the groaning of pine trees in the storm, and the howl of the wintry blast over the snow-covered plain ; while the song of the latter breathes softly upon the ear, and comes laden with gales of balm, the voice of the nightingale, and the cool dash of moonlight fountains.

Poetry is the oldest birth of the human mind. The first unravellings of that veil of light which God has woven into the frame of man, are in the form of verse. A poet of our own times has supposed that the first poet sung when the rainbow first shone upon the “green, undeluged earth,” as a covenant between God and man, but surely sixteen hundred years had not rolled by, without some

musical utterance, however rude and uncouth, of those sensations and emotions, which are felt in the blood and in the soul of man. Suns had set, and moons had risen, and the sweet influences of the stars had dropped from the midnight sky, the spinning earth had known its alternations of day and night, seed-time and harvest, lovers had wooed and maidens had been won, the child had been born and the old man had been carried to his grave, joy and sorrow, hope and fear, smiles and tears, had brightened and darkened man's life, and it cannot be that the minstrel had not sung — that the harp of Jubal had not trembled to the poet's touch.

As children resemble each other more than men, so are nations more alike in their infancy than in their mature age. All early poetry is marked, more or less strongly, by the same general characteristics. It has the unstudied movement, and the unconscious charm of childhood. It fills the mind with a sense of the golden light and dewy freshness of morning. It flows from an age which acknowledges a vivid satisfaction in the mere possession of life. That pleasure in the simple exercise of the faculties, without reference to the end or object of pursuit, which is common to the young

of all animals, and in which the benevolent observation of Paley saw the most striking proof of the goodness of God, is then the heritage of the race. It is a privilege to be alive : to enjoy the pleasurable sensations which accompany a healthful organization ; to hear the bird sing, to drink the red wine, to gaze on the cheek of beauty. The natural pleasures which lie upon the lap of the common earth content the child-like man. The feeling of satiety, of weariness and unrest, of longing after some ideal and unattainable good, is as yet unknown. The morning star of hope is in the ascendant, and not the evening star of memory. The poles of nature are not yet reversed. The appetites are not yet perverted from their legitimate function of means, and made to become ends. That unhappy system of anticipation, which brings the meal before the hunger, the bed before the weariness, has not begun. It is no disparagement to a brave man to express that honest fear of death which results naturally from an honest love of life. If we imagine grown up men carrying into the common business of the world, that heartiness, that irrepressible vivacity, that fulness of animal life, which children put into their play, we shall have a notion of that unwithered world which surrounds

the early poet, and which he reproduces in his epic, his saga, or his ballad. The heroes of Homer feel their life in every limb. They recoil from the unfathomable gulf of death, as children from a dark room. That same sense of the value of mere existence beats, like a strong pulse, through the early poetry of Spain, England, and Germany. The sorrow which is breathed over the dead body of Arcite, in the Knights' tale of Chaucer, flows chiefly from the feeling of what he had lost in losing life.

Why woldest thou be ded ? this women crie,  
And haddest gold ynough, and Emelie.

All early poetry is essentially picturesque. It is written at a time when the eye is the chief instrument of knowledge. Everything is seen clearly and presented in the vertical light and sharply-defined shadows of noon-day. Illustrations are used simply to illustrate, without inquiring whether they dignify and embellish. The crowd of impressions comes in too thick and fast to admit of discrimination and analysis. Epithets are not chosen from any particular sense of adaptation. The poet is too full of his matter to think of his style. He cannot pause in his rush of feeling to select his word with the care with which the

worker in mosaic does his color. Homely images are saved from being vulgar, and minute details from being tedious, by their vividness and truth. Poetry is a record of sensations, not reflections. The glance has not become introspective. The harvest of a quiet eye, which broods and sleeps upon its own heart, is not yet gathered. The mind is too busy with the young, untried world around it, to dwell at home and speculate on its own essence and organization. The exulting sweep of its own wings is too delightful to admit of pause and inquiry into the law by which they are moved. To employ terms which have become naturalized into the language, everything has an objective and not a subjective reality. The process of Berkley and the idealists is reversed. The mute forms of nature are clothed with life, and the earth, the air, and the sea are peopled with spiritual beings. The interval which separates the human soul from all other of God's works is not apprehended. So far from regarding his own mind as the highest manifestation of creative power, the early poet bows in awe and adoration before the beauty and grandeur of the visible world, as something mightier than himself. The mountain appals him with its frown. In its shady depths

lurk the hoofed satyr and the bearded faun. The rushing blast chills him with fear. Diana and her nymphs are sweeping by in the storm of chase, or in another age and clime, the wild huntsman is pursuing his spectral game, "the hunter and the deer a shade." A shaping spirit of imagination hangs over the earth and fills it with life. Hence

The intelligible forms of ancient poets,  
 The fair humanities of old religion,  
 The power, the beauty and the majesty  
 That had her haunts in dale, or piny mountain  
 Or forest by slow stream, or pebbly spring  
 Or chasm or watery depths ;

Hence the fair forms of worship to which the graceful genius of Greece gave birth ; the wood-nymph in the forest and the naiad of the stream ; the sun imaged as a golden-haired youth, and the moon shining on the hunter's face, symbolized into Diana bending over her sleeping Endymion. Hence, too, those delicate beings, the creation of modern romantic fiction,

Whose midnight revels by a forest-side  
 Or fountain, some belated peasant sees  
 Or dreams he sees, while overhead the moon  
 Sits arbitress, and nearer to the earth  
 Wheels her pale course,

who throw their peculiar charm over so much of



early English literature and of whose agency Shakspeare has availed himself in his *Midsummer Night's Dream*, with such creative power and artistic skill, as to form one of the most striking triumphs of even his miraculous genius.

As society advances from infancy to mature age, this process is essentially reversed. If the early poet may find his appropriate type in the child at his morning play, glowing with animal life, and seeing the sunshine of his own breast reflected from the dewy world around him, the poet of a later age and of modern times may be compared to the ripened man, in his evening walk. A change has come over the spirit of the scene. The tone of coloring is more subdued; the lights and shadows less strongly defined, the movement less animated. Life is more compact of reflection than of sensation. We do not merely observe, but we analyze, dissect and combine. The mute forms of the external world have lost their objective character. They are linked to long trains of association and represent states of mind and moods of feeling. That sharp and painful spirit of observation which Shakspeare has embodied in the character of Jaques, which moralizes material forms into a thousand similes drawn from artificial life and

manners, is called into being. The mind itself is a point of departure ; a standard to which all other things are referred. The poet of civilization is made acquainted with the thoughts of other men, and with his own, before he becomes familiar with Nature, and thus looks at it through a medium which colors with its own hues, the objects observed. Hence descriptive poetry is not so much a description of what is seen, as a transcript of the feelings in the poet's own mind awakened by it. Thus Thomson's descriptions are glowing but indistinct ; Cowper's, minute and accurate ; Byron's, vivid and impassioned ; Wordsworth's, profound ; Shelley's, ideal ; Tennyson's, fantastic ; Bryant's, natural and true. Indeed, descriptive poetry is the growth of a comparatively late age, in which men, weary of study or business, throw themselves upon the lap of Nature for refreshment and repose, and chronicle, with something of a lover's fondness, her changing expressions. The early poet deals with the visible world in a familiar and business-like way ; very much as the sailor talks of the sea, or the farmer of his farm. His descriptions serve the purposes of scenery only, or come in as introductory to something else. He has no more idea of describing

for its own sake, than an artist would have of framing a piece of bare canvass.

In an advanced period of society, a new element of the poetical is evolved in the contrast between the poet's ideal world and the real one around him. The mind of the early bard seems to be always in unison with the scenes and the life into which he is thrown. His world is fashioned of kindly elements and every one in it has his share of satisfaction. The face of Nature has not yet worn a step-mother's frown. The blue sky of God's providence bends lovingly over all. The child is not met with the pitiless question "why were you born?" The contrasts of life are not so violent and its extremes not so far apart. There are no glittering inaccessible peaks of wealth and splendor, with hopeless chasms of poverty and degradation at their feet. In the highest station, the element of a common humanity is always prominent. The king is not a ceremony or an abstraction, but a man crowned and reigning. Power belongs to him who can best vindicate his claim to it by superior strength, courage or wisdom. Life is full of dramatic changes and singular alternations of fortune. Palaces and castles are the rewards of enterprise and hardihood. A single battle

may cause the king and the wanderer, the noble and the outlaw to change places. The things in which men differ from each other — the accidents of birth, rank and station — are less conspicuous than those in which they are alike. Cloth of frieze rubs against cloth of gold. Thus the substance of poetry is ready made and requires only the form of verse. The relation of the poet to this natural and hearty world around him is all that he can ask. To the rude spirits of his time, he supplies their highest intellectual excitement, and the boon is acknowledged with a warmth and fulness proportionate to their impressible organization. An easily gathered harvest of smiles and tears rewards his efforts. Wealth enriches, power protects, and rank caresses him. Unconsciously to themselves, they reverence the breath of God in the poet's soul, and the infinite capacities of their own natures are not revealed to themselves, until they hear the minstrel singing to his harp.

On the other hand, in a highly civilized age, the poet finds himself perplexed with contradictions which he cannot reconcile, and anomalies which he cannot comprehend. Coming out from the soft ideal world in which he has dreamed away his youth, he is constantly repelled by some

iron reality. The aspect of life to him seems cold, hard and prosaic. It renews the legend of *Œdipus* and the Sphinx. It propounds to him a riddle, with a face of stone, which he must guess or be devoured. It is an age of frightful extremes of social condition ; of colossal wealth and heart-crushing poverty ; of courts and custom-houses ; of corn-laws and game-laws ; of man-traps and spring-guns. The smoke from the almshouse and the jail blots the pure sky. The race of life is not to the swift, nor its battle to the strong. A sensitive conscience, a delicate taste, the gift of genius and the ornament of learning, are rather obstacles, than helps, in the way of what is called success. Men are turned into petrifications by the slow-dropping influences of artificial life. The heroic virtues of the elder age have vanished with its free speech and its simple manners. There seems to be no pulse of hearty life in anything, whether it be good or bad. Virtue is timid and vice is cunning. Love is cold and calculating, and hatred masks its dagger with a smile. In this world of hollow forms and gilded seeming, the claims of the poet are unheeded, and his voice unheard. The gifts which he proffers are unvalued by those who have forgotten the dreams of their

youth, and wandered away from the primal light of their being. He looks around him, and the mournful fact presses itself upon his conviction, that there is no cover laid for him at Nature's table. His very existence seems to him a mistake. And now begins that fiery struggle in which the temper of his genius is to be tried, and which moves the deepest springs of compassion and sympathy in the human heart. Poetry has invented nothing more pathetic, history has recorded nothing more sad, than those mournful experiences which are so often the lot of the scholar and the man of genius. The dethronement of kings and the beggary of nobles are less affecting than the wrongs, the sorrows, the long-protracted trials, the forlorn conditions of great and gifted minds; nobles, whose patents are of elder date than the pyramids, and kings by the anointment of God's own hand. What tragedies can be read, in the history of literature, deeper than Macbeth, more moving than Lear! Milton, old, poor and blind, selling Paradise Lost for five pounds; Dryden beaten by ruffians at the prompting of a worthless peer, who, in Plato's commonwealth, would have been changing the poet's plate; Tasso, a creature as delicately moulded as if, like the Peris,

he had fed upon nothing grosser than the breath of flowers, wearing out the best years of his life in the gloom of a dungeon ; Racine hurried to his grave by the rebuke of a heartless king ; Chatterton, at midnight, homeless and hungry, bathing the unpitying stones of London with the hot tears of anguish and despair ; Johnson, at the age of thirty-six, dining behind a screen at the house of Cave, because he was too shabbily dressed to appear at the table ; Burns taken from the plough, which he had “ followed in glory and in joy upon the mountain side,” to guage ale-firkins and watch for contraband tobacco.

The false position in which men of genius so often find themselves placed in relation to their age, and the painful and protracted efforts they must make in order to gain a true one, have given to modern literature some of its prominent characteristics. Hence that half-unconscious sympathy which poets feel with characters, like Robin Hood, Rob Roy and Charles de Moor, who embody a protest against their times ; who mean, like Jack Cade, “ to dress the commonwealth and turn it and set a new nap upon it ; ” who presume, to borrow a daring expression of Schiller’s, to grind down the gaps in the sword of Almighty justice. Hence

much of that dreary melancholy, which overshadowed the mind of the stout-hearted and pious Johnson, whose sombre hue darkens the pages of his Rambler and Rasselas, and is concentrated in that celebrated couplet, in which the words seem to fall like drops of blood from a lacerated heart :

But ah ! what ills the scholar's life assail,  
Toil, envy, want, the patron and the jail.

To this source we may trace, in part, that personal element which glows so intensely in the lyric poetry of Schiller, and even sicklies o'er his otherwise admirable dramas. This, too, gave something of their depth and sternness to the powerful pictures of Crabbe. Hence that numerous tribe of poets and poetasters who, of late years, have so filled the groves of Parnassus with their melancholy notes, as sad, if not as sweet as those of the nightingale, whose young affections are ever running to waste, upon whose withered hearts the dew of hope can never fall, and who are ever longing to be a breeze, a cloud, a wave, or a sound — something that shall not have nerves to feel and a heart to ache.

In the struggle of which I have spoken, the poet has need of all his good angels. Without faith, strength of purpose and stern self-respect,



the very delicacy of organization which makes him a poet will only increase the odds against him. The dangers which assail him are various and menacing to different parts of his nature. He is tempted to make his poetry a mere medium for the expression of his own discontent; to fall into a tone of gloomy egotism, of querulous lamentation or of bold arraiging of that Providence, whose purposes he cannot comprehend and will not submit to. The habit of morbid introspection, into which he is likely to fall, leads inevitably to a self-exaggerating mood of mind, and this is a most fruitful source of unhappiness. Irving, in his *Tales of a Traveller*, has drawn a lively sketch of a poor devil author, who went up to London as a great genius, and starved miserably in that capacity, till it occurred to him that he was by no means so gifted a person as he and his friends had supposed, and he had since lived very comfortably, as a penny-a-liner. All, however, do not come to this self-knowledge. The history of literature, and especially of art, abounds with sad records of men, whose lives have been wasted because they aimed at a mark beyond their powers, mistaking aspiration for inspiration, sensibility for genius, an impressible organization for a creative

mind. The remark of Coleridge is perfectly true, that "where the subject is taken immediately from the author's personal sensations and experiences, the excellence of a particular poem is but an equivocal mark, and often a fallacious pledge of genuine poetical power." But the young especially are apt to mistake strength of feeling for power of expression, to exhaust themselves in unavailing efforts to give utterance to what are merely emotions and not conceptions, and to delude themselves with the notion that it is merely some formal defect, which care and training may supply, that keeps them from the highest success. But with the man of true genius, the inward voice and the outward utterance are simultaneous, and where imagination does body forth the forms of things unknown, the poet's pen will surely turn them to shape.

But in this conflict, the poet is in especial danger of suffering moral shipwreck. He is in danger of becoming the tool and slave of his age; of bartering away conscience and peace of mind for ease, delicate living, fine clothes and dainty food; of falling asleep on the lap of society and waking to the consciousness that the invincible locks of his genius have been shorn away by the hands of the

enchantress. It is hard to be loyal to truth, when its wages are want and obscurity ; to keep the erect attitude of sturdy virtue when house and land may be gained by bending before the idols of the time. Burns has recorded that in his experience nothing was so sad as a man seeking work ; more sad is the sight when that man is a man of genius ; and saddest of all is it when, enforced by fancied or real want, he consents to do the work, which is degradation and infamy. In this extremity, let him hold fast to the integrity of his soul. Let him learn that virtue may ennoble poverty, dignify neglect, and exalt a lowly station ; that peace of mind is better than a competence, and a good conscience more to be desired than a good estate. Is he called upon to suffer want, to languish in obscurity, to be the victim of persecution, to die, perhaps, of heart-sickness ? Let him drink in silence the cup that is held to his lips. Such has been the lot of the wise and gifted before him, and there was no covenant at his birth, that he should be exempt from the common chances of humanity. Let him eat his crust of bread in innocence and thankfulness. Let him dwell contentedly in his mean abode, whose threshold is not crossed by friendly forms, and whose echoes are not stirred by friendly voices.

Angel forms shall there minister to him ; the serene brow of faith, the cordial smile of hope, the overshadowing wings of peace shall be around him ; his own far-darting thoughts shall be his loving friends ; the wealth of his own imagination shall hang shapes of beauty upon the walls and empurple its floor with celestial roses. The smile of God shall beam upon it and the glory of its gates shall be as the glory of heaven.

From what has been said of the relation of the poet to his age, we might infer a fact which literary history confirms, that the poetry which has the most vitality and durability, is that which has flowed most naturally from the poet's age, and been the strongest infusion of the circumstances and scenes, among which it was written. The universal popularity of the poetry of Homer is to be ascribed as much to its truth as to its genius. It has an historical, as well as an imaginative value. From internal evidence, we have the strongest assurance that it is a true picture of the heroic age ; as we pronounce of some portraits that they are good likenesses, without ever having seen the originals. We call the Iliad the perfection of the epic, but the poet was unconscious that he was writing what we call an epic poem. He wrote, as

his own genius and the spirit of his age prompted, and we name the result the epic, and from it we draw the definition of that form of poetry. He introduces supernatural machinery, as a matter of course, because it was the faith of his time. To him who then walked upon the shores of the Ægean, Thetis and her nymphs were not cold shadows, but warm realities. He invests his gods and goddesses with a port, a majesty, a mixture of the terrible and the graceful, which can come only from that unquestioning faith, which trembles while it delineates. To him may be applied, with peculiar propriety, the lines,

Prevailing poet, whose undoubting mind  
Believed the magic wonders which he sang.

I have spoken of the Iliad as the work of a single mind, and that opinion is likely always to form a part of the popular literary creed, whatever may be the views of the initiated. The common mind will never consent to exchange that "blind old man of Scio's rocky isle," for a bodiless abstraction, nor blot out that single and blazing star of poetry from the dark morning sky, and put in its place a nebulous galaxy composed of innumerable lesser lights, without a name.

In all epic poetry since the *Iliad* we observe in a greater or less degree, the faltering touch and the diluted coloring which distinguish the copy from the original. When the *Æneid* was written, it was no longer an age of childlike faith in the unseen, but of speculation and skepticism; when, as Cicero says, it was a wonder that two augurs could look in each other's faces without laughing; and the effect is seen in the fainter lines and less vivid hues in which its mythological personages are drawn. There is a certain hesitation perceptible in the artist's hand. His gods and goddesses have not the unforced dignity and natural air of command of the deities of that elder lineage. They shine with a cold, lunar light, compared with that full meridian blaze. The truth of the observation which has been made may be more clearly perceived by comparing the *Æneid* with the *Georgics*. Here the poet's foot is upon his own native heather. Every line has the racy flavor of the soil. The hot sun and transparent sky of Italy hang over the scene, and its blue waters enclose it as in a frame. The song of the cicada, the rustle of the vine-leaf, the hum of the bee, the voice of the reaper, the cooing of the wood-pigeon; the very sounds which had charmed his own childhood

in his father's fields on the banks of the Mincius, and revealed to him the secret of his inspiration, breathe through its exquisite poetry and color it with the warm hues of life.

The revelation of Christianity has of course been unfavorable to that supernatural machinery, which forms a part of the very definition of the epic, and in all poems of that class which have been written since, it has been rather an obstacle to be overcome, in deference to established rules, than a help. Nothing proves the boldness of Milton's genius more than the choice of his subject ; nothing shows its vast resources more than the manner in which he has treated it. Its difficulties were almost superhuman, but he has grappled them with a commensurate power. Yet may we not ask, with that reverence with which so majestic a name should ever be approached, whether he has not attempted an enterprise in which complete success was impossible, whether there is not something of necessity debasing in those material attributes with which he has clothed the beings who are only to be spiritually discerned with the eye of faith, whether we do not pass lightly over such passages, to linger and dwell upon those, whose unequalled grandeur and beauty have no such

mixture of alloy, and whether it is not to be wished that he had at least paused at the foot of that throne, before whose glories angels bow and veil their faces.

The remarks which have been made upon Homer, may be applied in their spirit to the great work of Dante, which in originality and its subsequent influence upon literature, occupies a place second only to that of the Iliad. Indeed no work of the human mind is more entirely original than this. It draws its vigorous growth from the deep soil of its age. We see in it the religion, the philosophy, the science and the learning of that period set to the music of the noblest verse ; that blending of the Grecian and Gothic elements which characterized the times ; the unquestioning faith in all that the church prescribed, in the wild legends which it invented or circulated, and in the gross material images by which it symbolized the future world, and that strange mixture of Christianity and Pagan mythology which brings together Lucifer and Charon without any sense of incongruity. Its picturesqueness and intensity of feeling flow from the sincere and earnest spirit in which it was written. The poet relates the wonders he has seen, with the good faith and the circumstantial detail of



a witness on the stand. No poetry has the intense vitality of Dante's. The words burn and glow like coals of fire. To borrow a phrase of Ben Jonson's, it is "rammed with life." It was the growth of a mind which had been kindled by indignation at what it had suffered, and grief at what it had lost, to a heat like that of the central caverns of Etna. The mournful experiences of the lover whose world of hope and joy had been shattered into fragments, of the baffled politician, of the homeless exile whose daily food had long been the salt bread of dependence, only serve to deepen the earnestness with which he writes, and to add relief, distinctness and precision to his wonderful pictures.

Further illustrations of the same general truth may be seen in the *Orlando Furioso* of Ariosto, that bright mirror of romance which reflects so clearly the picturesque features of an age of chivalry; in the *Canterbury Tales* of Chaucer, which give us so lively a picture of the society and manners of England at the time when they were written, and in the early ballad poetry of England and Spain, so full of morning freshness and overflowing life. Nor is our own age without appropriate examples. One of its most striking poems is the *Faust* of

Goethe, and the most striking thing in it is the character of Mephistopheles. This conception was formed in the poet's mind at an early period in his life, before the breaking out of the French Revolution, and it may naturally enough have been suggested to an observation so penetrating and comprehensive as his, by the character of the times. It was then one of the dreariest periods in the history of the world; of heartless skepticism in religion, of shallow materialism in philosophy, of tame monotony in literature, and of hideous profligacy in social life. Of such an age, Mephistopheles is the type and exponent. He is an embodied sneer. He believes in nothing, hopes in nothing, sympathizes with nothing. He represents a civilization which has passed from ripeness to rottenness. If we suppose a man, thoroughly petrified by a long course of libertinism in corrupt cities and profligate courts, who has lost all faith in the honor of man, and the purity of woman, clothed with supernatural powers of body and mind, we have an outline of that character which the plastic hand of the poet has so skilfully filled up.

The gloomy discontent of Byron owed much of the response which it met in the public mind, to the time at which it was uttered. The period from

the breaking out of the French Revolution, to the battle of Waterloo, was one of intense and unparalleled excitement. The minds of men were kept in a constant effervescence by the magic of change and the whirl of revolution. There was passing before their eyes, the spectacle of a mighty drama, with Europe for the stage and kings for actors, managed by that extraordinary man, compared with whose dazzling career all that history has recorded is tame, all that fiction has invented is cold. Byron wrote at the close of this period, when the natural reaction was beginning to be felt; when the torpor, which follows a long-continued tension of the faculties, was stealing over men's minds, and their brains were throbbing with the sickness consequent upon the deep draughts of intellectual excitement, which they had drained. The energetic verses, in which he bewailed the wreck of his own lawless passions, fell upon the general mind like sparks upon combustible materials, and the result was a conflagration of unhappiness and misanthropy, the ashes of which are not yet cold.

The great success of the poetry of Burns and its permanent influence upon the literature of his country, is also in a great measure to be ascribed

to this vital element of truth and reality of which I have spoken. In his dedication of his poems to the noblemen and gentlemen of the Caledonian Hunt, he says, "the poetic genius of my country found me, as the prophetic bard Elijah did Elisha, at the plough, and threw her inspiring mantle over me. She bade me sing the loves, the joys, the rural scenes and the rural pleasures of my native soil, in my native tongue." Well was it for him and for us that he obeyed this call; that he drew his inspiration from the world around him; that he found his themes lying at his feet, in the daisy up-torn by his plough, in the field-mouse whose nest his furrow had laid bare, in the devotional exercises of his father's cottage, in the "banks and braes" of his own "bonnie Doon." The result is that the songs of the peasant bard have been borne, like the seeds of wild flowers, over the earth, and wherever they have fallen they have taken root in the human heart. They are mingling with the flow of the Thames, the Ganges, and St. Lawrence. The genius and the misfortune of Burns are forever associated with the glory and the shame of Scotland. He has poured round her hills and her valleys a light unknown before. Her forests have since waved more majestically; her streams

have flowed in more lucid beauty ; her men have seemed nobler ; her maidens more lovely. Where the foot of the poet has been planted — where his glance has rested — where his dust reposes — there is hallowed ground.

His spirit wraps the dusky mountain,  
 His memory sparkles o'er the fountain,  
 The meanest rill, the mightiest river  
 Rolls mingling with his name for ever.

There is much good sense in the advice that Goethe was accustomed to give to the young poets of his country, not as a matter of course to form the plan of writing a great poem, which might be neither suited to their own genius, nor adapted to the wants of their age, and which would cause them to lose many golden moments of inspiration, that might otherwise have been genially and productively employed, but to let their talent express itself naturally, and be ready to seize every poetical opportunity that might present itself. The epic form may be considered as a thing gone by, not to be recalled, like a belief in witchcraft, or the fashion of wearing armor. They who have written epics in our time, have only thrown away their labor and ingenuity. Who has ever, except as a task, toiled through the dreary pages of Cottle's

Alfred, the Charlemagne of Lucien Bonaparte, or, with reverence be it spoken, Barlow's Columbiad? A song of Burns, or a sonnet of Wordsworth is fairly worth an alcove of such epics.

So it is with the ballad. It is the rude expression of the sentiments of a rude age, and as such has a charm and value of its own. Clever men, in a cultivated age, amuse themselves with writing what they call ballads, but they are not native to the soil. The old trumpet tone cannot be brought back. The hues of morning will not blend with the light of noon. They remind us of the recent tournament at Eglington castle, a plaything imitation of what was once a manly reality; or of an artificial river in a pleasure-ground, which is very well in its way, but is not like the mountain stream, that wanders to the ocean at its own sweet will.

We frequently hear it said that ours is not a poetical age, still less a poetical country. The young poet thinks that he could have done something, if he had been born in another period, or under another sky. But this is, in a great measure, the effect of those magic hues which invest the distant both in time and space. Were the distant brought near, were the past made present, we should find the same mingled elements of prose

and poetry, that are around us at this moment. The soft cloud which lies on the distant mountain's side so temptingly, that we long for wings to bathe and revel in its voluptuous folds, is chilling to the bone, with its drizzling mist, the traveller who is enveloped by it. We mistake the costume of poetry for poetry itself, and the picturesque, which is one of its elements, for its whole substance. The age of chivalry was undoubtedly more picturesque than ours ; whether it was more poetical, is another question. Steel breast-plates and silken doublets make a fairer show than broadcloth, but the same human heart beats under both. "What is nature?" said Bonaparte to Bourrienne, "the thing is vague and unmeaning. Men and passions are the subjects to write about. Here is something to study." It betrays rather a poverty of invention to have perpetual recourse to foreign names, distant epochs, and remote places, to awaken interest. There is as good poetry in Middlesex, as in Italy or Cashmere, if we only knew where to look for it ; and he, whose heart is cold on the banks of the Merrimac, will not find it growing warm on those of the Tiber.

An opinion essentially similar to that which I have ventured to question, has been expressed by a distinguished living poet, in his lines to the Rainbow :

When science from creation's face,  
 Enchantment's veil withdraws,  
 What lovely visions yield their place  
 To cold material laws.

Presumptuous as it may seem to differ from the author of *O'Connor's Child*, upon the principles of his own art, I make bold to take issue with him both upon the general position and the particular illustration. Surely, the rainbow is a more glorious vision to him who comprehends the beautiful law by which its rich scarf is flung upon the dark skirts of the retiring storm. Akenside's is the better doctrine :

Nor ever yet  
 The melting rainbow's vermeil-tintured hues  
 To me have shone so pleasing, as when first  
 The hand of science pointed out the path,  
 In which the sunbeams, gleaming from the west,  
 Fall on the watery cloud.

The stars are the poetry of heaven, but do they become its prose to the instructed eye, which sees in them, not points of gold upon a ground of blue, but worlds of beauty peopling the infinite depths of space? Indeed, it seems to me that, if an undevout astronomer be mad, an unpoetical astronomer is monstrous. So too of the kindred science of



geology. The imaginative charm of the landscape does not disappear when we survey it from the geologist's point of view ; when we know what elemental forces, what mighty energies of wave and fire, have reared the pinnacled rock, have smoothed the level plain, have rounded the gentle slopes of the hills and torn open the mountain gates for the stream to pass through. The flower is not disenchanted to the botanist's eye, who has followed with his microscope the minute vessels and capillary tubes, by which it draws from the dark unsightly earth its beauty and its fragrance. To a well-constituted mind, the highest charm is ever that of truth ; compared to this, all the meretricious graces which may be borrowed from error and delusion are but as the varnish on the harlot's cheek, to the natural bloom of health and sensibility.

As poetry has its scientific exposition, so is science not without its poetical aspect. We may draw from the history of literature and science confirmations of the position which has been laid down. The imagination of Bacon was Shakspearian in its comprehensiveness and richness. Pascal, in his moral and religious writings, soars into the highest region of poetry. The scientific re-

searches of Goethe are well known. Sir Humphrey Davy, by common consent of all who knew him, might have been one of the prominent poets of his country, if he had not chosen to become the first of its scientific discoverers and benefactors. One of the most fruitful and musical of our own poets is also a highly distinguished man of science in more than one department. If I may presume to draw an inference from a very limited knowledge upon this subject, it seems to me that science has been a sufferer from the hard, cold and dry manner in which it has been viewed and treated, and that new value and interest may be given to its researches and discoveries by that more genial spirit in which we find it studied and interpreted by such men as Sir John Herschel and Professor Whewell.

The poet in our age has no occasion to lament his destiny or consider himself as one born out of due season. It is true that he must give up much of what was once a part of the common stock in trade of the craft, because there is no longer any demand for it in the market. All the commonplaces of classical mythology, Apollo and the Muses, Pegasus, Parnassus and Helicon, have lost their charm by long familiarity. The

present age deals with them as sternly as Coleridge relates that his teacher, Dr. Bowyer, did, when he met with them in the exercises of his boys ; “ Muse, boy, Muse — your nurse’s daughter, you mean ! Pierian spring ? Oh, ay, the cloister pump I suppose.” The green coats of the fairies, and the tinkling of their silver bells, have also passed away, never to be recalled. They can no longer endure the open daylight of reason. They were buried with the wand of that mighty magician, who, like his own Prospero, could summon shapes of beauty and power from the realms of earth, air and sea, to do his bidding. Nor can he have recourse to that cheap process of personification so common in the last century, by which life is attempted to be breathed into cold abstractions through the help of initial capitals, and which was carried so far at one period that an enthusiastic poet is said to have begun an ode with the line, “ Inoculation, heavenly maid, descend.” The compositor can no longer turn prose into poetry. The life from which the poet must now draw his materials is certainly less picturesque, perhaps less stimulating, than at former periods ; but the great fountains of poetry are left in the mind of man, with its thoughts that wander through eternity ;

and in the heart of man, that populous world of feeling and passion.

We call ours an extraordinary age. If by this expression it is meant that other ages have been ordinary in comparison with ours, it is a fallacy ; if it mean that our own age has its peculiar characteristics distinguishing it from previous periods, it is no more than a truism. Each age has its distinctive features and expression, and ours among the rest. Ours is a grave and earnest period ; of restless activity in every department of thought and inquiry ; of bold enterprise ; of fervid agitation. It is an age that takes nothing for granted. All institutions and all existing facts must be ever ready to produce their passports and their title deeds. The force of prescription is not recognised as it once was. The world has grown too old to be treated like the child, who is told to open his mouth and shut his eyes, if he would have something good. In legislation, politics and government, a fearless and irreverend spirit of innovation is at work. In these departments, the aim of the times is to produce symmetry, uniformity and consistency ; to correct what is anomalous, and cut off what is superfluous ; and the danger rather is, that we shall carve too deeply, and sacri-

fice the law of natural growth to an ideal standard of proportion.

Nor does the restless spirit of discontent stop here. A band of reformers, considerable from their enthusiasm and their purity of character, are questioning the fundamental principles on which society is organized and property distributed, and propose to unravel the whole web of social life and weave it anew. In metaphysics, the movement of oscillation is from materialism towards mysticism. The deepest problems in man's nature and destiny form the staple subject-matter of spiritual philosophy, and are discussed always boldly and sometimes successfully ; though it may be objected that the inquirer not unfrequently loses himself in a mist of words, and that the stream of thought is sometimes made turbid, as if on purpose to conceal its want of depth. The fate of Ixion is too often renewed ; and the lover of truth finds that he has embraced a cloud instead of a goddess.

In the sciences, there is a constant effort to simplify, to generalize, to discern unity in multiplicity, to extract the formula, to educe the law, by which discordant elements are harmonized and remote facts brought into affinity. In literature,

we require depth, comprehensiveness, philosophical insight and the breath of spiritual life. The writer of fiction must analyze motives, and lay bare the secret springs of action with metaphysical acuteness and discrimination. It is not enough to see the movement of the hands upon the dial-plate, we must also watch the play of the inner machinery, by which that movement is created and transmitted. The historian must have his theory of history ; he must survey his facts from his own point of view, and group them according to some pre-established harmony in his own mind. Criticism is more genial, more penetrating, more creative ; and the spirit of modern research is vivifying the dead bones of antiquity and extracting a new and deep meaning from the stories which charmed the childhood of the world.

From none of these influences can the poet escape, if he would ; and the less so, from the fact that his relations with society are more intimate than at former periods. He is no longer the mere minstrel singing to men, when their work is over, but is himself an actor and laborer. Poetry forms less of the embroidery of life, and more of its web. We have substituted the bookseller for the patron, and a reading public for a pension. Burns was

proud of his skill in all rural occupations. He was once engaged with a brother husbandman in binding up the corn into sheaves after the reapers, called in the dialect of Scotland "stooking," an employment in which he rarely found his match. After a hard strife, in which the poet was equalled, his rival said to him, "Robert, I 'm not so far behind you this time, I 'm thinking." The poet replied, while a glance of triumph shot from his dark eye, "John, you are behind me in something yet, for I made a song while I was stooking." I mention this anecdote for the illustration which it affords. The poet of our times must work and sing too. Hence every movement in social and moral reform, every institution, every party — temperance, anti-slavery, democracy — all keep their poets. In many of these, the delicate essence of poetry is quite sublimated and consumed by the hot flames of zeal. The poet is so terribly in earnest, that he is only one part poet to nine parts partisan.

Men in our times look to the poet to help them in their struggles and their aspirations. His clear insight, his picturesque fancy, his creative imagination are pressed into the service of toiling, suffering, sorrowing humanity. His themes are to be drawn less from the accidents of rank, place and position

than from those elements which are the common heritage of man. An admirer of Goethe once remarked to him, "your great tendency is to give the real a poetical form; others endeavor to realize the so-called poetical, the ideal, and the result is absurdity." The justice of this observation, so far as Goethe is concerned, will be acknowledged by all who are familiar with his writings. The poetry of our times must be, more than ever before, the poetry of real life, or if an expression may be allowed, somewhat savoring of conceit, the poetry of prose. It must be grave, earnest, sincere, and manly. It must rest upon the great heart of humanity, whose pulsations must vibrate through it. We exact more rigorously than at former periods, dignity of sentiment and elevation of feeling. Transparent beauty of diction and the most careful choice of language are seldom now employed to embalm cheap thoughts, commonplace imagery, and trivial conceptions, reminding us of straws and insects preserved in amber. The essence of poetry was once supposed to reside rather in the process or art, but now in the product or result. We sacrifice form to substance, and are only too careless about the garb of poetry. In the most sportive movements of the muse, there is an earnest



expression. There is a chord of rebellion in the lyre of Moore, and the songs of Beranger have sent him to prison.

In our own country we have the most complete manifestation of those characteristics which are peculiar to the age, and the absence of that contrast of light and shadow which arises from fixed differences in social life. How much poetry here loses by that clear daylight in which our history begins, and the want of those legendary traditions, drawn from the storehouse of a dim antiquity, and made venerable by the "awful hoar of innumerable ages" — how much it gains by those heroic and exalted virtues, in which the foundations of our state were laid, and by which so much of its subsequent history has been illustrated, and which shed so pure a light upon the Mayflower, the Pilgrims' rock, the plains of Lexington, and the shades of Mount Vernon — is a fruitful subject of inquiry, at which we can only give a passing glance.

Looking at the life, and the society that are around us to-day, if there be something discouraging in the plain level on which everything here rests, and in the absence of those picturesque and melo-dramatic elements, which are the birth of

traditional symbols and transmitted institutions, there is, on the other hand, a compensation in the more unchecked development, which is thereby given to simple humanity. In our free air, all human passions burn more brightly, and the hues of many-colored life glow more vividly. Love is more spontaneous, ambition is bolder, hope is more aspiring. The blood is younger in the veins of time. There is no occasion here for the poet to fold his hands in silent despair. All the primal elements of his art stand round him like ripened corn in the fields of the world. Here is man, nowhere more energetic, more persevering, more brave; here is woman, nowhere more lovely, more pure, more self-devoting; here are the dazzling hopes of youth; the evening shadows of age pointing eastward to the dawn of a new life; love that emparadises earth; the mother and her child; the ever new mystery of birth; the marriage benediction; the grave waiting for all. Above us are the unwrinkled heavens; the sleepless ocean murmurs around; and all the shows of earth are at our feet.

There is something fearful in the rapidity with which the industrial development of the country goes on; in the magic speed with which prairie grass is turned into pavements, and the primeval

forest is transformed into court-houses, blacksmiths' shops, and lawyers' offices. As we travel westward, we go back into the vanished centuries, and in the settler, with his axe before the giant woods of Michigan, we find a contemporary of the Greek, under the oaks of Dodona. All these things — even railroads, canals, and steam-ships, have, in their relation to human happiness and improvement, their poetical aspect. The poet who finds no “thoughts, that voluntary move harmonious numbers,” suggested by the Thames Tunnel, or the Croton Aqueduct, is but a tyro in his noble art.

If there be no lack of themes and inspiration, there is surely none of impulse and motive. Nowhere is the poet called upon more imperatively to speak out whatever there is within him of divine birth. We need the charm and grace which he alone can throw over the rough places of life. A nation skilled in the arts that multiply physical comforts and conveniences, but in which the imaginative faculty lies paralyzed and lifeless, disturbs us with the sense of something incomplete and imperfect. It reminds us of a world without children. It is a Shaker community on a gigantic scale. In some points we re-

cognise the superiority of Sparta to Athens; but what to us are the institutions of Lycurgus, compared with the choruses of Sophocles and the frieze of the Parthenon? As the idea of a cathedral includes not only the central nave, the long-drawn aisle, the high embowed roof, the massive buttress, but also, the roses blooming in stone, the quaint corbels, the twining wreaths of foliage, and the stained glass, blushing with the blood of martyrs and the glories of sunset; so in the idea of a state are comprehended, not only armies and navies, politics and government, the custom-house and the post-office, the judge and the sheriff, but whatever sweetens and decorates life, the arts that reproduce the beauty of stars and clouds and childhood's cheek — poetry, painting, sculpture and music.

The motives to intellectual action press upon us with peculiar force in our country, because the connection is here so immediate between character and happiness, and because there is nothing between us and ruin, but intelligence which sees the right, and virtue which pursues it. There are such elements of hope and fear mingled in the great experiment which is here trying, the results are so momentous to humanity, that all the

voices of the past and the future seem to blend in one sound of warning and entreaty, addressing itself not only to the general, but to the individual ear. By the wrecks of shattered states, by the quenched lights of promise that once shone upon man, by the long-deferred hopes of humanity, by all that has been done and suffered in the cause of liberty, by the martyrs that died before the sight, by the exiles, whose hearts have been crushed in dumb despair, by the memory of our fathers and their blood in our veins, — it calls upon us, each and all, to be faithful to the trust which God has committed to our hands.

That fine natures should here feel their energies palsied by the cold touch of indifference, that they should turn to Westminster Abbey, or the Alps or the Vatican, to quicken their flagging pulses, is of all mental anomalies the most inexplicable. The danger would seem to be rather that the spring of a sensitive mind may be broken by the weight of obligation that rests upon it, and that the stimulant, by its very excess, may become a narcotic. The poet must not plead his delicacy of organization as an excuse for dwelling apart in trim gardens of leisure, and looking at the world only through the loop-holes of his retreat. Let him fling him-

self with a gallant heart, upon the stirring life, that heaves and foams around him. He must call home his imagination from those spots on which the light of other days has thrown its pensive charm, and be content to dwell among his own people. The future and the present must inspire him, and not the past. He must transfer to his pictures the glow of morning, and not the hues of sunset. He must not go to any foreign Pharphar or Abana, for the sweet influences which he may find in that familiar stream, on whose banks he has played as a child, and mused as a man. Let him dedicate his powers to the best interests of his country. Let him sow the seeds of beauty along that dusty road, where humanity toils and sweats in the sun. Let him spurn the baseness which ministers food to the passions, that blot out in man's soul the image of God. Let not his hands add one seductive charm to the unzoned form of pleasure, nor twine the roses of his genius around the reveller's wine-cup. Let him mingle with his verse those grave and high elements befitting him, around whom the air of freedom blows, and upon whom the light of heaven shines. Let him teach those stern virtues of self-control and self-renunciation, of faith and patience, of abstinence and fortitude —

which constitute the foundations alike of individual happiness, and of national prosperity. Let him help to rear up this great people to the stature and symmetry of a moral manhood. Let him look abroad upon this young world in hope and not in despondency. Let him not be repelled by the coarse surface of material life. Let him survey it with the piercing insight of genius, and in the reconciling spirit of love. Let him find inspiration wherever man is found ; in the sailor singing at the windlass ; in the roaring flames of the furnace ; in the dizzy spindles of the factory ; in the regular beat of the thresher's flail ; in the smoke of the steam-ship ; in the whistle of the locomotive. Let the mountain wind blow courage into him. Let him pluck from the stars of his own wintry sky, thoughts, serene as their own light, lofty as their own place. Let the purity of the majestic heavens flow into his soul. Let his genius soar upon the wings of faith, and charm with the beauty of truth.







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