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Literary Criticism and Theory:
A 19th-Century
Anglo-American Anthology



Mise en Abyme
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Literary Criticism and Theory: A 19th-Century Anglo-American Anthology

Selected by Armando Rotondi and Elisa Sartor

The Poetic Principle (1850)

*Edgar Allan Poe*¹

In speaking of the Poetic Principle, I have no design to be either thorough or profound. While discussing, very much at random, the essentiality of what we call Poetry, my principal purpose will be to cite for consideration, some few of those minor English or American poems which best suit my own taste, or which, upon my own fancy, have left the most definite impression. By “minor poems” I mean, of course, poems of little length. And here, in the beginning, permit me to say a few words in regard to a somewhat peculiar principle, which, whether rightfully or wrongfully, has always had its influence in my own critical estimate of the poem. I hold that a long poem does not exist. I maintain that the phrase, “a long poem,” is simply a flat contradiction in terms.

I need scarcely observe that a poem deserves its title only inasmuch as it excites, by elevating the soul. The value of the poem is in the ratio of this elevating excitement. But all excitements are, through a psychal necessity, transient. That degree of excitement which would entitle a poem to be so called at all, cannot be sustained throughout a composition of any great length. After the lapse of half an hour, at the very utmost, it flags—fails—a revulsion ensues—and then the poem is, in effect, and in fact, no longer such.

There are, no doubt, many who have found difficulty in reconciling the critical dictum that the “Paradise Lost” is to be devoutly admired throughout, with the absolute impossibility of maintaining for it, during perusal, the amount of enthusiasm which that critical dictum would demand. This great work, in fact, is to be regarded as poetical, only when, losing sight of that vital requisite in all works of Art, Unity, we view it merely as a series of minor poems. If, to preserve its Unity—its totality of effect or impression—we read it (as would be necessary) at a single sitting, the result is but a constant alternation of excitement and depression. After a passage of what we feel to be true poetry, there follows, inevitably, a passage of platitude which no critical pre-judgment can force us to admire; but if, upon completing the work, we read it again, omitting

¹ “The Poetic Principle” was published in the *Home Journal*, no. 36, August 31st 1850, with an introductory note by Nathaniel Parker Willis.

the first book—that is to say, commencing with the second—we shall be surprised at now finding that admirable which we before condemned—that damnable which we had previously so much admired. It follows from all this that the ultimate, aggregate, or absolute effect of even the best epic under the sun, is a nullity:—and this is precisely the fact.

In regard to the Iliad, we have, if not positive proof, at least very good reason for believing it intended as a series of lyrics; but, granting the epic intention, I can say only that the work is based in an imperfect sense of art. The modern epic is, of the supposititious ancient model, but an inconsiderate and blindfold imitation. But the day of these artistic anomalies is over. If, at any time, any very long poem *were* popular in reality, which I doubt, it is at least clear that no very long poem will ever be popular again.

That the extent of a poetical work is, *ceteris paribus*, the measure of its merit, seems undoubtedly, when we thus state it, a proposition sufficiently absurd—yet we are indebted for it to the Quarterly Reviews. Surely there can be nothing in mere *size*, abstractly considered—there can be nothing in mere *bulk*, so far as a volume is concerned, which has so continuously elicited admiration from these saturnine pamphlets! A mountain, to be sure, by the mere sentiment of physical magnitude which it conveys, *does* impress us with a sense of the sublime—but no man is impressed after *this* fashion by the material grandeur of even “The Columbiad.” Even the Quarterlies have not instructed us to be so impressed by it. As *yet*, they have not *insisted* on our estimating Lamartine by the cubic foot, or Pollock by the pound—but what else are we to *infer* from their continual prating about “sustained effort?” If, by “sustained effort,” any little gentleman has accomplished an epic, let us frankly commend him for the effort—if this indeed be a thing commendable—but let us forbear praising the epic on the effort’s account. It is to be hoped that common sense, in the time to come, will prefer deciding upon a work of Art, rather by the impression it makes—by the effect it produces—than by the time it took to impress the effect, or by the amount of “sustained effort” which had been found necessary in effecting the impression. The fact is, that perseverance is one thing and genius quite another—nor can all the Quarterlies in Christendom confound them. By-and-by, this proposition, with many which I have been just urging, will be received as self-evident. In the meantime, by being generally condemned as falsities, they will not be essentially damaged as truths.

On the other hand, it is clear that a poem may be improperly brief. Undue brevity degenerates into mere epigrammatism. A *very* short poem, while now and then producing a brilliant or vivid, never produces a profound or enduring effect. There must be the steady

pressing down of the stamp upon the wax. De Béranger has wrought innumerable things, pungent and spirit-stirring; but, in general, they have been too imponderous to stamp themselves deeply into the public attention; and thus, as so many feathers of fancy, have been blown aloft only to be whistled down the wind.

A remarkable instance of the effect of undue brevity in depressing a poem—in keeping it out of the popular view—is afforded by the following exquisite little Serenade:

I arise from dreams of thee
In the first sweet sleep of night,
When the winds are breathing low,
And the stars are shining bright.
I arise from dreams of thee,
And a spirit in my feet
Has led me—who knows how?—
To thy chamber-window, sweet!

The wandering airs they faint
On the dark, the silent stream—
The champak odors fail
Like sweet thoughts in a dream;
The nightingale's complaint,
It dies upon her heart,
As I must die on thine,
O, beloved as thou art!

O, lift me from the grass!
I die, I faint, I fail!
Let thy love in kisses rain
On my lips and eyelids pale.
My cheek is cold and white, alas!
My heart beats loud and fast:
Oh! press it close to thine again,
Where it will break at last!

Very few perhaps are familiar with these lines—yet no less a poet than Shelley is their author. Their warm, yet delicate and ethereal imagination will be appreciated by all, but by none so thoroughly as by him who has himself arisen from sweet dreams of one beloved to bathe in the aromatic air of a southern midsummer night.

One of the finest poems by Willis—the very best, in my opinion, which he has ever written—has, no doubt, through this same defect of undue brevity, been kept back from its proper position, not less in the critical than in the popular view:

The shadows lay along Broadway,
 'Twas near the twilight-tide—
And slowly there a lady fair
 Was walking in her pride.
Alone walk'd she; but, viewlessly,
 Walk'd spirits at her side.

Peace charm'd the street beneath her feet,
 And Honor charm'd the air;
And all astir looked kind on her,
 And called her good as fair—
For all God ever gave to her
 She kept with chary care.

She kept with care her beauties rare
 From lovers warm and true—
For her heart was cold to all but gold,
 And the rich came not to woo—
But honor'd well are charms to sell
 If priests the selling do.

Now walking there was one more fair—
 A slight girl, lily-pale;
And she had unseen company
 To make the spirit quail—
'Twixt Want and Scorn she walk'd forlorn,
 And nothing could avail.

No mercy now can clear her brow
 For this world's peace to pray;
For, as love's wild prayer dissolved in air,
 Her woman's heart gave way!—
But the sin forgiven by Christ in Heaven
 By man is cursed away!

In this composition we find it difficult to recognize the Willis who has written so many mere “verses of society.” The lines are not only richly ideal, but full of energy; while they breathe an earnestness—an evident sincerity of sentiment—for which we look in vain throughout all the other works of this author.

While the epic mania—while the idea that, to merit in poetry, prolixity is indispensable—has, for some years past, been gradually dying out of the public mind, by mere dint of its own absurdity—we find it succeeded by a heresy too palpably false to be long tolerated, but one which, in the brief period it has already endured, may be said to have accomplished more in the corruption of our Poetical Literature than all its other enemies combined. I allude to the heresy of *The Didactic*. It has been assumed, tacitly and avowedly, directly and indirectly, that the ultimate

object of all Poetry is Truth. Every poem, it is said, should inculcate a moral; and by this moral is the poetical merit of the work to be adjudged. We Americans especially have patronized this happy idea; and we Bostonians, very especially, have developed it in full. We have taken it into our heads that to write a poem simply for the poem's sake, and to acknowledge such to have been our design, would be to confess ourselves radically wanting in the true poetic dignity and force: but the simple fact is, that, would we but permit ourselves to look into our own souls we should immediately there discover that under the sun there neither exists nor *can* exist any work more thoroughly dignified—more supremely noble than this very poem—this poem *per se*—this poem which is a poem and nothing more—this poem written solely for the poem's sake.

With as deep a reverence for the True as ever inspired the bosom of man, I would nevertheless, limit, in some measure, its modes of inculcation. I would limit to enforce them. I would not enfeeble them by dissipation. The demands of Truth are severe. She has no sympathy with the myrtles. All *that* which is so indispensable in Song, is precisely all *that* with which *she* has nothing whatever to do. It is but making her a flaunting paradox, to wreath her in gems and flowers. In enforcing a truth, we need severity rather than efflorescence of language. We must be simple, precise, terse. We must be cool, calm, unimpassioned. In a word, we must be in that mood which, as nearly as possible, is the exact converse of the poetical. *He* must be blind indeed who does not perceive the radical and chasmal differences between the truthful and the poetical modes of inculcation. He must be theory-mad beyond redemption who, in spite of these differences, shall still persist in attempting to reconcile the obstinate oils and waters of Poetry and Truth.

Dividing the world of mind into its three most immediately obvious distinctions, we have the Pure Intellect, Taste, and the Moral Sense. I place Taste in the middle, because it is just this position which, in the mind, it occupies. It holds intimate relations with either extreme; but from the Moral Sense is separated by so faint a difference that Aristotle has not hesitated to place some of its operations among the virtues themselves. Nevertheless, we find the *offices* of the trio marked with a sufficient distinction. Just as the Intellect concerns itself with Truth, so Taste informs us of the Beautiful while the Moral Sense is regardful of Duty. Of this latter, while Conscience teaches the obligation, and Reason the expediency, Taste contents herself with displaying the charms: waging war upon Vice solely on the ground of her deformity—her disproportion—her animosity to the fitting, to the appropriate, to the harmonious—in a word, to Beauty.

An immortal instinct, deep within the spirit of man, is thus, plainly, a sense of the Beautiful. This it is which administers to his delight in the manifold forms, and sounds, and odors, and sentiments amid which he exists. And just as the lily is repeated in the lake, or the eyes of Amaryllis in the mirror, so is the mere oral or written repetition of these forms, and sounds, and colors, and odors, and sentiments, a duplicate source of delight. But this mere repetition is not poetry. He who shall simply sing, with however glowing enthusiasm, or with however vivid a truth of description, of the sights, and sounds, and odors, and colors, and sentiments, which greet *him* in common with all mankind—he, I say, has yet failed to prove his divine title. There is still a something in the distance which he has been unable to attain. We have still a thirst unquenchable, to allay which he has not shown us the crystal springs. This thirst belongs to the immortality of Man. It is at once a consequence and an indication of his perennial existence. It is the desire of the moth for the star. It is no mere appreciation of the Beauty before us—but a wild effort to reach the Beauty above. Inspired by an ecstatic prescience of the glories beyond the grave, we struggle, by multiform combinations among the things and thoughts of Time, to attain a portion of that Loveliness whose very elements, perhaps, appertain to eternity alone. And thus when by Poetry,—or when by Music, the most entrancing of the Poetic moods—we find ourselves melted into tears—we weep then—not as the Abbate Gravina supposes—through excess of pleasure, but through a certain, petulant, impatient sorrow at our inability to grasp *now*, wholly, here on earth, at once and for ever, those divine and rapturous joys, of which *through* the poem, or *through* the music, we attain to but brief and indeterminate glimpses.

The struggle to apprehend the supernal Loveliness—this struggle, on the part of souls fittingly constituted—has given to the world all *that* which it (the world) has ever been enabled at once to understand and *to feel* as poetic.

The Poetic Sentiment, of course, may develop itself in various modes—in Painting, in Sculpture, in Architecture, in the Dance—very especially in Music—and very peculiarly, and with a wide field, in the composition position of the Landscape Garden. Our present theme, however, has regard only to its manifestation in words. And here let me speak briefly on the topic of rhythm. Contenting myself with the certainty that Music, in its various modes of metre, rhythm, and rhyme, is of so vast a moment in Poetry as never to be wisely rejected—is so vitally important an adjunct, that he is simply silly who declines its assistance, I will not now pause to maintain its absolute essentiality. It is in Music, perhaps, that the soul most nearly attains the great end for which, when inspired by the Poetic Sentiment, it struggles—the creation of supernal

Beauty. It *may* be, indeed, that here this sublime end is, now and then, attained *in fact*. We are often made to feel, with a shivering delight, that from an earthly harp are stricken notes which *cannot* have been unfamiliar to the angels. And thus there can be little doubt that in the union of Poetry with Music in its popular sense, we shall find the widest field for the Poetic development. The old Bards and Minnesingers had advantages which we do not possess—and Thomas Moore, singing his own songs, was, in the most legitimate manner, perfecting them as poems.

To recapitulate, then:—I would define, in brief, the Poetry of words as *The Rhythmical Creation of Beauty*. Its sole arbiter is Taste. With the Intellect or with the Conscience, it has only collateral relations. Unless incidentally, it has no concern whatever either with Duty or with Truth.

A few words, however, in explanation. *That* pleasure which is at once the most pure, the most elevating, and the most intense, is derived, I maintain, from the contemplation of the Beautiful. In the contemplation of Beauty we alone find it possible to attain that pleasurable elevation, or excitement, *of the soul*, which we recognise as the Poetic Sentiment, and which is so easily distinguished from Truth, which is the satisfaction of the Reason, or from Passion, which is the excitement of the heart. I make Beauty, therefore—using the word as inclusive of the sublime—I make Beauty the province of the poem, simply because it is an obvious rule of Art that effects should be made to spring as directly as possible from their causes:—no one as yet having been weak enough to deny that the peculiar elevation in question is at least *most readily* attainable in the poem. It by no means follows, however, that the incitements of Passion, or the precepts of Duty, or even the lessons of Truth, may not be introduced into a poem, and with advantage; for they may subserve, incidentally, in various ways, the general purposes of the work:—but the true artist will always contrive to tone them down in proper subjection to that *Beauty* which is the atmosphere and the real essence of the poem.

I cannot better introduce the few poems which I shall present for your consideration, than by the citation of the Pröem to Mr. Longfellow's "WaiP":

The day is done, and the darkness
Falls from the wings of Night,
As a feather is wafted downward
From an Eagle in his flight.

I see the lights of the village

Gleam through the rain and the mist,
And a feeling of sadness comes o'er me,
That my soul cannot resist;

A feeling of sadness and longing,
That is not akin to pain,
And resembles sorrow only
As the mist resembles the rain.

Come, read to me some poem,
Some simple and heartfelt lay,
That shall soothe this restless feeling,
And banish the thoughts of day.

Not from the grand old masters,
Not from the bards sublime,
Whose distant footsteps echo
Through the corridors of time.

For, like strains of martial music,
Their mighty thoughts suggest
Life's endless toil and endeavor;
And to-night I long for rest.

Read from some humbler poet,
Whose songs gushed from his heart,
As showers from the clouds of summer,
Or tears from the eyelids start;

Who through long days of labor,
And nights devoid of ease,
Still heard in his soul the music
Of wonderful melodies.

Such songs have power to quiet
The restless pulse of care,
And come like the benediction
That follows after prayer.

Then read from the treasured volume
The poem of thy choice,
And lend to the rhyme of the poet
The beauty of thy voice.

And the night shall be filled with music,
And the cares that infest the day,
Shall fold their tents, like the Arabs,
And as silently steal away.

With no great range of imagination, these lines have been justly admired for their delicacy of expression. Some of the images are very effective. Nothing can be better than—

————— the bards sublime,
Whose distant footsteps echo
Down the corridors of Time.

The idea of the last quatrain is also very effective. The poem, on the whole, however, is chiefly to be admired for the graceful *insouciance* of its metre, so well in accordance with the character of the sentiments, and especially for the *ease* of the general manner. This “ease,” or naturalness, in a literary style, it has long been the fashion to regard as ease in appearance alone—as a point of really difficult attainment. But not so:—a natural manner is difficult only to him who should never meddle with it—to the unnatural. It is but the result of writing with the understanding, or with the instinct, that *the tone*, in composition, should always be that which the mass of mankind would adopt—and must perpetually vary, of course, with the occasion. The author who, after the fashion of “*The North American Review*,” should be, upon *all* occasions, merely “quiet,” must necessarily upon *many* occasions, be simply silly, or stupid; and has no more right to be considered “easy,” or “natural,” than a Cockney exquisite, or than the sleeping Beauty in the wax-works.

Among the minor poems of Bryant, none has so much impressed me as the one which he entitles “June.” I quote only a portion of it:

There, through the long, long summer hours,
The golden light should lie,
And thick young herbs and groups of flowers
Stand in their beauty by.
The oriole should build and tell
His love-tale, close beside my cell;
The idle butterfly
Should rest him there, and there be heard
The housewife-bee and humming bird.

And what, if cheerful shouts at noon,
Come, from the village sent,
Or songs of maids, beneath the moon,
With fairy laughter blent?
And what if, in the evening light,
Betrothed lovers walk in sight
Of my low monument?

I would the lovely scene around
Might know no sadder sight nor sound.

I know, I know I should not see
The season's glorious show,
Nor would its brightness shine for me,
Nor its wild music flow;
But if, around my place of sleep,
The friends I love should come to weep,
They might not haste to go.
Soft airs, and song, and light, and bloom
Should keep them lingering by my tomb.

These to their soften'd hearts should bear
The thought of what has been,
And speak of one who cannot share
The gladness of the scene;
Whose part in all the pomp that fills
The circuit of the summer hills,
Is—that his grave is green;
And deeply would their hearts rejoice
To hear again his living voice.

The rhythmical flow, here, is even voluptuous—nothing could be more melodious. The poem has always affected me in a remarkable manner. The intense melancholy which seems to well up, perforce, to the surface of all the poet's cheerful sayings about his grave, we find thrilling us to the soul—while there is the truest poetic elevation in the thrill. The impression left is one of a pleasurable sadness. And if, in the remaining compositions which I shall introduce to you, there be more or less of a similar tone always apparent, let me remind you that (how or why we know not) this certain taint of sadness is inseparably connected with all the higher manifestations of true Beauty. It is, nevertheless,

A feeling of sadness and longing
That is not akin to pain,
And resembles sorrow only
As the mist resembles the rain.

The taint of which I speak is clearly perceptible even in a poem so full of brilliancy and spirit as the "Health" of Edward Coote Pinkney:—

I fill this cup to one made up
Of loveliness alone,

A woman, of her gentle sex
The seeming paragon;
To whom the better elements
And kindly stars have given
A form so fair, that, like the air,
'Tis less of earth than heaven.

Her every tone is music's own,
Like those of morning birds,
And something more than melody
Dwells ever in her words;
The coinage of her heart are they,
And from her lips each flows
As one may see the burden'd bee
Forth issue from the rose.

Affections are as thoughts to her,
The measures of her hours;
Her feelings have the fragrancy,
The freshness of young flowers;
And lovely passions, changing oft,
So fill her, she appears
The image of themselves by turns,—
The idol of past years!

Of her bright face one glance will trace
A picture on the brain,
And of her voice in echoing hearts
A sound must long remain;
But memory, such as mine of her,
So very much endears,
When death is nigh my latest sigh
Will not be life's but hers.

I fill'd this cup to one made up
Of loveliness alone,
A woman, of her gentle sex
The seeming paragon—
Her health! and would on earth there stood,
Some more of such a frame,
That life might be all poetry,
And weariness a name.

It was the misfortune of Mr. Pinkney to have been born too far south. Had he been a New Englander, it is probable that he would have been ranked as the first of American lyrists, by that magnanimous cabal which has so long controlled the destinies of American Letters, in conducting the thing called "*The North American Review*." The poem just cited is especially beautiful; but the poetic elevation which it induces, we must refer chiefly to our sympathy in the

poet's enthusiasm. We pardon his hyperboles for the evident earnestness with which they are uttered.

It was by no means my design, however, to expatiate upon the *merits* of what I should read you. These will necessarily speak for themselves. Boccalini, in his "Advertisements from Parnassus," tells us that Zoilus once presented Apollo a very caustic criticism upon a very admirable book:—whereupon the god asked him for the beauties of the work. He replied that he only busied himself about the errors. On hearing this, Apollo, handing him a sack of unwinnowed wheat, bade him pick out *all the chaff* for his reward.

Now this fable answers very well as a hit at the critics—but I am by no means sure that the god was in the right. I am by no means certain that the true limits of the critical duty are not grossly misunderstood. Excellence, in a poem especially, may be considered in the light of an axiom, which need only be properly *put*, to become self-evident. It is *not* excellence if it require to be demonstrated as such:—and thus, to point out too particularly the merits of a work of Art, is to admit that they are *not* merits altogether.

Among the "Melodies" of Thomas Moore, is one whose distinguished character as a poem proper, seems to have been singularly left out of view. I allude to his lines beginning—"Come, rest in this bosom." The intense energy of their expression is not surpassed by anything in Byron. There are two of the lines in which a sentiment is conveyed that embodies the *all in all* of the divine passion of Love—a sentiment which, perhaps, has found its echo in more, and in more passionate, human hearts than any other single sentiment ever embodied in words:

Come, rest in this bosom, my own stricken deer,
Though the herd have fled from thee, thy home is still here;
Here still is the smile, that no cloud can o'ercast,
And a heart and a hand all thy own to the last.

Oh! what was love made for, if 'tis not the same
Through joy and through torment, through glory and shame?
I know not, I ask not, if guilt's in that heart,
I but know that I love thee, whatever thou art.

Thou hast call'd me thy Angel in moments of bliss,
And thy Angel I'll be, 'mid the horrors of this,—
Through the furnace, unshrinking, thy steps to pursue,
And shield thee, and save thee,—or perish there too!

It has been the fashion, of late days, to deny Moore Imagination, while granting him Fancy—a distinction originating with Coleridge—than whom no man more fully comprehended the great powers of Moore. The fact is, that the fancy of this poet so far predominates over all his other faculties, and over the fancy of all other men, as to have induced, very naturally, the idea that he is fanciful *only*. But never was there a greater mistake. Never was a grosser wrong done the fame of a true poet. In the compass of the English language I can call to mind no poem more profoundly—more weirdly *imaginative*, in the best sense, than the lines commencing—“I would I were by that dim lake”—which are the composition of Thomas Moore. I regret that I am unable to remember them.

One of the noblest—and, speaking of Fancy, one of the most singularly fanciful of modern poets, was Thomas Hood. His “Fair Ines” had always, for me, an inexpressible charm:

O saw ye not fair Ines?
She's gone into the West,
To dazzle when the sun is down,
And rob the world of rest:
She took our daylight with her,
The smiles that we love best,
With morning blushes on her cheek,
And pearls upon her breast.

O, turn again, fair Ines,
Before the fall of night,
For fear the moon should shine alone,
And stars unrivall'd bright;
And blessed will the lover be
That walks beneath their light,
And breathes the love against thy cheek
I dare not even write!

Would I had been, fair Ines,
That gallant cavalier,
Who rode so gaily by thy side,
And whisper'd thee so near!
Were there no bonny dames at home,
Or no true lovers here,
That he should cross the seas to win
The dearest of the dear?

I saw thee, lovely Ines,
Descend along the shore,
With bands of noble gentlemen,
And banners waved before;
And gentle youth and maidens gay,

And snowy plumes they wore;
It would have been a beauteous dream,
– If it had been no more!

Alas, alas, fair Ines,
She went away with song,
With music waiting on her steps,
And shoutings of the throng;
But some were sad and felt no mirth,
But only Music's wrong,
In sounds that sang Farewell, Farewell,
To her you've loved so long.

Farewell, farewell, fair Ines,
That vessel never bore
So fair a lady on its deck,
Nor danced so light before,—
Alas, for pleasure on the sea,
And sorrow on the shore!
The smile that blest one lover's heart
Has broken many more!

“The Haunted House,” by the same author, is one of the truest poems ever written—one of the *truest*—one of the most unexceptionable—one of the most thoroughly artistic, both in its theme and in its execution. It is, moreover, powerfully ideal—imaginative. I regret that its length renders it unsuitable for the purposes of this Lecture. In place of it, permit me to offer the universally appreciated “Bridge of Sighs”:—

One more Unfortunate,
Weary of breath,
Rashly importunate,
Gone to her death!

Take her up tenderly,
Lift her with care;—
Fashion'd so slenderly,
Young, and so fair!

Look at her garments
Clinging like cerements;
Whilst the wave constantly
Drips from her clothing;
Take her up instantly,
Loving, not loathing.—

Touch her not scornfully;
Think of her mournfully,

Gently and humanly;
Not of the stains of her,
All that remains of her
Now is pure womanly.

Make no deep scrutiny
Into her mutiny
Rash and undutiful;
Past all dishonor,
Death has left on her
Only the beautiful.

Still, for all slips of hers,
One of Eve's family—
Wipe those poor lips of hers
Oozing so clammy.

Loop up her tresses
Escaped from the comb,
Her fair auburn tresses;
Whilst wonderment guesses
Where was her home?

Who was her father?
Who was her mother?
Had she a sister?
Had she a brother?
Or was there a dearer one
Still, and a nearer one
Yet, than all other?

Alas! for the rarity
Of Christian charity
Under the sun!
Oh! it was pitiful!
Near a whole city full,
Home she had none.

Sisterly, brotherly,
Fatherly, motherly,
Feelings had changed:
Love, by harsh evidence,
Thrown from its eminence;
Even God's providence
Seeming estranged.

Where the lamps quiver
So far in the river,
With many a light
From window and casement,
From garret to basement,

She stood, with amazement,
Houseless by night.

The bleak wind of March
Made her tremble and shiver;
But not the dark arch,
Or the black flowing river:
Mad from life's history,
Glad to death's mystery,
Swift to be hurl'd—
Anywhere, anywhere
Out of the world!

In she plunged boldly,
No matter how coldly
The rough river ran,—
Over the brink of it,
Picture it,—think of it,
Dissolute Man!
Lave in it, drink of it
Then, if you can!

Take her up tenderly,
Lift her with care;
Fashion'd so slenderly,
Young, and so fair!
Ere her limbs frigidly
Stiffen too rigidly,
Decently,—kindly,—
Smooth and compose them;
And her eyes, close them,
Staring so blindly!

Dreadfully staring
Through muddy impurity,
As when with the daring
Last look of despairing
Fixed on futurity.

Perishing gloomily,
Spurred by contumely,
Cold inhumanity,
Burning insanity,
Into her rest,—
Cross her hands humbly,
As if praying dumbly,
Over her breast!
Owning her weakness,
Her evil behavior,
And leaving, with meekness,
Her sins to her Savior!

The vigor of this poem is no less remarkable than its pathos. The versification, although carrying the fanciful to the very verge of the fantastic, is nevertheless admirably adapted to the wild insanity which is the thesis of the poem.

Among the minor poems of Lord Byron, is one which has never received from the critics the praise which it undoubtedly deserves:

Though the day of my destiny's over,
And the star of my fate hath declined,
Thy soft heart refused to discover
The faults which so many could find;
Though thy soul with my grief was acquainted,
It shrunk not to share it with me,
And the love which my spirit hath painted
It never hath found but in *thee*.

Then when nature around me is smiling,
The last smile which answers to mine,
I do not believe it beguiling,
Because it reminds me of thine;
And when winds are at war with the ocean,
As the breasts I believed in with me,
If their billows excite an emotion,
It is that they bear me from *thee*.

Though the rock of my last hope is shivered,
And its fragments are sunk in the wave,
Though I feel that my soul is delivered
To pain—it shall not be its slave.
There is many a pang to pursue me:
They may crush, but they shall not contemn—
They may torture, but shall not subdue me—
'Tis of *thee* that I think—not of them.

Though human, thou didst not deceive me,
Though woman, thou didst not forsake,
Though loved, thou forborest to grieve me,
Though slandered, thou never couldst shake,—
Though trusted, thou didst not disclaim me,
Though parted, it was not to fly,
Though watchful, 'twas not to defame me,
Nor mute, that the world might belie.

Yet I blame not the world, nor despise it,
Nor the war of the many with one—
If my soul was not fitted to prize it,
'Twas folly not sooner to shun:

And if dearly that error hath cost me,
And more than I once could foresee,
I have found that whatever it lost me,
It could not deprive me of *thee*.

From the wreck of the past, which hath perished,
Thus much I at least may recall,
It hath taught me that which I most cherished
Deserved to be dearest of all:
In the desert a fountain is springing,
In the wide waste there still is a tree,
And a bird in the solitude singing,
Which speaks to my spirit of *thee*.

Although the rhythm, here, is one of the most difficult, the versification could scarcely be improved. No nobler *theme* ever engaged the pen of poet. It is the soul-elevating idea, that no man can consider himself entitled to complain of Fate while, in his adversity, he still retains the unwavering love of woman.

From Alfred Tennyson—although in perfect sincerity I regard him as the noblest poet that ever lived—I have left myself time to cite only a very brief specimen. I call him, and *think* him the noblest of poets—*not* because the impressions he produces are, at *all* times, the most profound—*not* because the poetical excitement which he induces is, at *all* times, the most intense—but because it *is*, at all times, the most ethereal—in other words, the most elevating and most pure. No poet is so little of the earth, earthy. What I am about to read is from his last long poem, “The Princess”:

Tears, idle tears, I know not what they mean,
Tears from the depth of some divine despair
Rise in the heart, and gather to the eyes,
In looking on the happy Autumn-fields,
And thinking of the days that are no more.

Fresh as the first beam glittering on a sail,
That brings our friends up from the underworld,
Sad as the last which reddens over one
That sinks with all we love below the verge;
So sad, so fresh, the days that are no more.

Ah, sad and strange as in dark summer dawns
The earliest pipe of half-awaken'd birds
To dying ears, when unto dying eyes
The casement slowly grows a glimmering square;
So sad, so strange, the days that are no more.

Dear as remember'd kisses after death,
And sweet as those by hopeless fancy feign'd
On lips that are for others; deep as love,
Deep as first love, and wild with all regret;
O Death in Life, the days that are no more.

Thus, although in a very cursory and imperfect manner, I have endeavored to convey to you my conception of the Poetic Principle. It has been my purpose to suggest that, while this Principle itself is, strictly and simply, the Human Aspiration for Supernal Beauty, the manifestation of the Principle is always found in *an elevating excitement of the Soul*—quite independent of that passion which is the intoxication of the Heart—or of that Truth which is the satisfaction of the Reason. For, in regard to Passion, alas! its tendency is to degrade, rather than to elevate the Soul. Love, on the contrary—Love—the true, the divine Eros—the Uranian, as distinguished from the Dionæan Venus—is unquestionably the purest and truest of all poetical themes. And in regard to Truth—if, to be sure, through the attainment of a truth, we are led to perceive a harmony where none was apparent before, we experience, at once, the true poetical effect—but this effect is referable to the harmony alone, and not in the least degree to the truth which merely served to render the harmony manifest.

We shall reach, however, more immediately a distinct conception of what the true Poetry is, by mere reference to a few of the simple elements which induce in the Poet himself the true poetical effect. He recognizes the ambrosia which nourishes his soul, in waving of the grain-fields—in the slanting of tall, Eastern trees—in the blue distance of mountains—in the grouping of clouds—in the twinkling of half-hidden brooks—in the gleaming of silver rivers—in the repose of sequestered lakes—in the star-mirroring depths of lonely wells. He perceives it in the songs of birds—in the harp of Æolus—in the sighing of the night-wind—in the repining voice of the forest—in the surf that complains to the shore—in the fresh breath of the woods—in the scent of the violet—in the voluptuous perfume of the hyacinth—in the suggestive odor that comes to him, at eventide, from far-distant, undiscovered islands, over dim oceans, illimitable and unexplored. He owns it in all noble thoughts—in all unworldly motives—in all holy impulses—in all chivalrous, generous, and self-sacrificing deeds. He feels it in the beauty of woman—in the grace of her step—in the lustre of her eye—in the melody of her voice—in her soft laughter—in her sigh—in the harmony of the rustling of her robes. He deeply feels it in her winning endearments—in her burning enthusiasms—in her gentle charities—in her meek and devotional

endurances—but above all—ah, far above all—he kneels to it—he worships it in the faith, in the purity, in the strength, in the altogether divine majesty—of her *love*.

Let me conclude—by the recitation of yet another brief poem—one very different in character from any that I have before quoted. It is by Motherwell, and is called “The Song of the Cavalier.” With our modern and altogether rational ideas of the absurdity and impiety of warfare, we are not precisely in that frame of mind best adapted to sympathize with the sentiments, and thus to appreciate the real excellence of the poem. To do this fully, we must identify ourselves, in fancy, with the soul of the old cavalier.

Then mounte! then mounte, brave gallants, all,
And don your helmes amaine:
Deathe's couriers, Fame and Honor, call
Us to the field againe.
No shrewish teares shall fill our eye
When the sword-hilt's in our hand,—
Heart-whole we'll part, and no whit sighe
For the fayrest of the land;
Let piping swaine, and craven wight,
Thus weepe and puling crye,
Our business is like men to fight.
And hero-like to die!

The Function of Criticism at the Present Time (1864)

*Matthew Arnold**

Many objections have been made to a proposition which, in some remarks of mine on translating Homer, I ventured to put forth; a proposition about criticism, and its importance at the present day. I said: “Of the literature of France and Germany, as of the intellect of Europe in general, the main effort, for now many years, has been a critical effort; the endeavor, in all branches of knowledge, theology, philosophy, history, art, science, to see the object as in itself it really is.” I added, that owing to the operation in English literature of certain causes, “almost the last thing for which one would come to English literature is just that very thing which now Europe most desires,—criticism”; and that the power and value of English literature was thereby impaired. More than one rejoinder declared that the importance I here assigned to criticism was excessive, and asserted the inherent superiority of the creative effort of the human spirit over its critical effort. And the other day, having been led by a Mr. Shairp’s excellent notice of Wordsworth to turn again to his biography, I found, in the words of this great man, whom I, for one, must always listen to with the profoundest respect, a sentence passed on the critic’s business, which seems to justify every possible disparagement of it. Wordsworth says in one of his letters:—

The writers in these publications (the Reviews), while they prosecute their inglorious employment, cannot be supposed to be in a state of mind very favorable for being affected by the finer influences of a thing so pure as genuine poetry.

And a trustworthy reporter of his conversation quotes a more elaborate judgment to the same effect:—

Wordsworth holds the critical power very low, infinitely lower than the inventive; and he said to-day that if the quantity of time consumed in writing critiques on the works of others were

* The essay was originally published in 1864 and then collected in *Selections from the Prose Works of Matthew Arnold*, edited by William Savage Johnson, Houghton Mifflin Company & The Riverside Press, Boston-New York-Chicago-San Francisco, 1913.

given to original composition, of whatever kind it might be, it would be much better employed; it would make a man find out sooner his own level, and it would do infinitely less mischief. A false or malicious criticism may do much injury to the minds of others, a stupid invention, either in prose or verse, is quite harmless.

It is almost too much to expect of poor human nature, that a man capable of producing some effect in one line of literature, should, for the greater good of society, voluntarily doom himself to impotence and obscurity in another. Still less is this to be expected from men addicted to the composition of the “false or malicious criticism” of which Wordsworth speaks. However, everybody would admit that a false or malicious criticism had better never have been written. Everybody, too, would be willing to admit, as a general proposition, that the critical faculty is lower than the inventive. But is it true that criticism is really, in itself, a baneful and injurious employment; is it true that all time given to writing critiques on the works of others would be much better employed if it were given to original composition, of whatever kind this may be? Is it true that Johnson had better have gone on producing more *Irenes* instead of writing his *Lives of the Poets*; nay, is it certain that Wordsworth himself was better employed in making his Ecclesiastical Sonnets than when he made his celebrated Preface so full of criticism, and criticism of the works of others? Wordsworth was himself a great critic, and it is to be sincerely regretted that he has not left us more criticism; Goethe was one of the greatest of critics, and we may sincerely congratulate ourselves that he has left us so much criticism. Without wasting time over the exaggeration which Wordsworth’s judgment on criticism clearly contains, or over an attempt to trace the causes,—not difficult, I think, to be traced,—which may have led Wordsworth to this exaggeration, a critic may with advantage seize an occasion for trying his own conscience, and for asking himself of what real service at any given moment the practice of criticism either is or may be made to his own mind and spirit, and to the minds and spirits of others.

The critical power is of lower rank than the creative. True; but in assenting to this proposition, one or two things are to be kept in mind. It is undeniable that the exercise of a creative power, that a free creative activity, is the highest function of man; it is proved to be so by man’s finding in it his true happiness. But it is undeniable, also, that men may have the sense of exercising this free creative activity in other ways than in producing great works of literature or art; if it were not so, all but a very few men would be shut out from the true happiness of all men. They may have it in well-doing, they may have it in learning, they may have it even in criticizing. This is one thing to be kept in mind. Another is, that the exercise of the creative power in the

production of great works of literature or art, however high this exercise of it may rank, is not at all epochs and under all conditions possible; and that therefore labor may be vainly spent in attempting it, which might with more fruit be used in preparing for it, in rendering it possible. This creative power works with elements, with materials; what if it has not those materials, those elements, ready for its use? In that case it must surely wait till they are ready. Now, in literature,—I will limit myself to literature, for it is about literature that the question arises,—the elements with which the creative power works are ideas; the best ideas on every matter which literature touches, current at the time. At any rate we may lay it down as certain that in modern literature no manifestation of the creative power not working with these can be very important or fruitful. And I say *current* at the time, not merely accessible at the time; for creative literary genius does not principally show itself in discovering new ideas: that is rather the business of the philosopher. The grand work of literary genius is a work of synthesis and exposition, not of analysis and discovery; its gift lies in the faculty of being happily inspired by a certain intellectual and spiritual atmosphere, by a certain order of ideas, when it finds itself in them; of dealing divinely with these ideas, presenting them in the most effective and attractive combinations,—making beautiful works with them, in short. But it must have the atmosphere, it must find itself amidst the order of ideas, in order to work freely; and these it is not so easy to command. This is why great creative epochs in literature are so rare, this is why there is so much that is unsatisfactory in the productions of many men of real genius; because, for the creation of a master-work of literature two powers must concur, the power of the man and the power of the moment, and the man is not enough without the moment; the creative power has, for its happy exercise, appointed elements, and those elements are not in its own control.

Nay, they are more within the control of the critical power. It is the business of the critical power, as I said in the words already quoted, “in all branches of knowledge, theology, philosophy, history, art, science, to see the object as in itself it really is.” Thus it tends, at last, to make an intellectual situation of which the creative power can profitably avail itself. It tends to establish an order of ideas, if not absolutely true, yet true by comparison with that which it displaces; to make the best ideas prevail. Presently these new ideas reach society, the touch of truth is the touch of life, and there is a stir and growth everywhere; out of this stir and growth come the creative epochs of literature.

Or, to narrow our range, and quit these considerations of the general march of genius and of society,—considerations which are apt to become too abstract and impalpable,—every one

can see that a poet, for instance, ought to know life and the world before dealing with them in poetry; and life and the world being in modern times very complex things, the creation of a modern poet, to be worth much, implies a great critical effort behind it; else it must be a comparatively poor, barren, and short-lived affair. This is why Byron's poetry had so little endurance in it, and Goethe's so much; both Byron and Goethe had a great productive power, but Goethe's was nourished by a great critical effort providing the true materials for it, and Byron's was not; Goethe knew life and the world, the poet's necessary subjects, much more comprehensively and thoroughly than Byron. He knew a great deal more of them, and he knew them much more as they really are.

It has long seemed to me that the burst of creative activity in our literature, through the first quarter of this century, had about it in fact something premature; and that from this cause its productions are doomed, most of them, in spite of the sanguine hopes which accompanied and do still accompany them, to prove hardly more lasting than the productions of far less splendid epochs. And this prematureness comes from its having proceeded without having its proper data, without sufficient materials to work with. In other words, the English poetry of the first quarter of this century, with plenty of energy, plenty of creative force, did not know enough. This makes Byron so empty of matter, Shelley so incoherent, Wordsworth even, profound as he is, yet so wanting in completeness and variety. Wordsworth cared little for books, and disparaged Goethe. I admire Wordsworth, as he is, so much that I cannot wish him different; and it is vain, no doubt, to imagine such a man different from what he is, to suppose that he *could* have been different. But surely the one thing wanting to make Wordsworth an even greater poet than he is,—his thought richer, and his influence of wider application,—was that he should have read more books, among them, no doubt, those of that Goethe whom he disparaged without reading him.

But to speak of books and reading may easily lead to a misunderstanding here. It was not really books and reading that lacked to our poetry at this epoch: Shelley had plenty of reading, Coleridge had immense reading. Pindar and Sophocles—as we all say so glibly, and often with so little discernment of the real import of what we are saying—had not many books; Shakespeare was no deep reader. True; but in the Greece of Pindar and Sophocles, in the England of Shakespeare, the poet lived in a current of ideas in the highest degree animating and nourishing to the creative power; society was, in the fullest measure, permeated by fresh thought, intelligent and alive. And this state of things is the true basis for the creative power's exercise, in this it finds its data, its materials, truly ready for its hand; all the books and reading in the world are only

valuable as they are helps to this. Even when this does not actually exist, books and reading may enable a man to construct a kind of semblance of it in his own mind, a world of knowledge and intelligence in which he may live and work. This is by no means an equivalent to the artist for the nationally diffused life and thought of the epochs of Sophocles or Shakespeare; but, besides that it may be a means of preparation for such epochs, it does really constitute, if many share in it, a quickening and sustaining atmosphere of great value. Such an atmosphere the many-sided learning and the long and widely combined critical effort of Germany formed for Goethe, when he lived and worked. There was no national glow of life and thought there as in the Athens of Pericles or the England of Elizabeth. That was the poet's weakness. But there was a sort of equivalent for it in the complete culture and unfettered thinking of a large body of Germans. That was his strength. In the England of the first quarter of this century there was neither a national glow of life and thought, such as we had in the age of Elizabeth, nor yet a culture and a force of learning and criticism such as were to be found in Germany. Therefore the creative power of poetry wanted, for success in the highest sense, materials and a basis; a thorough interpretation of the world was necessarily denied to it.

At first sight it seems strange that out of the immense stir of the French Revolution and its age should not have come a crop of works of genius equal to that which came out of the stir of the great productive time of Greece, or out of that of the Renaissance, with its powerful episode the Reformation. But the truth is that the stir of the French Revolution took a character which essentially distinguished it from such movements as these. These were, in the main, disinterestedly intellectual and spiritual movements; movements in which the human spirit looked for its satisfaction in itself and in the increased play of its own activity. The French Revolution took a political, practical character. The movement, which went on in France under the old régime, from 1700 to 1789, was far more really akin than that of the Revolution itself to the movement of the Renaissance; the France of Voltaire and Rousseau told far more powerfully upon the mind of Europe than the France of the Revolution. Goethe reproached this last expressly with having "thrown quiet culture back." Nay, and the true key to how much in our Byron, even in our Wordsworth, is this!—that they had their source in a great movement of feeling, not in a great movement of mind. The French Revolution, however,—that object of so much blind love and so much blind hatred,—found undoubtedly its motive-power in the intelligence of men, and not in their practical sense; this is what distinguishes it from the English Revolution of Charles the First's time. This is what makes it a more spiritual event than our

Revolution, an event of much more powerful and world-wide interest, though practically less successful; it appeals to an order of ideas which are universal, certain, permanent. 1789 asked of a thing, Is it rational? 1642 asked of a thing, Is it legal? or, when it went furthest, Is it according to conscience? This is the English fashion, a fashion to be treated, within its own sphere, with the highest respect; for its success, within its own sphere, has been prodigious. But what is law in one place is not law in another; what is law here to-day is not law even here to-morrow; and as for conscience, what is binding on one man's conscience is not binding on another's. The old woman who threw her stool at the head of the surpliced minister in St. Giles's Church at Edinburgh obeyed an impulse to which millions of the human race may be permitted to remain strangers. But the prescriptions of reason are absolute, unchanging, of universal validity; *to count by tens is the easiest way of counting*,*—that is a proposition of which every one, from here to the Antipodes, feels the force; at least I should say so if we did not live in a country where it is not impossible that any morning we may find a letter in the *Times* declaring that a decimal coinage is an absurdity. That a whole nation should have been penetrated with an enthusiasm for pure reason, and with an ardent zeal for making its prescriptions triumph, is a very remarkable thing, when we consider how little of mind, or anything so worthy and quickening as mind, comes into

* A writer in the *Saturday Review*, who has offered me some counsels about style for which I am truly grateful, suggests that this should stand as follows:—*To take as your unit an established base of notation, ten being given as the base of notation, is, except for numbers under twenty, the simplest way of counting.* I tried it so, but I assure him, without jealousy, that the more I looked at his improved way of putting the thing, the less I liked it. It seems to me that the maxim, in this shape, would never make the tour of a world, where most of us are plain easy-spoken people. He forgets that he is a reasoner, a member of a school, a disciple of the great Bentham, and that he naturally talks in the scientific way of his school, with exact accuracy, philosophic propriety; I am a mere solitary wanderer in search of the light, and I talk an artless, unstudied, everyday, familiar language. But, after all, this is the language of the mass of the world.

The mass of Frenchmen who felt the force of that prescription of the reason which my reviewer, in his purified language, states thus:—*to count by tens has the advantage of taking as your unit the base of an established system of notation*, certainly rendered this, for themselves, in some such loose language as mine. My point is that they felt the force of a prescription of the reason so strongly that they legislated in accordance with it. They may have been wrong in so doing; they may have foolishly omitted to take other prescriptions of reason into account;—the non-English world does not seem to think so, but let that pass;—what I say is, that by legislating as they did they showed a keen susceptibility to purely rational, intellectual considerations. On the other hand, does my reviewer say that we keep our monetary system unchanged because our nation has grasped the intellectual proposition which he puts, in his masterly way, thus: [*“to count by twelves has the advantage of taking as your unit a number in itself far more convenient than ten for that purpose?”*] Surely not; but because our system is there, and we are too practical a people to trouble ourselves about its intellectual aspect.

To take a second case. The French Revolutionists abolished the sale of offices, because they thought (my reviewer will kindly allow me to put the thing in my imperfect, popular language) the sale of offices a gross anomaly. We still sell commissions in the army. I have no doubt my reviewer, with his scientific powers, can easily invent some beautiful formula to make us appear to be doing this on the purest philosophical principles; the principles of Hobbes, Locke, Bentham, Mr. Mill, Mr. Bain, and himself, their worthy disciple. But surely the plain unscientific account of the matter is, that we have the anomalous practice (he will allow it is, in itself, an anomalous practice?) established, and that (in the words of senatorial wisdom already quoted) “for a thing to be an anomaly we consider to be no objection to it whatever.”

the motives which alone, in general, impel great masses of men. In spite of the extravagant direction given to this enthusiasm, in spite of the crimes and follies in which it lost itself, the French Revolution derives from the force, truth, and universality of the ideas which it took for its law, and from the passion with which it could inspire a multitude for these ideas, a unique and still living power; it is,—it will probably long remain,—the greatest, the most animating event in history. And as no sincere passion for the things of the mind, even though it turn out in many respects an unfortunate passion, is ever quite thrown away and quite barren of good, France has reaped from hers one fruit—the natural and legitimate fruit though not precisely the grand fruit she expected: she is the country in Europe where *the people* is most alive.

But the mania for giving an immediate political and practical application to all these fine ideas of the reason was fatal. Here an Englishman is in his element: on this theme we can all go on for hours. And all we are in the habit of saying on it has undoubtedly a great deal of truth. Ideas cannot be too much prized in and for themselves, cannot be too much lived with; but to transport them abruptly into the world of politics and practice, violently to revolutionize this world to their bidding,—that is quite another thing. There is the world of ideas and there is the world of practice; the French are often for suppressing the one and the English the other; but neither is to be suppressed. A member of the House of Commons said to me the other day: “That a thing is an anomaly, I consider to be no objection to it whatever.” I venture to think he was wrong; that a thing is an anomaly *is* an objection to it, but absolutely and in the sphere of ideas: it is not necessarily, under such and such circumstances, or at such and such a moment, an objection to it in the sphere of politics and practice. Joubert has said beautifully: “C’est la force et le droit qui règlent toutes choses dans le monde; la force en attendant le droit.” (Force and right are the governors of this world; force till right is ready.) *Force till right is ready*; and till right is ready, force, the existing order of things, is justified, is the legitimate ruler. But right is something moral, and implies inward recognition, free assent of the will; we are not ready for right,—*right*, so far as we are concerned, *is not ready*,—until we have attained this sense of seeing it and willing it. The way in which for us it may change and transform force, the existing order of things, and become, in its turn, the legitimate ruler of the world, should depend on the way in which, when our time comes, we see it and will it. Therefore for other people enamored of their own newly discerned right, to attempt to impose it upon us as ours, and violently to substitute their right for our force, is an act of tyranny, and to be resisted. It sets at naught the second great half of our maxim, *force till right is ready*. This was the grand error of the French Revolution; and its movement of ideas, by

quitting the intellectual sphere and rushing furiously into the political sphere, ran, indeed, a prodigious and memorable course, but produced no such intellectual fruit as the movement of ideas of the Renaissance, and created, in opposition to itself, what I may call an *epoch of concentration*. The great force of that epoch of concentration was England; and the great voice of that epoch of concentration was Burke. It is the fashion to treat Burke's writings on the French Revolution as superannuated and conquered by the event; as the eloquent but unphilosophical tirades of bigotry and prejudice. I will not deny that they are often disfigured by the violence and passion of the moment, and that in some directions Burke's view was bounded, and his observation therefore at fault. But on the whole, and for those who can make the needful corrections, what distinguishes these writings is their profound, permanent, fruitful, philosophical truth. They contain the true philosophy of an epoch of concentration, dissipate the heavy atmosphere which its own nature is apt to engender round it, and make its resistance rational instead of mechanical.

But Burke is so great because, almost alone in England, he brings thought to bear upon politics, he saturates politics with thought. It is his accident that his ideas were at the service of an epoch of concentration, not of an epoch of expansion; it is his characteristic that he so lived by ideas, and had such a source of them welling up within him, that he could float even an epoch of concentration and English Tory politics with them. It does not hurt him that Dr. Price and the Liberals were enraged with him; it does not even hurt him that George the Third and the Tories were enchanted with him. His greatness is that he lived in a world which neither English Liberalism nor English Toryism is apt to enter;—the world of ideas, not the world of catchwords and party habits. So far is it from being really true of him that he “to party gave up what was meant for mankind,” that at the very end of his fierce struggle with the French Revolution, after all his invectives against its false pretensions, hollowness, and madness, with his sincere convictions of its mischievousness, he can close a memorandum on the best means of combating it, some of the last pages he ever wrote,—the *Thoughts on French Affairs*, in December 1791,—with these striking words:—

The evil is stated, in my opinion, as it exists. The remedy must be where power, wisdom, and information, I hope, are more united with good intentions than they can be with me. I have done with this subject, I believe, forever. It has given me many anxious moments for the last two years. *If a great change is to be made in human affairs, the minds of men will be fitted to it; the general opinions and feelings will draw that way. Every fear, every hope will forward it: and then they who persist in*

opposing this mighty current in human affairs, will appear rather to resist the decrees of Providence itself, than the mere designs of men. They will not be resolute and firm, but perverse and obstinate.

That return of Burke upon himself has always seemed to me one of the finest things in English literature, or indeed in any literature. That is what I call living by ideas: when one side of a question has long had your earnest support, when all your feelings are engaged, when you hear all round you no language but one, when your party talks this language like a steam-engine and can imagine no other,—still to be able to think, still to be irresistibly carried, if so it be, by the current of thought to the opposite side of the question, and, like Balaam, to be unable to speak anything *but what the Lord has put in your mouth*. I know nothing more striking, and I must add that I know nothing more un-English.

For the Englishman in general is like my friend the Member of Parliament, and believes, point-blank, that for a thing to be an anomaly is absolutely no objection to it whatever. He is like the Lord Auckland of Burke's day, who, in a memorandum on the French Revolution, talks of "certain miscreants, assuming the name of philosophers, who have presumed themselves capable of establishing a new system of society." The Englishman has been called a political animal, and he values what is political and practical so much that ideas easily become objects of dislike in his eyes, and thinkers "miscreants," because ideas and thinkers have rashly meddled with politics and practice. This would be all very well if the dislike and neglect confined themselves to ideas transported out of their own sphere, and meddling rashly with practice; but they are inevitably extended to ideas as such, and to the whole life of intelligence; practice is everything, a free play of the mind is nothing. The notion of the free play of the mind upon all subjects being a pleasure in itself, being an object of desire, being an essential provider of elements without which a nation's spirit, whatever compensations it may have for them, must, in the long run, die of inanition, hardly enters into an Englishman's thoughts. It is noticeable that the word *curiosity*, which in other languages is used in a good sense, to mean, as a high and fine quality of man's nature, just this disinterested love of a free play of the mind on all subjects, for its own sake,—it is noticeable, I say, that this word has in our language no sense of the kind, no sense but a rather bad and disparaging one. But criticism, real criticism, is essentially the exercise of this very quality. It obeys an instinct prompting it to try to know the best that is known and thought in the world, irrespectively of practice, politics, and everything of the kind; and to value knowledge and thought as they approach this best, without the intrusion of any other considerations whatever.

This is an instinct for which there is, I think, little original sympathy in the practical English nature, and what there was of it has undergone a long benumbing period of blight and suppression in the epoch of concentration which followed the French Revolution.

But epochs of concentration cannot well endure forever; epochs of expansion, in the due course of things, follow them. Such an epoch of expansion seems to be opening in this country. In the first place all danger of a hostile forcible pressure of foreign ideas upon our practice has long disappeared; like the traveller in the fable, therefore, we begin to wear our cloak a little more loosely. Then, with a long peace, the ideas of Europe steal gradually and amicably in, and mingle, though in infinitesimally small quantities at a time, with our own notions. Then, too, in spite of all that is said about the absorbing and brutalizing influence of our passionate material progress, it seems to me indisputable that this progress is likely, though not certain, to lead in the end to an apparition of intellectual life; and that man, after he has made himself perfectly comfortable and has now to determine what to do with himself next, may begin to remember that he has a mind, and that the mind may be made the source of great pleasure. I grant it is mainly the privilege of faith, at present, to discern this end to our railways, our business, and our fortune-making; but we shall see if, here as elsewhere, faith is not in the end the true prophet. Our ease, our travelling, and our unbounded liberty to hold just as hard and securely as we please to the practice to which our notions have given birth, all tend to beget an inclination to deal a little more freely with these notions themselves, to canvass them a little, to penetrate a little into their real nature. Flutterings of curiosity, in the foreign sense of the word, appear amongst us, and it is in these that criticism must look to find its account. Criticism first; a time of true creative activity, perhaps,—which, as I have said, must inevitably be preceded amongst us by a time of criticism,—hereafter, when criticism has done its work.

It is of the last importance that English criticism should clearly discern what rule for its course, in order to avail itself of the field now opening to it, and to produce fruit for the future, it ought to take. The rule may be summed up in one word,—*disinterestedness*. And how is criticism to show disinterestedness? By keeping aloof from what is called “the practical view of things”; by resolutely following the law of its own nature, which is to be a free play of the mind on all subjects which it touches. By steadily refusing to lend itself to any of those ulterior, political, practical considerations about ideas, which plenty of people will be sure to attach to them, which perhaps ought often to be attached to them, which in this country at any rate are certain to be attached to them quite sufficiently, but which criticism has really nothing to do with. Its business

is, as I have said, simply to know the best that is known and thought in the world, and by in its turn making this known, to create a current of true and fresh ideas. Its business is to do this with inflexible honesty, with due ability; but its business is to do no more, and to leave alone all questions of practical consequences and applications, questions which will never fail to have due prominence given to them. Else criticism, besides being really false to its own nature, merely continues in the old rut which it has hitherto followed in this country, and will certainly miss the chance now given to it. For what is at present the bane of criticism in this country? It is that practical considerations cling to it and stifle it. It subserves interests not its own. Our organs of criticism are organs of men and parties having practical ends to serve, and with them those practical ends are the first thing and the play of mind the second; so much play of mind as is compatible with the prosecution of those practical ends is all that is wanted. An organ like the *Revue des Deux Mondes*, having for its main function to understand and utter the best that is known and thought in the world, existing, it may be said, as just an organ for a free play of the mind, we have not. But we have the *Edinburgh Review*, existing as an organ of the old Whigs, and for as much play of the mind as may suit its being that; we have the *Quarterly Review*, existing as an organ of the Tories, and for as much play of mind as may suit its being that; we have the *British Quarterly Review*, existing as an organ of the political Dissenters, and for as much play of mind as may suit its being that; we have the *Times*, existing as an organ of the common, satisfied, well-to-do Englishman, and for as much play of mind as may suit its being that. And so on through all the various fractions, political and religious, of our society; every fraction has, as such, its organ of criticism, but the notion of combining all fractions in the common pleasure of a free disinterested play of mind meets with no favor. Directly this play of mind wants to have more scope, and to forget the pressure of practical considerations a little, it is checked, it is made to feel the chain. We saw this the other day in the extinction, so much to be regretted, of the *Home and Foreign Review*. Perhaps in no organ of criticism in this country was there so much knowledge, so much play of mind; but these could not save it. The *Dublin Review* subordinates play of mind to the practical business of English and Irish Catholicism, and lives. It must needs be that men should act in sects and parties, that each of these sects and parties should have its organ, and should make this organ subserve the interests of its action; but it would be well, too, that there should be a criticism, not the minister of these interests, not their enemy, but absolutely and entirely independent of them. No other criticism will ever attain any real authority or make any real way towards its end,—the creating a current of true and fresh ideas.

It is because criticism has so little kept in the pure intellectual sphere, has so little detached itself from practice, has been so directly polemical and controversial, that it has so ill accomplished, in this country, its best spiritual work; which is to keep man from a self-satisfaction which is retarding and vulgarizing, to lead him towards perfection, by making his mind dwell upon what is excellent in itself, and the absolute beauty and fitness of things. A polemical practical criticism makes men blind even to the ideal imperfection of their practice, makes them willingly assert its ideal perfection, in order the better to secure it against attack: and clearly this is narrowing and baneful for them. If they were reassured on the practical side, speculative considerations of ideal perfection they might be brought to entertain, and their spiritual horizon would thus gradually widen. Sir Charles Adderley says to the Warwickshire farmers:

Talk of the improvement of breed! Why, the race we ourselves represent, the men and women, the old Anglo-Saxon race, are the best breed in the whole world... The absence of a too enervating climate, too unclouded skies, and a too luxurious nature, has produced so vigorous a race of people, and has rendered us so superior to all the world.

Mr. Roebuck says to the Sheffield cutlers:

I look around me and ask what is the state of England? Is not property safe? Is not every man able to say what he likes? Can you not walk from one end of England to the other in perfect security? I ask you whether, the world over or in past history, there is anything like it? Nothing. I pray that our unrivalled happiness may last.

Now obviously there is a peril for poor human nature in words and thoughts of such exuberant self-satisfaction, until we find ourselves safe in the streets of the Celestial City.

Das wenige verschwindet leicht dem Blicke
Der vorwärts sieht, wie viel noch übrig bleibt—

says Goethe; “the little that is done seems nothing when we look forward and see how much we have yet to do.” Clearly this is a better line of reflection for weak humanity, so long as it remains on this earthly field of labor and trial.

But neither Sir Charles Adderley nor Mr. Roebuck is by nature inaccessible to considerations of this sort. They only lose sight of them owing to the controversial life we all

lead, and the practical form which all speculation takes with us. They have in view opponents whose aim is not ideal, but practical; and in their zeal to uphold their own practice against these innovators, they go so far as even to attribute to this practice an ideal perfection. Somebody has been wanting to introduce a six-pound franchise, or to abolish church-rates, or to collect agricultural statistics by force, or to diminish local self-government. How natural, in reply to such proposals, very likely improper or ill-timed, to go a little beyond the mark and to say stoutly, "Such a race of people as we stand, so superior to all the world! The old Anglo-Saxon race, the best breed in the whole world! I pray that our unrivalled happiness may last! I ask you whether, the world over or in past history, there is anything like it?" And so long as criticism answers this dithyramb by insisting that the old Anglo-Saxon race would be still more superior to all others if it had no church-rates, or that our unrivalled happiness would last yet longer with a six-pound franchise, so long will the strain, "The best breed in the whole world!" swell louder and louder, everything ideal and refining will be lost out of sight, and both the assailed and their critics will remain in a sphere, to say the truth, perfectly unvital, a sphere in which spiritual progression is impossible. But let criticism leave church-rates and the franchise alone, and in the most candid spirit, without a single lurking thought of practical innovation, confront with our dithyramb this paragraph on which I stumbled in a newspaper immediately after reading Mr. Roebuck:—

A shocking child murder has just been committed at Nottingham. A girl named Wragg left the workhouse there on Saturday morning with her young illegitimate child. The child was soon afterwards found dead on Mapperly Hills, having been strangled. Wragg is in custody.

Nothing but that; but, in juxtaposition with the absolute eulogies of Sir Charles Adderley and Mr. Roebuck, how eloquent, how suggestive are those few lines! "Our old Anglo-Saxon breed, the best in the whole world!"—how much that is harsh and ill-favored there is in this best! *Wragg!* If we are to talk of ideal perfection, of "the best in the whole world," has any one reflected what a touch of grossness in our race, what an original short-coming in the more delicate spiritual perceptions, is shown by the natural growth amongst us of such hideous names,—Higginbottom, Stiggins, Bugg! In Ionia and Attica they were luckier in this respect than "the best race in the world;" by the Ilissus there was no Wragg, poor thing! And "our unrivalled happiness;"—what an element of grimness, bareness, and hideousness mixes with it and blurs it; the workhouse, the dismal Mapperly Hills,—how dismal those who have seen them will remember;—the gloom, the smoke, the cold, the strangled illegitimate child! "I ask you whether,

the world over or in past history, there is anything like it?" Perhaps not, one is inclined to answer; but at any rate, in that case, the world is very much to be pitied. And the final touch,—short, bleak and inhuman: *Wragg is in custody*. The sex lost in the confusion of our unrivalled happiness; or (shall I say?) the superfluous Christian name lopped off by the straightforward vigor of our old Anglo-Saxon breed! There is profit for the spirit in such contrasts as this; criticism serves the cause of perfection by establishing them. By eluding sterile conflict, by refusing to remain in the sphere where alone narrow and relative conceptions have any worth and validity, criticism may diminish its momentary importance, but only in this way has it a chance of gaining admittance for those wider and more perfect conceptions to which all its duty is really owed. Mr. Roebuck will have a poor opinion of an adversary who replies to his defiant songs of triumph only by murmuring under his breath, *Wragg is in custody*; but in no other way will these songs of triumph be induced gradually to moderate themselves, to get rid of what in them is excessive and offensive, and to fall into a softer and truer key.

It will be said that it is a very subtle and indirect action which I am thus prescribing for criticism, and that, by embracing in this manner the Indian virtue of detachment and abandoning the sphere of practical life, it condemns itself to a slow and obscure work. Slow and obscure it may be, but it is the only proper work of criticism. The mass of mankind will never have any ardent zeal for seeing things as they are; very inadequate ideas will always satisfy them. On these inadequate ideas repose, and must repose, the general practice of the world. That is as much as saying that whoever sets himself to see things as they are will find himself one of a very small circle; but it is only by this small circle resolutely doing its own work that adequate ideas will ever get current at all. The rush and roar of practical life will always have a dizzying and attracting effect upon the most collected spectator, and tend to draw him into its vortex; most of all will this be the case where that life is so powerful as it is in England. But it is only by remaining collected, and refusing to lend himself to the point of view of the practical man, that the critic can do the practical man any service; and it is only by the greatest sincerity in pursuing his own course, and by at last convincing even the practical man of his sincerity, that he can escape misunderstandings which perpetually threaten him.

For the practical man is not apt for fine distinctions, and yet in these distinctions truth and the highest culture greatly find their account. But it is not easy to lead a practical man,—unless you reassure him as to your practical intentions, you have no chance of leading him,—to see that a thing which he has always been used to look at from one side only, which he greatly

values, and which, looked at from that side, quite deserves, perhaps, all the prizing and admiring which he bestows upon it,—that this thing, looked at from another side, may appear much less beneficent and beautiful, and yet retain all its claims to our practical allegiance. Where shall we find language innocent enough, how shall we make the spotless purity of our intentions evident enough, to enable us to say to the political Englishmen that the British Constitution itself, which, seen from the practical side, looks such a magnificent organ of progress and virtue, seen from the speculative side,—with its compromises, its love of facts, its horror of theory, its studied avoidance of clear thoughts,—that, seen from this side, our august Constitution sometimes looks,—forgive me, shade of Lord Somers!—a colossal machine for the manufacture of Philistines? How is Cobbett to say this and not be misunderstood, blackened as he is with the smoke of a lifelong conflict in the field of political practice? how is Mr. Carlyle to say it and not be misunderstood, after his furious raid into this field with his *Latter-day Pamphlets*? how is Mr. Ruskin, after his pugnacious political economy? I say, the critic must keep out of the region of immediate practice in the political, social, humanitarian sphere, if he wants to make a beginning for that more free speculative treatment of things, which may perhaps one day make its benefits felt even in this sphere, but in a natural and thence irresistible manner.

Do what he will, however, the critic will still remain exposed to frequent misunderstandings, and nowhere so much as in this country. For here people are particularly indisposed even to comprehend that without this free disinterested treatment of things, truth and the highest culture are out of the question. So immersed are they in practical life, so accustomed to take all their notions from this life and its processes, that they are apt to think that truth and culture themselves can be reached by the processes of this life, and that it is an impertinent singularity to think of reaching them in any other. “We are all *terre filii*,” cries their eloquent advocate; “all Philistines together. Away with the notion of proceeding by any other course than the course dear to the Philistines; let us have a social movement, let us organize and combine a party to pursue truth and new thought, let us call it *the liberal party*, and let us all stick to each other, and back each other up. Let us have no nonsense about independent criticism, and intellectual delicacy, and the few and the many. Don’t let us trouble ourselves about foreign thought; we shall invent the whole thing for ourselves as we go along. If one of us speaks well, applaud him; if one of us speaks ill, applaud him too; we are all in the same movement, we are all liberals, we are all in pursuit of truth.” In this way the pursuit of truth becomes really a social, practical, pleasurable affair, almost requiring a chairman, a secretary, and advertisements; with the

excitement of an occasional scandal, with a little resistance to give the happy sense of difficulty overcome; but, in general, plenty of bustle and very little thought. To act is so easy, as Goethe says; to think is so hard! It is true that the critic has many temptations to go with the stream, to make one of the party movement, one of these *terra filii*; it seems ungracious to refuse to be a *terra filius*, when so many excellent people are; but the critic's duty is to refuse, or, if resistance is vain, at least to cry with Obermann: *Périssons en résistant*.

How serious a matter it is to try and resist, I had ample opportunity of experiencing when I ventured some time ago to criticize the celebrated first volume of Bishop Colenso*. The echoes of the storm which was then raised I still, from time to time, hear grumbling round me. That storm arose out of a misunderstanding almost inevitable. It is a result of no little culture to attain to a clear perception that science and religion are two wholly different things. The multitude will forever confuse them; but happily that is of no great real importance, for while the multitude imagines itself to live by its false science, it does really live by its true religion. Dr. Colenso, however, in his first volume did all he could to strengthen the confusion,† and to make it dangerous. He did this with the best intentions, I freely admit, and with the most candid ignorance that this was the natural effect of what he was doing; but, says Joubert, "Ignorance, which in matters of morals extenuates the crime, is itself, in intellectual matters, a crime of the first order." I criticized Bishop Colenso's speculative confusion. Immediately there was a cry raised: "What is this? here is a liberal attacking a liberal. Do not you belong to the movement? are not you a friend of truth? Is not Bishop Colenso in pursuit of truth? then speak with proper respect of his book. Dr. Stanley is another friend of truth, and you speak with proper respect of his book; why make these invidious differences? both books are excellent, admirable, liberal; Bishop Colenso's perhaps the most so, because it is the boldest, and will have the best practical

* So sincere is my dislike to all personal attack and controversy, that I abstain from reprinting, at this distance of time from the occasion which called them forth, the essays in which I criticised the Bishop of Natal's book; I feel bound, however, after all that has passed, to make here a final declaration of my sincere impenitence for having published them. The Bishop of Natal's subsequent volumes are in great measure free from the crying fault of his first; he has at

length succeeded in more clearly separating, in his own thoughts, the idea of science from the idea of religion; his mind appears to be opening as he goes along, and he may perhaps end by becoming a useful biblical critic, though never, I think, of the first order.

Still, in here taking leave of him at the moment when he is publishing, for popular use, a cheap edition of his work, I cannot forbear repeating yet once more, for his benefit and that of his readers, this sentence from my original remarks upon him: *There is truth of science and truth of religion; truth of science does not become truth of religion till it is made religious*. And I will add: Let us have all the science there is from the men of science; from the men of religion let us have religion.

† It has been said I make it "a crime against literary criticism and the higher culture to attempt to inform the ignorant." Need I point out that the ignorant are not informed by being confirmed in a confusion?

consequences for the liberal cause. Do you want to encourage to the attack of a brother liberal his, and your, and our implacable enemies, the *Church and State Review* or the *Record*,—the High Church rhinoceros and the Evangelical hyena? Be silent, therefore; or rather speak, speak as loud as ever you can! and go into ecstasies over the eighty and odd pigeons.”

But criticism cannot follow this coarse and indiscriminate method. It is unfortunately possible for a man in pursuit of truth to write a book which reposes upon a false conception. Even the practical consequences of a book are to genuine criticism no recommendation of it, if the book is, in the highest sense, blundering. I see that a lady who herself, too, is in pursuit of truth, and who writes with great ability, but a little too much, perhaps, under the influence of the practical spirit of the English liberal movement, classes Bishop Colenso’s book and M. Renan’s together, in her survey of the religious state of Europe, as facts of the same order, works, both of them, of “great importance;” “great ability, power, and skill;” Bishop Colenso’s, perhaps, the most powerful; at least, Miss Cobbe gives special expression to her gratitude that to Bishop Colenso “has been given the strength to grasp, and the courage to teach, truths of such deep import.” In the same way, more than one popular writer has compared him to Luther. Now it is just this kind of false estimate which the critical spirit is, it seems to me, bound to resist. It is really the strongest possible proof of the low ebb at which, in England, the critical spirit is, that while the critical hit in the religious literature of Germany is Dr. Strauss’s book, in that of France M. Renan’s book, the book of Bishop Colenso is the critical hit in the religious literature of England. Bishop Colenso’s book reposes on a total misconception of the essential elements of the religious problem, as that problem is now presented for solution. To criticism, therefore, which seeks to have the best that is known and thought on this problem, it is, however well meant, of no importance whatever. M. Renan’s book attempts a new synthesis of the elements furnished to us by the Four Gospels. It attempts, in my opinion, a synthesis, perhaps premature, perhaps impossible, certainly not successful. Up to the present time, at any rate, we must acquiesce in Fleury’s sentence on such recastings of the Gospel story: *Quiconque s’imagine la pouvoir mieux écrire, ne l’entend pas*. M. Renan had himself passed by anticipation a like sentence on his own work, when he said: “If a new presentation of the character of Jesus were offered to me, I would not have it; its very clearness would be, in my opinion, the best proof of its insufficiency.” His friends may with perfect justice rejoin that at the sight of the Holy Land, and of the actual scene of the Gospel story, all the current of M. Renan’s thoughts may have naturally changed, and a new casting of that story irresistibly suggested itself to him; and that this is just a case for

applying Cicero's maxim: Change of mind is not inconsistency—*nemo doctus unquam mutationem consilii inconstantiam dixit esse*. Nevertheless, for criticism, M. Renan's first thought must still be the truer one, as long as his new casting so fails more fully to commend itself, more fully (to use Coleridge's happy phrase about the Bible) to *find* us. Still M. Renan's attempt is, for criticism, of the most real interest and importance, since, with all its difficulty, a fresh synthesis of the New Testament *data*—not a making war on them, in Voltaire's fashion, not a leaving them out of mind, in the world's fashion, but the putting a new construction upon them, the taking them from under the old, traditional, conventional point of view and placing them under a new one—is the very essence of the religious problem, as now presented; and only by efforts in this direction can it receive a solution.

Again, in the same spirit in which she judges Bishop Colenso, Miss Cobbe, like so many earnest liberals of our practical race, both here and in America, herself sets vigorously about a positive reconstruction of religion, about making a religion of the future out of hand, or at least setting about making it. We must not rest, she and they are always thinking and saying, in negative criticism, we must be creative and constructive; hence we have such works as her recent *Religious Duty*, and works still more considerable, perhaps, by others, which will be in every one's mind. These works often have much ability; they often spring out of sincere convictions, and a sincere wish to do good; and they sometimes, perhaps, do good. Their fault is (if I may be permitted to say so) one which they have in common with the British College of Health, in the New Road. Every one knows the British College of Health; it is that building with the lion and the statue of the Goddess Hygeia before it; at least I am sure about the lion, though I am not absolutely certain about the Goddess Hygeia. This building does credit, perhaps, to the resources of Dr. Morrison and his disciples; but it falls a good deal short of one's idea of what a British College of Health ought to be. In England, where we hate public interference and love individual enterprise, we have a whole crop of places like the British College of Health; the grand name without the grand thing. Unluckily, creditable to individual enterprise as they are, they tend to impair our taste by making us forget what more grandiose, noble, or beautiful character properly belongs to a public institution. The same may be said of the religions of the future of Miss Cobbe and others. Creditable, like the British College of Health, to the resources of their authors, they yet tend to make us forget what more grandiose, noble, or beautiful character properly belongs to religious constructions. The historic religions, with all their faults, have had this; it certainly belongs to the religious sentiment, when it truly flowers, to have this; and we impoverish our

spirit if we allow a religion of the future without it. What then is the duty of criticism here? To take the practical point of view, to applaud the liberal movement and all its works,—its New Road religions of the future into the bargain,—for their general utility's sake? By no means; but to be perpetually dissatisfied with these works, while they perpetually fall short of a high and perfect ideal. For criticism, these are elementary laws; but they never can be popular, and in this country they have been very little followed, and one meets with immense obstacles in following them. That is a reason for asserting them again and again. Criticism must maintain its independence of the practical spirit and its aims. Even with well-meant efforts of the practical spirit it must express dissatisfaction, if in the sphere of the ideal they seem impoverishing and limiting. It must not hurry on to the goal because of its practical importance. It must be patient, and know how to wait; and flexible, and know how to attach itself to things and how to withdraw from them. It must be apt to study and praise elements that for the fulness of spiritual perfection are wanted, even though they belong to a power which in the practical sphere may be maleficent. It must be apt to discern the spiritual shortcomings or illusions of powers that in the practical sphere may be beneficent. And this without any notion of favoring or injuring, in the practical sphere, one power or the other; without any notion of playing off, in this sphere, one power against the other. When one looks, for instance, at the English Divorce Court—an institution which perhaps has its practical conveniences, but which in the ideal sphere is so hideous; an institution which neither makes divorce impossible nor makes it decent, which allows a man to get rid of his wife, or a wife of her husband, but makes them drag one another first, for the public edification, through a mire of unutterable infamy,—when one looks at this charming institution, I say, with its crowded trials, its newspaper reports, and its money compensations, this institution in which the gross unregenerate British Philistine has indeed stamped an image of himself, —one may be permitted to find the marriage theory of Catholicism refreshing and elevating. Or when Protestantism, in virtue of its supposed rational and intellectual origin, gives the law to criticism too magisterially, criticism may and must remind it that its pretensions, in this respect, are illusive and do it harm; that the Reformation was a moral rather than an intellectual event; that Luther's theory of grace no more exactly reflects the mind of the spirit than Bossuet's philosophy of history reflects it; and that there is no more antecedent probability of the Bishop of Durham's stock of ideas being agreeable to perfect reason than of Pope Pius the Ninth's. But criticism will not on that account forget the achievements of Protestantism in the practical and moral sphere; nor that, even in the intellectual sphere, Protestantism, though in a blind and

stumbling manner, carried forward the Renaissance, while Catholicism threw itself violently across its path.

I lately heard a man of thought and energy contrasting the want of ardor and movement which he now found amongst young men in this country with what he remembered in his own youth, twenty years ago. "What reformers we were then!" he exclaimed; "What a zeal we had! how we canvassed every institution in Church and State, and were prepared to remodel them all on first principles!" He was inclined to regret, as a spiritual flagging, the lull which he saw. I am disposed rather to regard it as a pause in which the turn to a new mode of spiritual progress is being accomplished. Everything was long seen, by the young and ardent amongst us, in inseparable connection with politics and practical life. We have pretty well exhausted the benefits of seeing things in this connection, we have got all that can be got by so seeing them. Let us try a more disinterested mode of seeing them; let us betake ourselves more to the serener life of the mind and spirit. This life, too, may have its excesses and dangers; but they are not for us at present. Let us think of quietly enlarging our stock of true and fresh ideas, and not, as soon as we get an idea or half an idea, be running out with it into the street, and trying to make it rule there. Our ideas will, in the end, shape the world all the better for maturing a little. Perhaps in fifty years' time it will in the English House of Commons be an objection to an institution that it is an anomaly, and my friend the Member of Parliament will shudder in his grave. But let us in the meanwhile rather endeavor that in twenty years' time it may, in English literature, be an objection to a proposition that it is absurd. That will be a change so vast, that the imagination almost fails to grasp it. *Ab Integro soeculorum nascitur ordo.*

If I have insisted so much on the course which criticism must take where politics and religion are concerned, it is because, where these burning matters are in question, it is most likely to go astray. I have wished, above all, to insist on the attitude which criticism should adopt towards things in general; on its right tone and temper of mind. But then comes another question as to the subject-matter which literary criticism should most seek. Here, in general, its course is determined for it by the idea which is the law of its being: the idea of a disinterested endeavor to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world, and thus to establish a current of fresh and true ideas. By the very nature of things, as England is not all the world, much of the best that is known and thought in the world cannot be of English growth, must be foreign; by the nature of things, again, it is just this that we are least likely to know, while English thought is streaming in upon us from all sides, and takes excellent care that we shall not be

ignorant of its existence. The English critic of literature, therefore, must dwell much on foreign thought, and with particular heed on any part of it, which, while significant and fruitful in itself, is for any reason specially likely to escape him. Again, judging is often spoken of as the critic's one business, and so in some sense it is; but the judgment which almost insensibly forms itself in a fair and clear mind, along with fresh knowledge, is the valuable one; and thus knowledge, and ever fresh knowledge, must be the critic's great concern for himself. And it is by communicating fresh knowledge, and letting his own judgment pass along with it,—but insensibly, and in the second place, not the first, as a sort of companion and clue, not as an abstract lawgiver,—that the critic will generally do most good to his readers. Sometimes, no doubt, for the sake of establishing an author's place in literature, and his relation to a central standard (and if this is not done, how are we to get at our *best in the world?*) criticism may have to deal with a subject-matter so familiar that fresh knowledge is out of the question, and then it must be all judgment; an enunciation and detailed application of principles. Here the great safeguard is never to let oneself become abstract, always to retain an intimate and lively consciousness of the truth of what one is saying, and, the moment this fails us, to be sure that something is wrong. Still under all circumstances, this mere judgment and application of principles is, in itself, not the most satisfactory work to the critic; like mathematics, it is tautological, and cannot well give us, like fresh learning, the sense of creative activity.

But stop, some one will say; all this talk is of no practical use to us whatever; this criticism of yours is not what we have in our minds when we speak of criticism; when we speak of critics and criticism, we mean critics and criticism of the current English literature of the day: when you offer to tell criticism its function, it is to this criticism that we expect you to address yourself. I am sorry for it, for I am afraid I must disappoint these expectations. I am bound by my own definition of criticism; *a disinterested endeavor to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world*. How much of current English literature comes into this “best that is known and thought in the world”? Not very much I fear; certainly less, at this moment, than of the current literature of France or Germany. Well, then, am I to alter my definition of criticism, in order to meet the requirements of a number of practising English critics, who, after all, are free in their choice of a business? That would be making criticism lend itself just to one of those alien practical considerations, which, I have said, are so fatal to it. One may say, indeed, to those who have to deal with the mass—so much better disregarded—of current English literature, that they may at all events endeavor, in dealing with this, to try it, so far as they can, by the standard of the

best that is known and thought in the world; one may say, that to get anywhere near this standard, every critic should try and possess one great literature, at least, besides his own; and the more unlike his own, the better. But, after all, the criticism I am really concerned with,—the criticism which alone can much help us for the future, the criticism which, throughout Europe, is at the present day meant, when so much stress is laid on the importance of criticism and the critical spirit,—is a criticism which regards Europe as being, for intellectual and spiritual purposes, one great confederation, bound to a joint action and working to a common result; and whose members have, for their proper outfit, a knowledge of Greek, Roman, and Eastern antiquity, and of one another. Special, local, and temporary advantages being put out of account, that modern nation will in the intellectual and spiritual sphere make most progress, which most thoroughly carries out this program. And what is that but saying that we too, all of us, as individuals, the more thoroughly we carry it out, shall make the more progress?

There is so much inviting us!—what are we to take? what will nourish us in growth towards perfection? That is the question which, with the immense field of life and of literature lying before him, the critic has to answer; for himself first, and afterwards for others. In this idea of the critic's business the essays brought together in the following pages have had their origin; in this idea, widely different as are their subjects, they have, perhaps, their unity.

I conclude with what I said at the beginning: to have the sense of creative activity is the great happiness and the great proof of being alive, and it is not denied to criticism to have it; but then criticism must be sincere, simple, flexible, ardent, ever widening its knowledge. Then it may have, in no contemptible measure, a joyful sense of creative activity; a sense which a man of insight and conscience will prefer to what he might derive from a poor, starved, fragmentary, inadequate creation. And at some epochs no other creation is possible.

Still, in full measure, the sense of creative activity belongs only to genuine creation; in literature we must never forget that. But what true man of letters ever can forget it? It is no such common matter for a gifted nature to come into possession of a current of true and living ideas, and to produce amidst the inspiration of them, that we are likely to underrate it. The epochs of Æschylus and Shakespeare make us feel their preëminence. In an epoch like those is, no doubt, the true life of literature; there is the promised land, towards which criticism can only beckon. That promised land it will not be ours to enter, and we shall die in the wilderness: but to have desired to enter it, to have saluted it from afar, is already, perhaps, the best distinction among contemporaries; it will certainly be the best title to esteem with posterity.

What is Literature? (1886)

*Hutcheson Macaulay Posnett**

§1. Charles Lamb in one of his essays speaks of “books which are no books” as a catalogue including calendars and directories, scientific treatises and the statutes at large, the works of Hume and Gibbon, the histories of Flavius Josephus (“that learned Jew”), Paley’s Moral Philosophy, almanacks, and draught-boards bound and lettered on the back. It moved the spleen of Elia “to see these *things in books clothing* perched upon shelves, like false saints, usurpers of true shrines—to reach down a well-bound semblance of a volume and to come bolt on a withering Population Essay—to expect a Steele or a Farquhar and find Adam Smith.” But, humorous and capricious as it is, this catalogue gives us a glimpse of problems which since the days of Elia have gradually assumed defined shape and serious significance:—How shall we distinguish the various classes of writing which social evolution produces; how shall we separate specialized scientific studies from the works of creative imagination—the latter apparently Elia’s ideal “books;” what, in fact, as distinct from scientific treatises and all other “things in books’ clothing,” is “literature”?

The unfortunate word has indeed been sadly abused. In popular usage it has come to resemble an old bag stuffed out and burst in a hundred places by all kinds of contents, so that we hardly know whether it could not be made to hold anything “written,” from to-day’s newspaper or the latest law reports, to Assyrian inscriptions, the picture-writings of the Aztecs, or the hieroglyphics of Egypt. Even professed scholars have contributed little towards the prevention of this cruelty to words. For example, Sismondi, one of the pioneers of literary history, though starting in his *Littérature du Midi de l’Europe* (1813) with the suggestive promise that he intended “above all to illustrate the reciprocal influence of the peoples’ history, political and religious, on their literature, and of their literature on their character,” vitiates from the outset any scientific treatment of his subject by leaving its nature unexplained. It is the same with Hallam. Shirking any effort to define the meaning of “literature,” or even indicate the necessary difficulties in any

* The essay represents the first chapter of the seminal book *Comparative Literature* (1886) by Hutcheson Macaulay Posnett. Reference edition is London, Trench & Co., 1886.

such definition, Hallam uses the word (as he tells us in the preface to his *Literature of Europe*) “in the most general sense for the knowledge imparted through books;” and so treats it as a common, and apparently useless, label for a perfect farrago of subjects—logic, astronomy, the drama, philology, political economy, jurisprudence, theology, medicine. Even immense improvements in the extent and depth of historical studies have done little to redeem the use of the word “literature,” the origin of languages having for the most part diverted attention from that of the forms of writing as dependent on social evolution. Hence, such excellent scholars as J. J. Ampère, Littré, Villemain, Patin, Sainte-Beuve, Taine, in France; G. G. Gervinus, Koberstein, Hettner, Scherer, and the authors of “culture-histories”—Grün, Kiehl, Kremer, and others—in Germany, have by no means clarified European ideas of “literature” so thoroughly as might have been expected. No doubt we would not now, with Hallam, apologize for neglecting such “departments of *literature*” as books on agriculture or English law; still we have by no means reached any settled ideal of “literature” such as Hallam himself obscurely outlined by excluding history, save where it “had been written with peculiar beauty of language or philosophical spirit,” from his *Literature of Europe*. Must we, then, surrender the word to the abuse alike of the learned and unlearned at the peril of some such caprice as that of Lamb—caprice not to be enjoyed as a freak of humour, but rather despised as the miscarriage of sober, possibly prosaic, inquiry? If we review the causes which have produced the abuse we shall at least understand the difficulties to which any definition of “literature” must be exposed.

§2. The word *litteratura* even among the Romans had no settled meaning. Tacitus uses the phrase *litteratura Graeca* to express “the shapes of the Greek alphabet;” Quintilian calls grammar *litteratura*; and Cicero uses the word in the general sense of “learning” or “erudition.” Accordingly, when scholars of the Renaissance began to use the word they did not intend to convey ideas which it now readily suggests. They did not intend to convey the idea of a body of writings representing the life of a given people; much less did they purpose by using the word to draw distinctions between one class of such writings and another. Borrowing the word in its Latin significations, they did not stop to dream of days when modern nations would possess their own bodies of writings, just as they did not stop to inquire whether Greek or Latin ideas of the lyric, the epic, the drama, were suited or unsuited to the new life of Europe they saw around them. Greece and Rome, though rich in terms for special branches of poetry, oratory, or philosophy, had not in fact needed a word to express the general body of their writings as

representing a *national* development. Greece had not needed such a word because she never was at one with herself, never attained to permanent national unity. Rome had not needed such a word partially because she passed, as if at one bound, from municipality to world-empire without halting to become a nation, partially because the cultured few who were the makers of her writings worked day and night upon Greek models. It was only when bodies of national writings, such as those of England and France, had been long enough in existence to attract reflection, it was only when the spread of democratic ideas in the eighteenth century began to make men regard the writings of their countrymen as something more than elegant copies of antique models made under the patronage of courts and princes, as in truth the fruits of the nation's historic past, that the word "literature" became useful to mark an idea peculiar to the nations of modern Europe. But the word in which the new idea was embodied served rather to conceal than to disclose any conceptions of national authorship. "Literature," long a mere generalization for letters or the knowledge of letters, classical or modern, was ill adapted to express the idea of a definite national growth.

§3. One cause of the indefiniteness of "literature" we have thus found in the source from which the word has reached us; another and more interesting cause we shall find in the development of social life. Karl Otfried Müller tells us how we may trace the three different stages of civilisation among the Greeks in the three grand divisions of their poetry; how the epic belongs to a period of monarchical institutions when men's minds were impregnated and swayed by legends handed down from antiquity; how the elegiac, iambic, and lyric poetry arise in more agitated times and accompany the growth of republican governments; and how the drama represents the prime of Athenian power and freedom. But this is only one out of a host of such examples. Take any branch of verse or prose composition, and you soon find that directly or indirectly its existence implies certain conditions of social life. The oratory of the Athenian Ekklêsia or the Roman Forum, of the English Parliament or the French Pulpit; the hymns of the Indian or Hebrew priests; the rythmical prose of Hebrew or Arab poets; the songs of the Homeric *oidos* or the Saxon *scôp*; the chorus of the *Khorovod* in the Russian *Mir* or village-commune; Athenian, Roman, Sanskrit, Chinese, Japanese, English, French, and German dramas;—all result from and reflect the action, thought, and speech peculiar to the particular places and particular times at which they appear. But this dependence on limited spheres of social life is concealed by the vague word "literature." Containing a generalization, and as such suggesting some abstract unity

unconditioned by time and space, the word leads us to expect identity in the form and spirit of writing whenever and wherever it appears an identity which does not strike us as false until repeated comparisons and contrasts have forced upon us the recognition of the falsity. We can easily understand how the enthusiastic study of classical models contributed to disseminate in modern Europe the idea of this uniformity, and the belief that archetypes of “literature” had been fixed once for all in the brilliant ages of Pericles and Augustus. We can easily understand how the universal claims of medieval theology and philosophy directly or indirectly contributed to strengthen this belief in universal exemplars which threatened for a time to make the masterpieces of Athens and Home idols of literary imitation as unquestionable, if not as sacred, as the Qur’ân. But it is not so easy to grasp the facts that “literature,” far from enshrining universal forms and ideas of beauty, owes both its creative and critical works to the development of social life; that familiar general or special conceptions suggested by the word drop off one by one as we retrace the steps of such development; and that all our subtle literary distinctions finally disappear in the songs of those isolated clans and tribes whose fusion produced the people and the language of future art and criticism. We may be sure that it is difficult to keep the varying relations of social development to literary growth steadily in view when we find a scholar like Mr. J. A. Symonds speaking of Athenian literature as “National,” or an antiquary like Herr Ten Brink applying the phrase “National Epos” to days when the Saxons were merely a loose federation of tribes.

Indeed, we have only to watch the beginnings of national history in order to see how readily the actual development of literature is obscured, how hardly it is to be recovered. Nations, like individuals, have been always disposed from interest or vanity to forget their day of small things; like individuals, too, they have been always unwilling to isolate their origins from the great ones who have gone before. Some Æneas will connect the pedigrees of Ilium and Rome, some Brute the Trojan will serve as an aristocratic eponymous ancestor for the wild tribes of Britain. Thus, at the price of much confusion in language and thought, the interlacing of national histories reproduces on an enlarged scale the interlacing of clan traditions which has everywhere accompanied the fusion of clans into larger social groups. Thus, too, chronological standards, which can never carry us beyond the adult and self-conscious age of some particular group, are so applied as to raise the most confused impressions of relative antiquity in institutions and thought; and languages, customs, ideas, come to be reckoned old or young by measurements taken from the First Olympiad, or A.U.C., or B.C., or from the Flight. Hence, *within* the group,

social development is obscured by inability or dislike to look back to times when national language and ideas could not exist; *without* the group, it is obscured by imitation of peoples who have attained to higher grades of social progress; and so the conception of national literature, as well as that of national history, becomes a medley of confusion in which differences of time and place, of social and individual character, are obliterated. Nothing but historical reflection can restore the real order of development out of this chaos; and historical reflection, as a work of science, is only the tardy product of the present century. How recent are its applications to the domain of literature we may judge from two facts. Hallam, in 1838, could truthfully say that “France has no work of any sort, even an indifferent one, on the universal history of her literature; nor can we (Englishmen) claim for ourselves a single attempt of the most superficial kind.” Donaldson, in his “Translator’s Preface” to the first volume of Miller’s *Literature of Ancient Greece*, observed, in January, 1840, that “before the publication of the present work no history of Greek literature had been published in the English language.”

§4. But if it be hard for the popular mind to avoid confusing early and adult conceptions of literature, the critical mind, from causes peculiar to itself, is exposed to a similar confusion. If the facts of social development have been almost unavoidably overlooked by average intelligence, they have been deliberately set aside by the professed critic. When men first began to ask themselves why it was that the poet’s works pleased them, they sought to find the cause not in human senses, emotions, intellect, but in analyses of the works themselves. Thus the *Poetics*, attributed to Aristotle, mark an effort to extract general principles of dramatic creation from the practice of the Athenian masters, Sophocles in particular. Few questions are asked about the development of the Athenian drama. The literary influences of Athenian life, contrasted with the life celebrated by the early epic and lyric poets of Greece, are ignored. No attempt is made to compare the drama of Athens with that of other Greek cities, much less to discover whether “barbarians” possessed any similar spectacles. Thus, by neglecting the influences of social life on literature, Greek criticism fostered the deadly theories that literature is essentially an imitation of masterpieces, that its ideals are not progressive but permanent, that they have no dependence on particular conditions of human character, on the nature of that social instrument language, on circumscribed spheres of time and place. In the imitative workmanship of Roman artists the principles of the Greek only gathered strength; and, transmitted through Rome to the peoples of modern Europe, they everywhere more or less checked the growth of truly national literature.

While the more vigorous life of England and Spain developed new forms of the drama, Italy and France accepted the classical models, Germany following their example. It is true that at length the learning of Germany revolted from a bondage in which it recognised a hybrid monster of Greek, Roman, and French extraction. It is true that France herself, especially after the Revolution had thrown her back on older memories than those of Richelieu's centralism or Henri Quatre, came to learn the literary value of her own early history. But, in spite of these successes of the national against the classical spirit, one strong survival of classical influences lingered, and still lingers, in the critical mind of Europe. If men like Goethe and Victor Hugo could cast off the bondage of Greek models, and appeal triumphantly to the art of Shakespeare and Calderon, criticism was still far from giving up those universal ideas which, logically enough, had accompanied the conception of literature as the imitation of universal models. Thus, for example, the main purpose of A. W. Schlegel's defence of the "Romantic School" was to reconcile the conflicting principles of "Romantic" and classical art in universal ideas common to and underlying both; and Coleridge upholds the universal claims of Shakespeare's art with as much enthusiasm as any classical critic ever upheld those of the ancient masters.

The truth is that the "Romantic School" represented reformers imperfectly conscious of the purport of their reforms. These dissidents from an ancient creed of critical dogma failed to see that if literary art is something better than an imitation of models, if these models are admitted to be out of place when carried into social conditions markedly different from those under which they were produced, then the dependence of literary ideals on limited spheres of human association follows as a matter of course, and "Romantic" pretenders to universal rights are caught in the act of self-contradiction. Failure to observe this self-contradiction need not surprise any student of the social sciences. Political economists, for example, have based their science on assumptions of personal freedom, social classification, and human character which possess a very limited application even within the recent history of the English people; yet such facts as medieval serfage, the different social classification of different countries and ages, or the impossibility of action from self-interest in communal life, have only within the last few years prevented our economists from claiming universality for their theories. Again, English jurisprudence for a time did not hesitate to advance similar claims, although its leading idea of a central government, from which the commands, obligations, and sanctions of law shall issue, is in the political life of early Communities as clearly out of place as the literary ideals of Athens, Home, or Paris would have been among the early Arab clans. If we find fault with the

shortcomings of “Romantic” criticism we must remember that nothing is more difficult than to see an ideal without expanding it into universality even in the prosaic accuracy of scientific reasoning, how much more in works peculiarly belonging to the imagination—works in which the consciousness of thinking within limits is a fatal damper to the enthusiasm which creates without reflecting on the nature of its materials, and is paralysed when it attempts to critically retrace the steps of the creative process. Yet, unless we limit the range to which our criticism shall apply, we may find ourselves applying the standards of the Athenian to the Japanese drama, or those of the Greek lyric to the *Shih King* of ancient China. Clearly such limitless criticism has done much to obscure all ideas of literary development, and consequently to make the conception of literature the medley we have found it.

§5. But there are obstacles to the definition of literature which arise not from the origin of the word, nor from unhistorical ideas of the learned or the unlearned, but from the different and even conflicting aims of writing in different states of social life and the different means adopted to secure such aims. “By literature,” says Mr. Stopford Brooke, “we mean the written thoughts and feelings of intelligent men and women arranged in a way which will give pleasure to the reader;” and the same admirable critic adds that “prose is not literature unless it have style and character and be written with curious care.” Without pausing to ask whether Mr. Brooke would extend his ideal of “prose” so as to cover the rythmical cadence of Al-Harîrî, or the Chinese *Tsze* in which rimes are repeated at the end of lines of indeterminate length, without raising any questions about the development of prose, and allowing one ideal end of literature as opposed to science to be pleasure, not discovery or instruction, we find that the pleasure imparted by literature and the means of imparting it have in different states of social life varied surprisingly. For example, from our modern standpoint Professor Jebb is perhaps right in saying that “there can be no literature without writing; for literature implies fixed form; and, though memory may do great feats, a merely oral tradition cannot guarantee fixed form.” Yet we cannot forget that even at the zenith of Greek civilization music and dancing (to say nothing of acting) formed an integral part of certain literary pleasures to a degree which our modern familiarity with printed books renders almost inconceivable. Not only have the pleasures of literature varied with the average character of the men and women it addressed—from communal villagers singing their harvest hymn to the courtly audience of Boileau—but the means to secure such pleasures have likewise varied from wild combinations of gesture, music, dance, and song, in which the

words were of the least importance, to printed letters as the main instrument of the literary artist. Compare, for example, the so-called “Pindaric” odes of Gray with those of the Greek master himself, and nothing but our modern idea of literary art, as mainly an appeal to the eye and ear through print, can hide the grotesque absurdity of *strophe* and *antistrophe* reappearing like fleshless skeletons two thousand years after the dance and song that gave them life have died away.

As the means so also the ideal ends of literary production have varied remarkably under different conditions of social life. The prevalent belief that the proper ends of science are discovery and instruction, but that of literature pleasure, the greatest pleasure of the greatest number in the given national group,^{*} is due to developments in social organisation and thought which have democratically expanded the audience of literature, specialised the pursuits of science, and established rather superficial distinctions between experience and its students on the one side and imagination and its votaries on the other. Some of these ideas would have been sadly out of place in days when the cultured few (as in Athens or Rome) reposed upon the labours of a mass of slaves; others, in days when science and literature were so closely intertwined as in the science-poetry of Empedocles or even the dialogues of Plato, would have been too confused to supply distinctions. In fact, the differentiation of literature from science, however “natural” it may now look to us, was a process of slow and fitful evolution dependent not only on individual intelligence but on social development. The dependence of the ideal ends of literature on such development might be illustrated from the writings of every people, every social group, which has produced a literature of its own. If it may be seen from Spenser’s introductory letter to his *Faerie Queene* that our modern democratic conceptions of literature have no place in his knightly theory of poetry as intended “to fashion a gentleman or noble person in virtuous and gentle discipline,” similar contrasts might be easily discovered between the early and modern ideals of song in France, or Germany, or Spain. But we need not confine our examples to European nations. The paternal government of China and the sentiments of family life which form the striking social characteristic of that vast empire have left their marks upon the ideals of Chinese literature in general and upon that of the Chinese drama in particular. “Chinese poetry,” says M. Bazin (introduction to his *Théâtre Chinois*, p. xxvii.), “requires every dramatic work to have a moral end

^{*} Mr. Palgrave (*Songs and Sonnets of Shakespeare*, p. 237) tells us that “pleasure is the object of poetry; and the best fulfilment of its task is the greatest pleasure of the greatest number.” They who still fancy that literature in an age of democracy can remain the monopoly of a cultured Cloud-cuckoo-town will shrink from this use of a Philistine formula and resent the expression of poetry’s ideal end in an echo of Benthamism. But art and criticism, if they are living, must reflect contemporary life and current thought.

or meaning. For example, the moral purpose of the play called *Tchao-mei-hiang*, or *A Maid's Intrigues*, discovers itself in the words addressed by the lady Han to her daughter, 'Know you not that now, as in ancient times, the marriage of husband and wife needs to be consecrated by rites and ceremonies?' The *dénoûment* is the triumph of virtue. Any play without a moral purpose is in Chinese eyes only a ridiculous work in which one can find no meaning. According to Chinese authors the object aimed at in a serious drama is to present the noblest lessons of history to the ignorant who know not how to read; and, according to the Chinese penal code, the end of theatrical representations is 'to exhibit true or imaginary pictures of just and good men, chaste women, and loving and dutiful children—characters likely to lead the spectators to the practice of virtue.' Obscenity is a crime; and composers of obscene plays, says a Chinese writer quoted by Morrison, shall be severely punished in the abode of expiations, *ming-fou*, and their torment shall last as long as their plays remain on the earth."

Contrasting this aim of the Chinese drama with that of the aesthetic Athenian for, in spite of the famous definition in the *Poetics*, we can scarcely speak of Attic tragedy, much less comedy, as possessing a moral purpose critics who refuse to separate their ideals of literature from those of human conduct will probably agree with M. Bazin in placing the Attic sense of the beautiful below the didactic morality of the Celestial. Aristophanes, it is to be feared, stands condemned by Chinese judgment to a very lengthy experience of *ming-fou*; and as for such dramatists as Wycherley and Vanbrugh, their only hopes must depend on the rather dusty condition of their volumes nowadays. It may be true that the Chinese ideal is higher than that of our modern European dramas, which would limit itself to the truthful imitation of human character and custom in contemporary life. It may be that the Chinese is superior to the Indian dramatic ideal laid down in the prologue of the *Málali* and *Mádhava*,* and clearly expressing the dramatic taste of a cultured class such as the Bráhmans of India are known to have been. But our object is not to canvass the merits of this or that dramatic ideal; it is simply to show how widely such ideals have differed in different conditions of social life, and to illustrate by their conflict the difficulty, or rather impossibility, of reconciling such contradictions in any universal definition of literature which, be it remembered, must also include, many branches of verse and prose not to be found in the drama.

* "Again," says this prologue, "what avails it to boast a knowledge of the Yoga, the Sankhya, the Upanishads, or the Vedas? Such knowledge is of no use for dramatic composition. Fertility of imagination, harmony of style, richness of invention—these are the qualities which mark education and genius in this kind of writing. Such is the drama written by our venerable friend Bhavabhúti."

§6. We have now reviewed four causes of the obscurity overhanging the word “literature”—the source from which it has reached us, unhistorical ideas about it entertained by the learned and the unlearned, the subtle changes in the means and the no less subtle changes in the ends of literary workmanship. In short, we have found what was to have been expected wherever the dependence of written upon living thought and of the latter upon social and physical conditions is overlooked—confused views of the present nature, the past, and the ideal future of literature. Other causes contributing to the same confusion might easily be added. For example, many problems properly belonging to any scientific treatment of literature are hidden away in more or less cognate studies. Thus, the origins of metres, if discussed at all, are generally treated as the worthless *peculium* of that broken-down philosopher, the grammarian; and rhetoric absorbs much of the interest which might be well bestowed on a subject so attractive as the developments of prose in different languages and social groups. But we need not extend our search for the causes of an obscurity which average thinking and cultured taste concurred to render unavoidable.

Definite ideas of literature have, in truth, been impeded by two grand facts which theory may affect to conceal but cannot really banish—the fact that all literatures, even to some degree those wrought by the hand of mere imitators like the Romans, depend upon conditions of social life, arid, if not stationary or decaying, constantly throw out new forms of vitality, constantly enter new phases of art and criticism; and the fact that, in spite of this constant movement in each separate literature, in all literatures viewed together as productions of humanity, definition implies, and must at least provisionally assume, a degree of *permanence* which is too often secured off-hand by violently declaring selected ideas to be universal and independent, not only of social life in its myriad shapes, but even of space and time. Hereafter we shall have other opportunities for discussing these obstacles to the scientific study of literature—obstacles, it must be remembered, common to all the social sciences, political economy, jurisprudence, even logic, so far as the laws of thought are dependent on social evolution. At present, however, we shall be satisfied with two principles which may serve to guide our efforts to reach defined ideas of literature. (1) Our definition cannot cover an unlimited range of human life save at the expense of confusing perceptions of sense, emotions, thoughts, not only belonging to widely diverse social and physical conditions, but often directly conflicting in the form and spirit of their literary expression. (2) We must be ever prepared to forego our limited definitions of literature, or any species of literature, when we pass out of the conditions to which they are properly confined.

Bearing these principles in mind, we may be content to set out with a rough definition of literature, as consisting of works which, whether in verse or prose, are the handicraft of imagination rather than reflection, aim at the pleasure of the greatest possible number of the nation rather than instruction and practical effects,* and appeal to general rather than specialised knowledge. Every element of this definition clearly depends on limited spheres of social and mental evolution—the separation of imagination from experience, of didactic purpose from aesthetic pleasure, and that specialisation of knowledge which is so largely due to the economic development known as “division of labour.” In truth, our definition will carry us, and is intended to carry us, a very short way satisfactorily—perhaps no distance at all beyond conditions of art and science under which we live, or similar to these. If the student has expected something better, let him reflect that breadth of definition is only to be purchased by flagrant violations of the facts but just stated. He can, indeed, have no better introduction to the scientific study of literature than a definition which shall bring home one of the great lessons to be learned from this and every other science, the limited truth of human ideas.

We have spoken of our study as a “science;” let us state at the outset the meaning we intend to convey by that term. It must be evident from what we have already said that by “science” we cannot mean a body of universal truths, that the very evolution of literature is fatal *per se* to any such literary “science.” But by the use of the term we mean to imply that limited truths discoverable in the various phases of literature may, nay, in order to be understood even as limited truths, *must* be grouped round certain central facts of comparatively permanent influence. Such facts are the climate, soil, animal and plant life of different countries; such also is the principle of evolution from communal to individual life which we shall hereafter explain at length. The former may be called the static influences to which literature has been everywhere exposed; the latter may be called the dynamical principle of literature’s progress and decay. But

* M. Victor de Laprade (*La Sentiment de la Nature chez les Modernes*, pp. 312-322), while discussing Goethe’s efforts to combine science with poetry, raises the question whether didactic poetry is at the present day a legitimate form of poetic art. In doing so he draws a careful distinction between the didactic poetry of Greece or India, and that of days in which “science has left the path of hypothesis and imagination, has become possessed of fixed methods and knows its proper limits.” In these latter conditions M. Laprade decides that didactic poetry is “un genre bâtard, dangereux, à peu près impossible;” that it is poetry at all only “in proportion as it withdraws itself from science to enter into the imagination.” Goethe’s *Faust* may contain geology, optics, chemistry; his *Wilhelm Meister*, scientific discussions and demonstrations; but in his *Elective Affinities* there appears that “fatalistic conception” of scientific law before which human liberty, master-maker of literary art, would seem to disappear. But M. Laprade has scarcely touched the true cause of that dissatisfaction which the metaphysical as well as the didactic poetry of modern times can hardly fail to produce. This cause is to be found in the fact that poetry and literature in general are expected to address the average mind in average, not specialised, language; whereas science pursues its studies and expresses its truths in the technical language it requires.

before we attempt to explain this principle we shall illustrate the dependence of literature on social conditions, and the consequent relativity, or necessary limitation, alike of its creative art and criticism.

Style (1888)

*Walter Horatian Pater**

SINCE all progress of mind consists for the most part in differentiation, in the resolution of an obscure and complex object into its component aspects, it is surely the stupidest of losses to confuse things which right reason has put asunder, to lose the sense of achieved distinctions, the distinction between poetry and prose, for instance, or, to speak more exactly, between the laws and characteristic excellences of verse and prose composition. On the other hand, those who have dwelt most emphatically on the distinction between prose and verse, prose and poetry, may sometimes have been tempted to limit the proper functions of prose too narrowly; and this again is at least false economy, as being, in effect, the renunciation of a certain means or faculty, in a world where after all we must needs make the most of things. Critical efforts to limit art *a priori*, by anticipations regarding the natural incapacity of the material with which this or that artist works, as the sculptor with solid form, or the prose-writer with the ordinary language of men, are always liable to be discredited by the facts of artistic production; and while prose is actually found to be a coloured thing with Bacon, picturesque with Livy and Carlyle, musical with Cicero and Newman, mystical and intimate with Plato and Michelet and Sir Thomas Browne, exalted or florid, it may be, with Milton and Taylor, it will be useless to protest that it can be nothing at all, except something very tamely and narrowly confined to mainly practical ends—a kind of “good round-hand;” as useless as the protest that poetry might not touch prosaic subjects as with Wordsworth, or an abstruse matter as with Browning, or treat contemporary life nobly as with Tennyson. In subordination to one essential beauty in all good literary style, in all literature as a fine art, as there are many beauties of poetry so the beauties of prose are many, and it is the business of criticism to estimate them as such; as it is good in the criticism of verse to look for those hard, logical, and quasi-prosaic excellences which that too has, or needs. To find in the poem, amid the flowers, the allusions, the mixed perspectives, of *Lycidas* for instance, the thought, the logical structure:—how wholesome! how delightful! as to identify in prose what we

* The essay represents the first chapter of *Appreciations, with an Essay on Style* by Walter Horatio Pater, reprinted from the *Fortnightly Review*, 1888. Reference edition is London, Macmillan, 1899.

call the poetry, the imaginative power, not treating it as out of place and a kind of vagrant intruder, but by way of an estimate of its rights, that is, of its achieved powers, there.

Dryden, with the characteristic instinct of his age, loved to emphasise the distinction between poetry and prose, the protest against their confusion with each other, coming with somewhat diminished effect from one whose poetry was so prosaic. In truth, his sense of prosaic excellence affected his verse rather than his prose, which is not only fervid, richly figured, poetic, as we say, but vitiated, all unconsciously, by many a scanning line. Setting up correctness, that humble merit of prose, as the central literary excellence, he is really a less correct writer than he may seem, still with an imperfect mastery of the relative pronoun. It might have been foreseen that, in the rotations of mind, the province of poetry in prose would find its assertor; and, a century after Dryden, amid very different intellectual needs, and with the need therefore of great modifications in literary form, the range of the poetic force in literature was effectively enlarged by Wordsworth. The true distinction between prose and poetry he regarded as the almost technical or accidental one of the absence or presence of metrical beauty, or, say! metrical restraint; and for him the opposition came to be between verse and prose of course—you can't scan Wordsworth's prose: but, as the essential dichotomy in this matter, between imaginative and unimaginative writing, parallel to De Quincey's distinction between "the literature of power and the literature of knowledge," in the former of which the composer gives us not fact, but his peculiar sense of fact whether past or present or prospective, it may be, as often in oratory.

Dismissing then, under sanction of Wordsworth, that harsher opposition of poetry to prose, as savouring in fact of the arbitrary psychology of the last century, and with it the prejudice that there can be but one only beauty of prose style, I propose here to point out certain qualities of all literature as a fine art, which, if they apply to the literature of fact, apply still more to the literature of the imaginative sense of fact, while they apply indifferently to verse and prose, so far as either is really imaginative—certain conditions of true art in both alike, which conditions may also contain in them the secret of the proper discrimination and guardianship of the peculiar excellences of either.

The line between fact and something quite different from external fact is, indeed, hard to draw. In Pascal, for instance, in the persuasive writers generally, how difficult to define the point where, from time to time, argument which, if it is to be worth anything at all, must consist of facts or groups of facts, becomes a pleading—a theorem no longer, but essentially an appeal to the reader to catch the writer's spirit, to think with him, if one can or will—an expression no

longer of fact but of his sense of it, his peculiar intuition of a world, prospective, or discerned below the faulty conditions of the present, in either case changed somewhat from the actual world. In science, on the other hand, in history so far as it conforms to scientific rule, we have a literary domain where the imagination may be thought to be always an intruder. And as, in all science, the functions of literature reduce themselves eventually to the transcribing of fact, so all the excellences of literary form in regard to science are reducible to various kinds of painstaking; this good quality being involved in all “skilled work” whatever, in the drafting of an act of parliament, as in sewing. Yet here again, the writer’s sense of fact, in history especially, and in all those complex subjects which do but lie on the borders of science, will still take the place of fact, in various degrees. Your historian, for instance, with absolutely truthful intention, amid the multitude of facts presented to him must needs select, and in selecting assert something of his own humour, something that comes not of the world without but of a vision within. So Gibbon moulds his unwieldy material to a preconceived view. Livy, Tacitus, Michelet, moving full of poignant sensibility amid the records of the past, each, after his own sense, modifies—who can tell where and to what degree?—and becomes something else than a transcriber; each, as he thus modifies, passing into the domain of art proper. For just in proportion as the writer’s aim, consciously or unconsciously, comes to be the transcribing, not of the world, not of mere fact, but of his sense of it, he becomes an artist, his work *fine* art; and good art (as I hope ultimately to show) in proportion to the truth of his presentment of that sense; as in those humbler or plainer functions of literature also, truth—truth to bare fact, there—is the essence of such artistic quality as they may have. Truth! there can be no merit, no craft at all, without that. And further, all beauty is in the long run only *fineness* of truth, or what we call expression, the finer accommodation of speech to that vision within.

The transcript of his sense of fact rather than the fact, as being preferable, pleasanter, more beautiful to the writer himself. In literature, as in every other product of human skill, in the moulding of a bell or a platter for instance, wherever this sense asserts itself, wherever the producer so modifies his work as, over and above its primary use or intention, to make it pleasing (to himself, of course, in the first instance) there, “fine” as opposed to merely serviceable art, exists. Literary art, that is, like all art which is in any way imitative or reproductive of fact—form, or colour, or incident—is the representation of such fact as connected with soul, of a specific personality, in its preferences, its volition and power.

Such is the matter of imaginative or artistic literature—this transcript, not of mere fact, but of fact in its infinite variety, as modified by human preference in all its infinitely varied forms. It will be good literary art not because it is brilliant or sober, or rich, or impulsive, or severe, but just in proportion as its representation of that sense, that soul-fact, is true, verse being only one department of such literature, and imaginative prose, it may be thought, being the special art of the modern world. That imaginative prose should be the special and opportune art of the modern world results from two important facts about the latter: first, the chaotic variety and complexity of its interests, making the intellectual issue, the really master currents of the present time incalculable—a condition of mind little susceptible of the restraint proper to verse form, so that the most characteristic verse of the nineteenth century has been lawless verse; and secondly, an all-pervading naturalism, a curiosity about everything whatever as it really is, involving a certain humility of attitude, cognate to what must, after all, be the less ambitious form of literature. And prose thus asserting itself as the special and privileged artistic faculty of the present day, will be, however critics may try to narrow its scope, as varied in its excellence as humanity itself reflecting on the facts of its latest experience—an instrument of many stops, meditative, observant, descriptive, eloquent, analytic, plaintive, fervid. Its beauties will be not exclusively “pedestrian”: it will exert, in due measure, all the varied charms of poetry, down to the rhythm which, as in Cicero, or Michelet, or Newman, at their best, gives its musical value to every syllable.*

The literary artist is of necessity a scholar, and in what he proposes to do will have in mind, first of all, the scholar and the scholarly conscience—the male conscience in this matter, as we must think it, under a system of education which still to so large an extent limits real scholarship to men. In his self-criticism, he supposes always that sort of reader who will go (full of eyes) warily, considerately, though without consideration for him, over the ground which the female conscience traverses so lightly, so amiably. For the material in which he works is no more a creation of his own than the sculptor’s marble. Product of a myriad various minds and contending tongues, compact of obscure and minute association, a language has its own abundant and often recondite laws, in the habitual and summary recognition of which scholarship consists. A writer, full of a matter he is before all things anxious to express, may

* Mr. Saintsbury, in his *Specimens of English Prose, from Malory to Macaulay*, has succeeded in tracing, through successive English prose-writers, the tradition of that severer beauty in them, of which this admirable scholar of our literature is known to be a lover. *English Prose, from Mandeville to Thackeray*, more recently “chosen and edited” by a younger scholar, Mr. Arthur Galton, of New College, Oxford, a lover of our literature at once enthusiastic and discreet, aims at a more various illustration of the eloquent powers of English prose, and is a delightful companion.

think of those laws, the limitations of vocabulary, structure, and the like, as a restriction, but if a real artist will find in them an opportunity. His punctilious observance of the proprieties of his medium will diffuse through all he writes a general air of sensibility, of refined usage. *Exclusiones debita natura*—the exclusions, or rejections, which nature demands—we know how large a part these play, according to Bacon, in the science of nature. In a somewhat changed sense, we might say that the art of the scholar is summed up in the observance of those rejections demanded by the nature of his medium, the material he must use. Alive to the value of an atmosphere in which every term finds its utmost degree of expression, and with all the jealousy of a lover of words, he will resist a constant tendency on the part of the majority of those who use them to efface the distinctions of language, the facility of writers often reinforcing in this respect the work of the vulgar. He will feel the obligation not of the laws only, but of those affinities, avoidances, those mere preferences, of his language, which through the associations of literary history have become a part of its nature, prescribing the rejection of many a neology, many a license, many a gipsy phrase which might present itself as actually expressive. His appeal, again, is to the scholar, who has great experience in literature, and will show no favour to short-cuts, or hackneyed illustration, or an affectation of learning designed for the unlearned. Hence a contention, a sense of self-restraint and renunciation, having for the susceptible reader the effect of a challenge for minute consideration; the attention of the writer, in every minutest detail, being a pledge that it is worth the reader's while to be attentive too, that the writer is dealing scrupulously with his instrument, and therefore, indirectly, with the reader himself also, that he has the science of the instrument he plays on, perhaps, after all, with a freedom which in such case will be the freedom of a master.

For meanwhile, braced only by those restraints, he is really vindicating his liberty in the making of a vocabulary, an entire system of composition, for himself, his own true manner; and when we speak of the manner of a true master we mean what is essential in his art. Pedantry being only the scholarship of *le cuistre* (we have no English equivalent) he is no pedant, and does but show his intelligence of the rules of language in his freedoms with it, addition or expansion, which like the spontaneities of manner in a well-bred person will still further illustrate good taste.—The right vocabulary! Translators have not invariably seen how all-important that is in the work of translation, driving for the most part at idiom or construction; whereas, if the original be first-rate, one's first care should be with its elementary particles, Plato, for instance, being often reproducible by an exact following, with no variation in structure, of word after word, as the

pencil follows a drawing under tracing-paper, so only each word or syllable be not of false colour, to change my illustration a little.

Well! that is because any writer worth translating at all has winnowed and searched through his vocabulary, is conscious of the words he would select in systematic reading of a dictionary, and still more of the words he would reject were the dictionary other than Johnson's; and doing this with his peculiar sense of the world ever in view, in search of an instrument for the adequate expression of that, he begets a vocabulary faithful to the colouring of his own spirit, and in the strictest sense original. That living authority which language needs lies, in truth, in its scholars, who recognising always that every language possesses a genius, a very fastidious genius, of its own, expand at once and purify its very elements, which must needs change along with the changing thoughts of living people. Ninety years ago, for instance, great mental force, certainly, was needed by Wordsworth, to break through the consecrated poetic associations of a century, and speak the language that was his, that was to become in a measure the language of the next generation. But he did it with the tact of a scholar also. English, for a quarter of a century past, has been assimilating the phraseology of pictorial art; for half a century, the phraseology of the great German metaphysical movement of eighty years ago; in part also the language of mystical theology: and none but pedants will regret a great consequent increase of its resources. For many years to come its enterprise may well lie in the naturalisation of the vocabulary of science, so only it be under the eye of a sensitive scholarship—in a liberal naturalisation of the ideas of science too, for after all the chief stimulus of good style is to possess a full, rich, complex matter to grapple with. The literary artist, therefore, will be well aware of physical science; science also attaining, in its turn, its true literary ideal. And then, as the scholar is nothing without the historic sense, he will be apt to restore not really obsolete or really worn-out words, but the finer edge of words still in use: *ascertain*, *communicate*, *discover*—words like these it has been part of our “business” to misuse. And still, as language was made for man, he will be no authority for correctnesses which, limiting freedom of utterance, were yet but accidents in their origin; as if one vowed not to say “*its*,” which ought to have been in Shakespeare; “*his*” and “*hers*,” for inanimate objects, being but a barbarous and really inexpressive survival. Yet we have known many things like this. Racy Saxon monosyllables, close to us as touch and sight, he will intermix readily with those long, savoursome, Latin words, rich in “second intention.” In this late day certainly, no critical process can be conducted reasonably without eclecticism. Of such eclecticism we have a justifying example in one of the first poets of our time. How illustrative of

monosyllabic effect, of sonorous Latin, of the phraseology of science, of metaphysic, of colloquialism even, are the writings of Tennyson; yet with what a fine, fastidious scholarship throughout!

A scholar writing for the scholarly, he will of course leave something to the willing intelligence of his reader. "To go preach to the first passer-by," says Montaigne, "to become tutor to the ignorance of the first I meet, is a thing I abhor;" a thing, in fact, naturally distressing to the scholar, who will therefore ever be shy of offering uncomplimentary assistance to the reader's wit. To really strenuous minds there is a pleasurable stimulus in the challenge for a continuous effort on their part, to be rewarded by securer and more intimate grasp of the author's sense. Self-restraint, a skilful economy of means, *ascēsis*, that too has a beauty of its own; and for the reader supposed there will be an aesthetic satisfaction in that frugal closeness of style which makes the most of a word, in the exaction from every sentence of a precise relief, in the just spacing out of word to thought, in the logically filled space connected always with the delightful sense of difficulty overcome.

Different classes of persons, at different times, make, of course, very various demands upon literature. Still, scholars, I suppose, and not only scholars, but all disinterested lovers of books, will always look to it, as to all other fine art, for a refuge, a sort of cloistral refuge, from a certain vulgarity in the actual world. A perfect poem like *Lycidas*, a perfect fiction like *Esmond*, the perfect handling of a theory like Newman's *Idea of a University*, has for them something of the uses of a religious "retreat." Here, then, with a view to the central need of a select few, those "men of a finer thread" who have formed and maintain the literary ideal, everything, every component element, will have undergone exact trial, and, above all, there will be no uncharacteristic or tarnished or vulgar decoration, permissible ornament being for the most part structural, or necessary. As the painter in his picture, so the artist in his book, aims at the production by honourable artifice of a peculiar atmosphere. "The artist," says Schiller, "may be known rather by what he *omits*"; and in literature, too, the true artist may be best recognised by his tact of omission. For to the grave reader words too are grave; and the ornamental word, the figure, the accessory form or colour or reference, is rarely content to die to thought precisely at the right moment, but will inevitably linger awhile, stirring a long "brain-wave" behind it of perhaps quite alien associations.

Just there, it may be, is the detrimental tendency of the sort of scholarly attentiveness of mind I am recommending. But the true artist allows for it. He will remember that, as the very

word ornament indicates what is in itself non-essential, so the “one beauty” of all literary style is of its very essence, and independent, in prose and verse alike, of all removable decoration; that it may exist in its fullest lustre, as in Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*, for instance, or in Stendhal’s *Le Rouge et Le Noir*, in a composition utterly unadorned, with hardly a single suggestion of visibly beautiful things. Parallel, allusion, the allusive way generally, the flowers in the garden:—he knows the narcotic force of these upon the negligent intelligence to which any *diversion*, literally, is welcome, any vagrant intruder, because one can go wandering away with it from the immediate subject. Jealous, if he have a really quickening motive within, of all that does not hold directly to that, of the facile, the otiose, he will never depart from the strictly pedestrian process, unless he gains a ponderable something thereby. Even assured of its congruity, he will still question its serviceableness. Is it worth while, can we afford, to attend to just that, to just that figure or literary reference, just then?—Surplusage! he will dread that, as the runner on his muscles. For in truth all art does but consist in the removal of surplusage, from the last finish of the gem-engraver blowing away the last particle of invisible dust, back to the earliest divination of the finished work to be, lying somewhere, according to Michelangelo’s fancy, in the rough-hewn block of stone.

And what applies to figure or flower must be understood of all other accidental or removable ornaments of writing whatever; and not of specific ornament only, but of all that latent colour and imagery which language as such carries in it. A lover of words for their own sake, to whom nothing about them is unimportant, a minute and constant observer of their physiognomy, he will be on the alert not only for obviously mixed metaphors of course, but for the metaphor that is mixed in all our speech, though a rapid use may involve no cognition of it. Currently recognising the incident, the colour, the physical elements or particles in words like *absorb*, *consider*, *extract*, to take the first that occur, he will avail himself of them, as further adding to the resources of expression. The elementary particles of language will be realised as colour and light and shade through his scholarly living in the full sense of them. Still opposing the constant degradation of language by those who use it carelessly, he will not treat coloured glass as if it were clear; and while half the world is using figure unconsciously, will be fully aware not only of all that latent figurative texture in speech, but of the vague, lazy, half-formed personification—a rhetoric, depressing, and worse than nothing, because it has no really rhetorical motive—which plays so large a part there, and, as in the case of more ostentatious ornament, scrupulously exact of it, from syllable to syllable, its precise value.

So far I have been speaking of certain conditions of the literary art arising out of the medium or material in or upon which it works, the essential qualities of language and its aptitudes for contingent ornamentation, matters which define scholarship as science and good taste respectively. They are both subservient to a more intimate quality of good style: more intimate, as coming nearer to the artist himself. The otiose, the facile, surplusage: why are these abhorrent to the true literary artist, except because, in literary as in all other art, structure is all-important, felt, or painfully missed, everywhere?—that architectural conception of work, which foresees the end in the beginning and never loses sight of it, and in every part is conscious of all the rest, till the last sentence does but, with undiminished vigour, unfold and justify the first—a condition of literary art, which, in contradistinction to another quality of the artist himself, to be spoken of later, I shall call the necessity of *mind* in style.

An acute philosophical writer, the late Dean Mansel (a writer whose works illustrate the literary beauty there may be in closeness, and with obvious repression or economy of a fine rhetorical gift) wrote a book, of fascinating precision in a very obscure subject, to show that all the technical laws of logic are but means of securing, in each and all of its apprehensions, the unity, the strict identity with itself, of the apprehending mind. All the laws of good writing aim at a similar unity or identity of the mind in all the processes by which the word is associated to its import. The term is right, and has its essential beauty, when it becomes, in a manner, what it signifies, as with the names of simple sensations. To give the phrase, the sentence, the structural member, the entire composition, song, or essay, a similar unity with its subject and with itself:—style is in the right way when it tends towards that. All depends upon the original unity, the vital wholeness and identity, of the initiatory apprehension or view. So much is true of all art, which therefore requires always its logic, its comprehensive reason—insight, foresight, retrospect, in simultaneous action—true, most of all, of the literary art, as being of all the arts most closely cognate to the abstract intelligence. Such logical coherency may be evidenced not merely in the lines of composition as a whole, but in the choice of a single word, while it by no means interferes with, but may even prescribe, much variety, in the building of the sentence for instance, or in the manner, argumentative, descriptive, discursive, of this or that part or member of the entire design. The blithe, crisp sentence, decisive as a child's expression of its needs, may alternate with the long-contending, victoriously intricate sentence; the sentence, born with the integrity of a single word, relieving the sort of sentence in which, if you look closely, you can see much contrivance, much adjustment, to bring a highly qualified matter into compass at one view.

For the literary architecture, if it is to be rich and expressive, involves not only foresight of the end in the beginning, but also development or growth of design, in the process of execution, with many irregularities, surprises, and afterthoughts; the contingent as well as the necessary being subsumed under the unity of the whole. As truly, to the lack of such architectural design, of a single, almost visual, image, vigorously informing an entire, perhaps very intricate, composition, which shall be austere, ornate, argumentative, fanciful, yet true from first to last to that vision within, may be attributed those weaknesses of conscious or unconscious repetition of word, phrase, motive, or member of the whole matter, indicating, as Flaubert was aware, an original structure in thought not organically complete. With such foresight, the actual conclusion will most often get itself written out of hand, before, in the more obvious sense, the work is finished. With some strong and leading sense of the world, the tight hold of which secures true *composition* and not mere loose accretion, the literary artist, I suppose, goes on considerably, setting joint to joint, sustained by yet restraining the productive ardour, retracing the negligences of his first sketch, repeating his steps only that he may give the reader a sense of secure and restful progress, readjusting mere assonances even, that they may soothe the reader, or at least not interrupt him on his way; and then, somewhere before the end comes, is burdened, inspired, with his conclusion, and betimes delivered of it, leaving off, not in weariness and because he finds *himself* at an end, but in all the freshness of volition. His work now structurally complete, with all the accumulating effect of secondary shades of meaning, he finishes the whole up to the just proportion of that ante-penultimate conclusion, and all becomes expressive. The house he has built is rather a body he has informed. And so it happens, to its greater credit, that the better interest even of a narrative to be recounted, a story to be told, will often be in its second reading. And though there are instances of great writers who have been no artists, an unconscious tact sometimes directing work in which we may detect, very pleasurably, many of the effects of conscious art, yet one of the greatest pleasures of really good prose literature is in the critical tracing out of that conscious artistic structure, and the pervading sense of it as we read. Yet of poetic literature too; for, in truth, the kind of constructive intelligence here supposed is one of the forms of the imagination.

That is the special function of mind, in style. Mind and soul:—hard to ascertain philosophically, the distinction is real enough practically, for they often interfere, are sometimes in conflict, with each other. Blake, in the last century, is an instance of preponderating soul, embarrassed, at a loss, in an era of preponderating mind. As a quality of style, at all events, soul is

a fact, in certain writers—the way they have of absorbing language, of attracting it into the peculiar spirit they are of, with a subtlety which makes the actual result seem like some inexplicable inspiration. By mind, the literary artist reaches us, through static and objective indications of design in his work, legible to all. By soul, he reaches us, somewhat capriciously perhaps, one and not another, through vagrant sympathy and a kind of immediate contact. Mind we cannot choose but approve where we recognise it; soul may repel us, not because we misunderstand it. The way in which theological interests sometimes avail themselves of language is perhaps the best illustration of the force I mean to indicate generally in literature, by the word *soul*. Ardent religious persuasion may exist, may make its way, without finding any equivalent heat in language: or, again, it may enkindle words to various degrees, and when it really takes hold of them doubles its force. Religious history presents many remarkable instances in which, through no mere phrase-worship, an unconscious literary tact has, for the sensitive, laid open a privileged pathway from one to another. “The altar-fire,” people say, “has touched those lips!” The Vulgate, the English Bible, the English Prayer-Book, the writings of Swedenborg, the Tracts for the Times:—there, we have instances of widely different and largely diffused phases of religious feeling in operation as soul in style. But something of the same kind acts with similar power in certain writers of quite other than theological literature, on behalf of some wholly personal and peculiar sense of theirs. Most easily illustrated by theological literature, this quality lends to profane writers a kind of religious influence. At their best, these writers become, as we say sometimes, “prophets”; such character depending on the effect not merely of their matter, but of their matter as allied to, in “electric affinity” with, peculiar form, and working in all cases by an immediate sympathetic contact, on which account it is that it may be called soul, as opposed to mind, in style. And this too is a faculty of choosing and rejecting what is congruous or otherwise, with a drift towards unity—unity of atmosphere here, as there of design—soul securing colour (or perfume, might we say?) as mind secures form, the latter being essentially finite, the former vague or infinite, as the influence of a living person is practically infinite. There are some to whom nothing has any real interest, or real meaning, except as operative in a given person; and it is they who best appreciate the quality of soul in literary art. They seem to know a *person*, in a book, and make way by intuition: yet, although they thus enjoy the completeness of a personal information, it is still a characteristic of soul, in this sense of the word, that it does but suggest what can never be uttered, not as being different from, or more obscure than, what actually gets

said, but as containing that plenary substance of which there is only one phase or facet in what is there expressed.

If all high things have their martyrs, Gustave Flaubert might perhaps rank as the martyr of literary style. In his printed correspondence, a curious series of letters, written in his twenty-fifth year, records what seems to have been his one other passion—a series of letters which, with its fine casuistries, its firmly repressed anguish, its tone of harmonious grey, and the sense of disillusion in which the whole matter ends, might have been, a few slight changes supposed, one of his own fictions. Writing to Madame X. certainly he does display, by “taking thought” mainly, by constant and delicate pondering, as in his love for literature, a heart really moved, but still more, and as the pledge of that emotion, a loyalty to his work. Madame X., too, is a literary artist, and the best gifts he can send her are precepts of perfection in art, counsels for the effectual pursuit of that better love. In his love-letters it is the pains and pleasures of art he insists on, its solaces: he communicates secrets, reproves, encourages, with a view to that. Whether the lady was dissatisfied with such divided or indirect service, the reader is not enabled to see; but sees that, on Flaubert’s part at least, a living person could be no rival of what was, from first to last, his leading passion, a somewhat solitary and exclusive one.

I must scold you (he writes) for one thing, which shocks, scandalises me, the small concern, namely, you show for art just now. As regards glory be it so: there, I approve. But for art!—the one thing in life that is good and real—can you compare with it an earthly love?—prefer the adoration of a relative beauty to the *cultus* of the true beauty? Well! I tell you the truth. That is the one thing good in me: the one thing I have, to me estimable. For yourself, you blend with the beautiful a heap of alien things, the useful, the agreeable, what not?—The only way not to be unhappy is to shut yourself up in art, and count everything else as nothing. Pride takes the place of all beside when it is established on a large basis. Work! God wills it. That, it seems to me, is clear.—

I am reading over again the *Aeneid*, certain verses of which I repeat to myself to satiety. There are phrases there which stay in one’s head, by which I find myself beset, as with those musical airs which are for ever returning, and cause you pain, you love them so much. I observe that I no longer laugh much, and am no longer depressed. I am ripe. You talk of my serenity, and envy me. It may well surprise you. Sick, irritated, the prey a thousand times a day of cruel pain, I continue my labour like a true working-man, who, with sleeves turned up, in the sweat of his brow, beats away at his anvil, never troubling himself whether it rains or blows, for hail or thunder. I was not like that formerly. The change has taken place naturally, though my will has counted for something in the matter.—

Those who write in good style are sometimes accused of a neglect of ideas, and of the moral end, as if the end of the physician were something else than healing, of the painter than painting—as if the end of art were not, before all else, the beautiful.

What, then, did Flaubert understand by beauty, in the art he pursued with so much fervour, with so much self-command? Let us hear a sympathetic commentator:—

Possessed of an absolute belief that there exists but one way of expressing one thing, one word to call it by, one adjective to qualify, one verb to animate it, he gave himself to superhuman labour for the discovery, in every phrase, of that word, that verb, that epithet. In this way, he believed in some mysterious harmony of expression, and when a true word seemed to him to lack euphony still went on seeking another, with invincible patience, certain that he had not yet got hold of the *unique* word... A thousand preoccupations would beset him at the same moment, always with this desperate certitude fixed in his spirit: Among all the expressions in the world, all forms and turns of expression, there is but *one*—one form, one mode—to express what I want to say.

The one word for the one thing, the one thought, amid the multitude of words, terms, that might just do: the problem of style was there!—the unique word, phrase, sentence, paragraph, essay, or song, absolutely proper to the single mental presentation or vision within. In that perfect justice, over and above the many contingent and removable beauties with which beautiful style may charm us, but which it can exist without, independent of them yet dexterously availing itself of them, omnipresent in good work, in function at every point, from single epithets to the rhythm of a whole book, lay the specific, indispensable, very intellectual, beauty of literature, the possibility of which constitutes it a fine art.

One seems to detect the influence of a philosophic idea there—the idea of a natural economy, of some pre-existent adaptation, between a relative, somewhere in the world of thought, and its correlative, somewhere in the world of language—both alike, rather, somewhere in the mind of the artist, desiderative, expectant, inventive—meeting each other with the readiness of “soul and body reunited,” in Blake’s rapturous design; and, in fact, Flaubert was fond of giving his theory philosophical expression.—

There are no beautiful thoughts (he would say) without beautiful forms, and conversely. As it is impossible to extract from a physical body the qualities which really constitute it—colour, extension, and the like—without reducing it to a hollow abstraction, in a word, without destroying it; just so it is impossible to detach the form from the idea, for the idea only exists by virtue of the form.

All the recognised flowers, the removable ornaments of literature (including harmony and ease in reading aloud, very carefully considered by him) counted, certainly; for these too are part of the actual value of what one says. But still, after all, with Flaubert, the search, the unwearied

research, was not for the smooth, or winsome, or forcible word, as such, as with false Ciceronians, but quite simply and honestly, for the word's adjustment to its meaning. The first condition of this must be, of course, to know yourself, to have ascertained your own sense exactly. Then, if we suppose an artist, he says to the reader,—I want you to see precisely what I see. Into the mind sensitive to “form,” a flood of random sounds, colours, incidents, is ever penetrating from the world without, to become, by sympathetic selection, a part of its very structure, and, in turn, the visible vesture and expression of that other world it sees so steadily within, nay, already with a partial conformity thereto, to be refined, enlarged, corrected, at a hundred points; and it is just there, just at those doubtful points that the function of style, as tact or taste, intervenes. The unique term will come more quickly to one than another, at one time than another, according also to the kind of matter in question. Quickness and slowness, ease and closeness alike, have nothing to do with the artistic character of the true word found at last. As there is a charm of ease, so there is also a special charm in the signs of discovery, of effort and contention towards a due end, as so often with Flaubert himself—in the style which has been pliant, as only obstinate, durable metal can be, to the inherent perplexities and recusancy of a certain difficult thought.

If Flaubert had not told us, perhaps we should never have guessed how tardy and painful his own procedure really was, and after reading his confession may think that his almost endless hesitation had much to do with diseased nerves. Often, perhaps, the felicity supposed will be the product of a happier, a more exuberant nature than Flaubert's. Aggravated, certainly, by a morbid physical condition, that anxiety in “seeking the phrase,” which gathered all the other small *ennuis* of a really quiet existence into a kind of battle, was connected with his lifelong contention against facile poetry, facile art—art, facile and flimsy; and what constitutes the true artist is not the slowness or quickness of the process, but the absolute success of the result. As with those labourers in the parable, the prize is independent of the mere length of the actual day's work. “You talk,” he writes, odd, trying lover, to Madame X.—

You talk of the exclusiveness of my literary tastes. That might have enabled you to divine what kind of a person I am in the matter of love. I grow so hard to please as a literary artist, that I am driven to despair. I shall end by not writing another line.

“Happy,” he cries, in a moment of discouragement at that patient labour, which for him, certainly, was the condition of a great success—

Happy those who have no doubts of themselves! who lengthen out, as the pen runs on, all that flows forth from their brains. As for me, I hesitate, I disappoint myself, turn round upon myself in despite: my taste is augmented in proportion as my natural vigour decreases, and I afflict my soul over some dubious word out of all proportion to the pleasure I get from a whole page of good writing. One would have to live two centuries to attain a true idea of any matter whatever. What Buffon said is a big blasphemy: genius is not long-continued patience. Still, there is some truth in the statement, and more than people think, especially as regards our own day. Art! art! art! bitter deception! phantom that glows with light, only to lead one on to destruction.

Again—

I am growing so peevish about my writing. I am like a man whose ear is true but who plays falsely on the violin: his fingers refuse to reproduce precisely those sounds of which he has the inward sense. Then the tears come rolling down from the poor scraper's eyes and the bow falls from his hand.

Coming slowly or quickly, when it comes, as it came with so much labour of mind, but also with so much lustre, to Gustave Flaubert, this discovery of the word will be, like all artistic success and felicity, incapable of strict analysis: effect of an intuitive condition of mind, it must be recognised by like intuition on the part of the reader, and a sort of immediate sense. In every one of those masterly sentences of Flaubert there was, below all mere contrivance, shaping and afterthought, by some happy instantaneous concourse of the various faculties of the mind with each other, the exact apprehension of what was *needed* to carry the meaning. And that it fits with absolute justice will be a judgment of immediate sense in the appreciative reader. We all feel this in what may be called inspired translation. Well! all language involves translation from inward to outward. In literature, as in all forms of art, there are the absolute and the merely relative or accessory beauties; and precisely in that exact proportion of the term to its purpose is the absolute beauty of style, prose or verse. All the good qualities, the beauties, of verse also, are such, only as precise expression.

In the highest as in the lowliest literature, then, the one indispensable beauty is, after all, truth:—truth to bare fact in the latter, as to some personal sense of fact, diverted somewhat from men's ordinary sense of it, in the former; truth there as accuracy, truth here as expression, that finest and most intimate form of truth, the *vraie vérité*. And what an eclectic principle this really is! employing for its one sole purpose—that absolute accordance of expression to idea—all other literary beauties and excellences whatever: how many kinds of style it covers, explains, justifies, and at the same time safeguards! Scott's facility, Flaubert's deeply pondered evocation of “the

phrase,” are equally good art. Say what you have to say, what you have a will to say, in the simplest, the most direct and exact manner possible, with no surplusage:—there, is the justification of the sentence so fortunately born, “entire, smooth, and round,” that it needs no punctuation, and also (that is the point!) of the most elaborate period, if it be right in its elaboration. Here is the office of ornament: here also the purpose of restraint in ornament. As the exponent of truth, that austerity (the beauty, the function, of which in literature Flaubert understood so well) becomes not the correctness or purism of the mere scholar, but a security against the otiose, a jealous exclusion of what does not really tell towards the pursuit of relief, of life and vigour in the portraiture of one’s sense. License again, the making free with rule, if it be indeed, as people fancy, a habit of genius, flinging aside or transforming all that opposes the liberty of beautiful production, will be but faith to one’s own meaning. The seeming baldness of *Le Rouge et Le Noir* is nothing in itself; the wild ornament of *Les Misérables* is nothing in itself; and the restraint of Flaubert, amid a real natural opulence, only redoubled beauty—the phrase so large and so precise at the same time, hard as bronze, in service to the more perfect adaptation of words to their matter. Afterthoughts, retouchings, finish, will be of profit only so far as they too really serve to bring out the original, initiative, generative, sense in them.

In this way, according to the well-known saying, “The style is the man,” complex or simple, in his individuality, his plenary sense of what he really has to say, his sense of the world; all cautions regarding style arising out of so many natural scruples as to the medium through which alone he can expose that inward sense of things, the purity of this medium, its laws or tricks of refraction: nothing is to be left there which might give conveyance to any matter save that. Style in all its varieties, reserved or opulent, terse, abundant, musical, stimulant, academic, so long as each is really characteristic or expressive, finds thus its justification, the sumptuous good taste of Cicero being as truly the man himself, and not another, justified, yet insured inalienably to him, thereby, as would have been his portrait by Raffaello, in full consular splendour, on his ivory chair.

A relegation, you may say perhaps—a relegation of style to the subjectivity, the mere caprice, of the individual, which must soon transform it into mannerism. Not so! since there is, under the conditions supposed, for those elements of the man, for every lineament of the vision within, the one word, the one acceptable word, recognisable by the sensitive, by others “who have intelligence” in the matter, as absolutely as ever anything can be in the evanescent and delicate region of human language. The style, the manner, would be the man, not in his

unreasoned and really uncharacteristic caprices, involuntary or affected, but in absolutely sincere apprehension of what is most real to him. But let us hear our French guide again.—

Styles (says Flaubert's commentator), *Styles*, as so many peculiar moulds, each of which bears the mark of a particular writer, who is to pour into it the whole content of his ideas, were no part of his theory. What he believed in was *Style*: that is to say, a certain absolute and unique manner of expressing a thing, in all its intensity and colour. For him the *form* was the work itself. As in living creatures, the blood, nourishing the body, determines its very contour and external aspect, just so, to his mind, the *matter*, the basis, in a work of art, imposed, necessarily, the unique, the just expression, the measure, the rhythm—the *form* in all its characteristics.

If the style be the man, in all the colour and intensity of a veritable apprehension, it will be in a real sense “impersonal.”

I said, thinking of books like Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*, that prose literature was the characteristic art of the nineteenth century, as others, thinking of its triumphs since the youth of Bach, have assigned that place to music. Music and prose literature are, in one sense, the opposite terms of art; the art of literature presenting to the imagination, through the intelligence, a range of interests, as free and various as those which music presents to it through sense. And certainly the tendency of what has been here said is to bring literature too under those conditions, by conformity to which music takes rank as the typically perfect art. If music be the ideal of all art whatever, precisely because in music it is impossible to distinguish the form from the substance or matter, the subject from the expression, then, literature, by finding its specific excellence in the absolute correspondence of the term to its import, will be but fulfilling the condition of all artistic quality in things everywhere, of all good art.

Good art, but not necessarily great art; the distinction between great art and good art depending immediately, as regards literature at all events, not on its form, but on the matter. Thackeray's *Esmond*, surely, is greater art than *Vanity Fair*, by the greater dignity of its interests. It is on the quality of the matter it informs or controls, its compass, its variety, its alliance to great ends, or the depth of the note of revolt, or the largeness of hope in it, that the greatness of literary art depends, as *The Divine Comedy*, *Paradise Lost*, *Les Misérables*, *The English Bible*, are great art. Given the conditions I have tried to explain as constituting good art;—then, if it be devoted further to the increase of men's happiness, to the redemption of the oppressed, or the enlargement of our sympathies with each other, or to such presentment of new or old truth about ourselves and our relation to the world as may ennoble and fortify us in our sojourn here,

or immediately, as with Dante, to the glory of God, it will be also great art; if, over and above those qualities I summed up as mind and soul—that colour and mystic perfume, and that reasonable structure, it has something of the soul of humanity in it, and finds its logical, its architectural place, in the great structure of human life.

The General Theory of Poetry in the Italian Renaissance (1899)

Joel Elias Spingarn¹

In the first book of his *Geography* Strabo defines poetry as “a kind of elementary philosophy, which introduces us early to life, and gives us pleasurable instruction in reference to character, emotion, action.” This passage sounds the keynote of the Renaissance theory of poetry. Poetry is therein stated to be a form of philosophy, and, moreover, a philosophy whose subject is life, and its object is said to be pleasurable instruction.

I. Poetry as a Form of Scholastic Philosophy

In the first place, poetry is a form of philosophy. Savonarola had classed poetry with logic and grammar, and had asserted that a knowledge of logic is essential to the composing of poetry. The division of the sciences and the relative importance of each were a source of infinite scholastic discussion during the Middle Ages. Aristotle had first placed dialectic or logic, rhetoric, and poetics in the same category of efficient philosophy. But Averroës was probably the first to confuse the function of poetics with that of logic, and to make the former a subdivision, or form, of the latter; and this classification appears to have been accepted by the scholastic philosophers of the Middle Ages.

This conception of the position of poetry in the body of human knowledge may be found, however, throughout the Renaissance. Thus, Robortelli, in his commentary on Aristotle's *Poetics* (1548), gives the usual scholastic distinctions between the various forms of the written or spoken word (*oratio*): the demonstrative, which deals with the true; the dialectic, which deals with the probable; the rhetorical, with the persuasive; and the poetic, with the false or fabulous. By the term “false” or “fabulous” is meant merely that the subject of poetry is not actual fact, but that it deals with things as they ought to be, rather than as they are. Varchi, in his

¹ The essay represents the second chapter of the first part (*Literary Criticism in Italy*) of the seminal book *A History of Literary Criticism in the Renaissance* by Joel Elias Spingarn. Reference edition is New York, Columbia University Press & Macmillan, 1899.

public lectures on poetry (1553), divides philosophy into two forms, real and rational. Real philosophy deals with things, and includes metaphysics, ethics, physics, geometry, and the like; while rational philosophy, which includes logic, dialectic, rhetoric, history, poetry, and grammar, deals not with things, but with words, and is not philosophy proper, but the instrument of philosophy. Poetry is therefore, strictly speaking, neither an art nor a science, but an instrument or faculty; and it is only an art in the sense that it has been reduced to rules and precepts. It is, in fact, a form of logic, and no man, according to Varchi, can be a poet unless he is a logician; the better logician he is, the better poet he will be. Logic and poetry differ, however, in their matter and their instruments; for the subject of logic is truth, arrived at by means of the demonstrative syllogism, while the subject of poetry is fiction or invention, arrived at by means of that form of the syllogism known as the example. Here the enthymeme, or example, which Aristotle has made the instrument of rhetoric, becomes the instrument of poetry.

This classification survived in the Aristotelian schools at Padua and elsewhere as late as Zabarella and Campanella. Zabarella, a professor of logic and later of philosophy at Padua from 1564 to 1589, explains at length Averroës's theory that poetics is a form of logic, in a treatise on the nature of logic, published in 1578. He concludes that the two faculties, logic and poetics, are not instruments of philosophy in general, but only of a part of it, for they refer rather to action than to knowledge; that is, they come under Aristotle's category of efficient philosophy. They are not the instruments of useful art or of moral philosophy, the end of which is to make one's self good; but of civil philosophy, the end of which is to make others good. If it be objected that they are τῶν ἐναντίων, that is, of both good and evil, it may be answered that their proper end is good. Thus, in the *Symposium*, the true poet is praised; while in the *Republic* the poets who aim at pleasure and who corrupt their audiences are censured; and Aristotle in his definition of tragedy says that the end of tragedy is to purge the passions and to correct the morals of men (*affectiones animi purgare et mores corrigere*).

Even later than Zabarella, we find in the *Poetica* of Campanella a division of the sciences very similar to that of Savonarola and Varchi. Theology is there placed at the head of all knowledge, in accordance with the mediæval tradition, while poetics, with dialectic, grammar, and rhetoric, is placed among the logical sciences. Considering *poetica* as a form of philosophy, another commentator on Aristotle, Maggi (1550), takes great pains to distinguish its various manifestations. *Poetica* is the art of composing poetry, *poesis*, the poetry composed according to

this art, *poeta*, the composer of poetry, and *poema*, a single specimen of poetry. This distinction is an elaboration of two passages in Plutarch and Aphthonius.

II. Poetry as an Imitation of Life

In the second place, according to the passage from Strabo cited at the beginning of this chapter, poetry introduces us early to life, or, in other words, its subject is human action, and it is what Aristotle calls it, an imitation of human life. This raises two distinct problems. First, what is the meaning of imitation? and what in life is the subject-matter of this imitation?

The conception of imitation held by the critics of the Renaissance was that expressed by Aristotle in the ninth chapter of the *Poetics*. The passage is as follows:—

It is evident from what has been said that it is not the function of the poet to relate what has happened, but what may happen,—what is possible according to the law of probability or necessity. The poet and the historian differ not by writing in verse or in prose. The work of Herodotus might be put into verse, and it would still be a species of history, with metre no less than without it. The true difference is that one relates what has happened, the other what may happen. Poetry, therefore, is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history; for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular. The universal tells us how a person of given character will on occasion speak or act, according to the law of probability or necessity; and it is this universality at which poetry aims in giving expressive names to the characters.

In this passage Aristotle has briefly formulated a conception of ideal imitation which may be regarded as universally valid, and which, repeated over and over again, became the basis of Renaissance criticism.

In the *Poetica* of Daniello (1536), occurs the first allusion in modern literary criticism to the Aristotelian notion of ideal imitation. According to Daniello, the poet, unlike the historian, can mingle fictions with facts, because he is not obliged, as is the historian, to describe things as they actually are or have been, but rather as they ought to be; and it is in this that the poet most differs from the historian, and not in the writing of verses; for even if Livy's works were versified, they would still be histories as before. This is of course almost a paraphrase of the passage in Aristotle; but that Daniello did not completely understand the ideal element in Aristotle's conception is shown by the further distinction which he draws between the historian and the poet. For he adds that the poet and the historian have much in common; in both there are

descriptions of places, peoples, laws; both contain the representation of vices and virtues; in both, amplification, variety, and digressions are proper; and both teach, delight, and profit at the same time. They differ, however, in that the historian, in telling his story, recounts it exactly as it happened, and adds nothing; whereas the poet is permitted to add whatever he desires, so long as the fictitious events have all the appearance of truth.

Somewhat later, Robortelli treats the question of aesthetic imitation from another point of view. The poet deals with things as they ought to be, but he can either appropriate actual fact, or he can invent his material. If he does the former, he narrates the truth not as it really happened, but as it might or ought to happen; while if he invents his material, he must do so in accordance with the law of possibility, or necessity, or probability and verisimilitude. Thus Xenophon, in describing Cyrus, does not depict him as he actually was, but as the best and noblest king can be and ought to be; and Cicero, in describing the orator, follows the same method. From this it is evident that the poet can invent things transcending the order of nature; but if he does so, he should describe what might or ought to have been.

Here Robortelli answers a possible objection to Aristotle's statement that poets deal only with what is possible and verisimilar. Is it possible and verisimilar that the gods should eat ambrosia and drink nectar, as Homer describes, and that such a being as Cerberus should have several heads, as we find in Virgil, not to mention various improbable things that occur in many other poets? The answer to such an objection is that poets can invent in two ways. They can invent either things according to nature or things transcending nature. In the former case, these things must be in keeping with the laws of probability and necessity; but in the latter case, the things are treated according to a process described by Aristotle himself, and called paralogism, which means, not necessarily false reasoning, but the natural, if quite inconclusive, logical inference that the things we know not of are subject to the same laws as the things we know. The poets accept the existence of the gods from the common notion of men, and then treat all that relates to these deities in accordance with this system of paralogism. In tragedy and comedy men are described as acting in accordance with the ordinary occurrences of nature; but in epic poetry this is not entirely the case, and the marvellous is therefore admitted. Accordingly, this marvellous element has the widest scope in epic poetry; while in comedy, which treats of things nearest to our own time, it ought not to be admitted at all.

But there is another problem suggested by the passage from the *Poetics* which has been cited. Aristotle says that imitation, and not metre, is the test of poetry; that even if a history were

versified, it would still remain history. The question then arises whether a writer who imitates in prose, that is, without verse, would be worthy of the title of poet. Robortelli answers this question by pointing out that metre does not constitute the nature, force, or essence of poetry, which depends entirely on the fact of imitation; but at the same time, while one who imitates without verse is a poet, in the best and truest poetry imitation and metre are combined.

In Fracastoro's *Naugerius, sive de Poetica Dialogus* (1555), there is the completest explanation of the ideal element in the Aristotelian conception of imitation. The poet, according to Aristotle, differs from other writers in that the latter consider merely the particular, while the poet aims at the universal. He is, in other words, attempting to describe the simple and essential truth of things, not by depicting the nude thing as it is, but the idea of things clothed in all their beauties. Here Fracastoro attempts to explain the Aristotelian conception of the type with the aid of the Platonic notion of beauty. There were, in fact, in the Renaissance, three conceptions of beauty in general vogue. First, the purely objective conception that poetry is fixed or formal, that it consists in approximating to a certain mechanical or geometrical form, such as roundness, squareness, or straightness; secondly, the Platonic conception, ethical rather than æsthetic, connecting the beautiful with the good, and regarding both as the manifestation of divine power; and, thirdly, a more purely æsthetic conception of beauty, connecting it either with grace or conformity, or in a higher sense with whatever is proper or fitting to an object. This last idea, which at times approaches the modern conception that beauty consists in the realization of the objective character of any particular thing and in the fulfilment of the law of its own being, seems to have been derived from the *Idea* of the Greek rhetorician Hermogenes, whose influence during the sixteenth century was considerable, even as early as the time of Filelfo. It was the celebrated rhetorician Giulio Cammillo, however, who appears to have popularized Hermogenes in the sixteenth century, by translating the *Idea* into Italian, and by expounding it in a discourse published posthumously in 1544.

As will be seen, Fracastoro's conception of beauty approximates both to the Platonic and to the more purely æsthetic doctrines which we have mentioned; and he expounds and elaborates this æsthetic notion in the following manner. Each art has its own rules of proper expression. The historian or the philosopher does not aim at all the beauties or elegancies of expression, but only such as are proper to history or philosophy. But to the poet no grace, no embellishment, no ornament, is ever alien; he does not consider the particular beauty of any one field,—that is, the singular, or particular, of Aristotle,—but all that pertains to the simple idea of beauty and of

beautiful speech. Yet this universalized beauty is no extraneous thing; it cannot be added to objects in which it has no place, as a golden coat on a rustic; all the essential beauty of each species is to be the especial regard of the poet. For in imitating persons and things, he neglects no beauty or elegance which he can attribute to them; he strives only after the most beautiful and most excellent, and in this way affects the minds of men in the direction of excellence and beauty.

This suggests a problem which is at the very root of Aristotle's conception of ideal imitation; and it is Fracastoro's high merit that he was one of the first writers of the Renaissance to explain away the objection, and to formulate in the most perfect manner what Aristotle really meant. For, even granting that the poet teaches more than others, may it not be urged that it is not what pertains to the thing itself, but the beauties which he adds to them,—that it is ornament, extraneous to the thing itself (*extra rem*), and not the thing itself,—which seems to be the chief regard of the poet? But after all, what is *extra rem*? Are beautiful columns, domes, peristyles *extra rem*, because a thatched roof will protect us from rain and frost; or is noble raiment *extra rem*, because a rustic garment would suffice? The poet, so far from adding anything extraneous to the things he imitates, depicts them in their very essence; and it is because he alone finds the true beauty in things, because he attributes to them their true nobility and perfection, that he is more useful than any other writer. The poet does not, as some think, deal with the false and the unreal. He assumes nothing openly alien to truth, though he may permit himself to treat of old and obscure legends which cannot be verified, or of things which are regarded as true on account of their appearance, their allegorical signification (such as the ancient myths and fables), or their common acceptance by men. So we may conclude that not every one who uses verse is a poet, but only he who is moved by the true beauty of things—by their simple and essential beauties, not merely apparent ones. This is Fracastoro's conclusion, and it contains that mingling of Platonism and Aristotelianism which may be found somewhat later in Tasso and Sir Philip Sidney. It is the chief merit of Fracastoro's dialogue, that even while emphasizing this Platonic element, he clearly distinguishes and defines the ideal element in æsthetic imitation.

About the same time, in the public lectures of Varchi (1553), there was an attempt to formulate a more explicit definition of poetry on the basis of Aristotle's definition of tragedy. Poetry, according to Varchi, is an imitation of certain actions, passions, habits of mind, with song, diction, and harmony, together or separately, for the purpose of removing the vices of men and inciting them to virtue, in order that they may attain their true happiness and beatitude. In

the first place, poetry is an imitation. Every poet imitates, and any one who does not imitate cannot be called a poet. Accordingly, Varchi follows Maggi in distinguishing three classes of poets,—the poets *par excellence*, who imitate in verse; the poets who imitate without using verse, such as Lucian, Boccaccio in the *Decameron*, and Sannazaro in the *Arcadia*; and the poets, commonly but less properly so called, who use verse, but who do not imitate. Verse, while not an essential attribute of poetry, is generally required; for men's innate love of harmony, according to Aristotle, was one of the causes that gave rise to poetic composition. Certain forms of poetry however, such as tragedy, cannot be written without verse; for "embellished language," that is, verse, is included in the very definition of tragedy as given by Aristotle.

The question whether poetry could be written in prose was a source of much discussion in the Renaissance; but the consensus of opinion was overwhelmingly against the prose drama. Comedy in prose was the usual Italian practice of this period, and various scholars even sanctioned the practice on theoretical grounds. But the controversy was not brought to a head until the publication of Agostino Michele's *Discorso in cui si dimostra come si possono scrivere le Commedie e le Tragedie in Prosa* in 1592; and eight years later, in 1600, Paolo Beni published his Latin dissertation, *Disputatio in qua ostenditur præstare Comædiam atque Tragediam metrorum vinculis solvere*. The language of Beni's treatise was strong—its very title speaks of liberating the drama from the shackles of verse; and for a heresy of this sort, couched as it was in language that might even have been revolutionary enough for the French romanticists of 1830, the sixteenth century was not yet fully prepared. Faustino Summo, answering Beni in the same year, asserts that not only is it improper for tragedy and comedy to be written in prose, but that no form of poetry whatever can properly be composed without the accompaniment of verse. The result of the whole controversy was to fix the metrical form of the drama throughout the period of classicism. But it need not be said that the same conclusion was not accepted by all for every form of poetry. The remark of Cervantes in *Don Quixote*, that epics can be written in prose as well as in verse, is well known; and Julius Cæsar Scaliger speaks of Heliodorus's romance as a model epic.

Scaliger, however, regards verse as a fundamental part of poetry. For him, poetry and history have the forms of narration and ornament in common, but differ in that poetry adds fictions to the things that are true, or imitates actual things with fictitious ones,—*majore sane apparatu*, that is, among other things, with verse. As a result of this notion, Scaliger asserts that if the history of Herodotus were versified, it would no longer be history, but historical poetry. Under no circumstances, theoretically, will he permit the separation of poetry from mere

versification. He accordingly dismisses with contempt the usual argument of the period that Lucan was an historian rather than a poet. "Take an actual history," says Scaliger; "how does Lucan differ, for example, from Livy? He differs in using verse. Well, then he is a poet." Poetry, then, is imitation in verse; but in imitating what ought to be rather than what is, the poet creates another nature and other fortunes, as if he were another God.

It will be seen from these discussions that the Renaissance always conceived of æsthetic imitation in this ideal sense. There are scarcely any traces of realism, in anything like its modern sense, in the literary criticism of this period. Torquato Tasso does indeed say that art becomes most perfect as it approaches most closely to nature; and Scaliger declares that the dramatic poet must beyond all things aim at reproducing the actual conditions of life. But it is the appearance of reality, and not the mere actuality itself, that the critics are speaking of here. With the vast body of mediæval literature before them, in which impossibilities follow upon impossibilities, and the sense of reality is continually obscured, the critical writers of the Renaissance were forced to lay particular stress on the element of probability, the element of close approach to the seeming realities of life; but the imitation of life is for them, nevertheless, an imitation of things as they ought to be—in other words, the imitation is ideal. Muzio says that nature is adorned by art:—

Suol far l'opere sue roze, e tra le mani
Lasciarle a l'arte, che le adorni e limi;

and he distinctly affirms that the poet cannot remain content with exact portraiture, with the mere actuality of life:—

Lascia 'l vero a l' historia, e ne' tuoi versi
Sotto i nomi privati a l' universo
Mostra che fare e che non far si debbia.

In keeping with this idealized conception of art, Muzio asserts that everything obscene or immoral must be excluded from poetry; and this puristic notion of art is everywhere emphasized in Renaissance criticism. It was the *verisimile*, as has been said, that the writers of this period especially insisted upon. Poetry must have the appearance of truth, that is, it must be probable; for unless the reader believes what he reads, his spirit cannot be moved by the poem. This anticipates Boileau's famous line:—

L'esprit n'est point ému de ce qu'il ne croit pas.

But beyond and above the *verisimile*, the poet must pay special regard to the ethical element (*il lodevole e l'onesto*). A poet of the sixteenth century, Palingenius, says that there are three qualities required of every poem:—

Atqui scire opus est, triplex genus esse bonorum,
Utile, delectans, majusque ambobus honestum.

Poetry, then, is an ideal representation of life; but should it be still further limited, and made an imitation of only human life? In other words, are the actions of men the only possible themes of poetry, or may it deal, as in the *Georgics* and the *De Rerum Natura*, with the various facts of external nature and of science, which are only indirectly connected with human life? May poetry treat of the life of the world as well as of the life of men; and if only of the latter, is it to be restricted to the actions of men, or may it also depict their passions, emotions, and character? In short, how far may external nature on the one hand, and the internal working of the human soul on the other hand, be regarded as the subject-matter of poetry? Aristotle says that poetry deals with the actions of men, but he uses the word “actions” in a larger sense than many of the Renaissance critics appear to have believed. His real meaning is thus explained by a modern writer:

Everything that expresses the mental life, that reveals a rational personality, will fall within this larger sense of action... The phrase is virtually an equivalent for ἦθη (character), πάθη (emotion), πράξεις (action)... The common original from which all the arts draw is human life,—its mental processes, its spiritual movements, its outward acts issuing from deeper sources; in a word, all that constitutes the inward and essential activity of the soul. On this principle landscape and animals are not ranked among the objects of æsthetic imitation. The whole universe is not conceived of as the raw material of art. Aristotle's theory is in agreement with the practice of the Greek poets and artists of the classical period, who introduce the external world only so far as it forms a background of action, and enters as an emotional element into man's life and heightens the human interest.

Aristotle distinctly says that “even if a treatise on medicine or natural philosophy be brought out in verse, the name of poet is by custom given to the author; and yet Homer and Empedocles have nothing in common except the material; the former, therefore, is properly styled poet, the latter, physicist rather than poet.”

The Aristotelian doctrine was variously conceived during the Renaissance. Fracastoro, for example, asserts that the imitation of human life alone is not of itself a test of poetry, for such a test would exclude Empedocles and Lucretius; it would make Virgil a poet in the *Aeneid*, and not a poet in the *Georgics*. All matters are proper material for the poet, as Horace says, if they are treated poetically; and although the imitation of men and women may seem to be of higher importance for us who are men and women, the imitation of human life is no more the poet’s end than the imitation of anything else. This portion of Fracastoro’s argument may be called apologetic, for the imitation of human actions as a test of poetry would exclude most of his own poems, such as his famous *De Morbo Gallico* (1529), written before the influence of Aristotle was felt in anything but the mere external forms of creative literature. For Fracastoro, all things poetically treated become poetry, and Aristotle himself says that everything becomes pleasant when correctly imitated. So that not the mere composition of verse, but the Platonic rapture, the delight in the true and essential beauty of things, is for Fracastoro the test of poetic power.

Varchi, on the other hand, is more in accord with Aristotle, in conceiving of “action,” the subject-matter of poetry, as including the passions and habits of mind as well as the merely external actions of mankind. By passions Varchi means those mental perturbations which impel us to an action at any particular time (πάθη); while by manners, or habits of mind, he means those mental qualities which distinguish one man or one class of men from another (ἤθη). The exclusion of the emotional or introspective side of human life would leave all lyric and, in fact, all subjective verse out of the realms of poetry; and it was therefore essential, in an age in which Petrarch was worshipped, that the subjective side of poetry should receive its justification. There is also in Varchi a most interesting comparison between the arts of poetry and painting. The basis of his distinction is Horace’s *ut pictura poesis*, doubtless founded on the parallel of Simonides preserved for us by Plutarch; and this distinction, which regarded painting as silent poetry, and poetry as painting in language, may be considered almost the keynote of Renaissance criticism, continuing even up to the time of Lessing.

In Capriano’s *Della Vera Poetica* (1555) poetry is given a preëminent place among all the arts, because it does not merely deal with actions or with the objects of any single sense. For

Capriano, poetry is an ideal representation of life, and as such “vere nutrice e amatrice del nostro bene.” All sensuous or comprehensible objects are capable of being imitated by various arts. The nobler of the imitative arts are concerned with the objects of the nobler senses, while the ignobler arts are concerned with the objects of the senses of taste, touch, and smell. Poetry is the finest of all the arts, because it comprehends in itself all the faculties and powers of the other arts, and can in fact imitate anything, as, for example, the form of a lion, its color, its ferocity, its roar, and the like. It is also the highest form of art because it makes use of the most efficacious means of imitation, namely, words, and especially since these receive the additional beauty and power of rhythm. Accordingly, Capriano divides poets into two classes: natural poets, who describe the things of nature, and moral poets (such as epic and tragic poets), who aim at presenting moral lessons and indicating the uses of life; and of these two classes the moral poets are to be rated above the natural poets.

But if all things are the objects of poetic imitation, the poet must know everything; he must have studied nature as well as life; and, accordingly, Lionardi, in his dialogues on poetic imitation (1554), says that to be a good poet, one must be a good historian, a good orator, and a good natural and moral philosopher as well; and Bernardo Tasso asserts that a thorough acquaintance with the art of poetry is only to be gained from the study of Aristotle’s *Poetics*, combined with a knowledge of philosophy and the various arts and sciences, and vast experience of the world. The Renaissance, with its humanistic tendencies, never quite succeeded in discriminating between erudition and genius. Scaliger says that nothing which proceeds from solid learning can ever be out of place in poetry, and Fracastoro (1555) and Tomitano (1545) both affirm that the good poet and the good orator must essentially be learned scholars and philosophers. Scaliger therefore distinguishes three classes of poets,—first, the theological poets, such as Orpheus and Amphion; secondly, the philosophical poets, of two sorts, natural poets, such as Empedocles and Lucretius, and moral poets, who again are either political, as Solon and Tyrtaeus, economic, as Hesiod, or common, as Phocyllides; and, thirdly, the ordinary poets who imitate human life. The last are divided according to the usual Renaissance classification into dramatic, narrative, and common or mixed. Scaliger’s classification is employed by Sir Philip Sidney; and a very similar subdivision is given by Minturno.

The treatment of Castelvetro, in his commentary on the *Poetics* (1570), is at times much more in accord with the true Aristotelian conception than most of the other Renaissance writers. While following Aristotle in asserting that verse is not of the essence of poetry, he shows that

Aristotle himself by no means intended to class as poetry works that imitated in prose, for this was not the custom of Hellenic art. Prose is not suited to imitative or imaginative subjects, for we expect themes treated in prose to be actual facts. “Verse does not distinguish poetry,” says Castelvetro, “but clothes and adorns it; and it is as improper for poetry to be written in prose, or history in verse, as it is for women to use the garments of men, and for men to wear the garments of women.” The test of poetry therefore is not the metre but the material. This approximates to Aristotle’s own view; since while imitation is what distinguishes the poetic art, Aristotle, by limiting it to the imitation of human life, was, after all, making the matter the test of poetry.

Castelvetro, however, arrives at this conclusion on different grounds. Science he regards as not suitable material for poetry, and accordingly such writers as Lucretius and Fracastoro are not poets. They are good artists, perhaps, or good philosophers, but not poets; for the poet does not attempt to discover the truth of nature, but to imitate the deeds of men, and to bring delight to his audience by means of this imitation. Moreover, poetry, as will be seen later, is intended to give delight to the populace, the untrained multitude, to whom the sciences and the arts are dead letters; if we concede these to be fit themes for poetry, then poetry is either not meant to delight, or not meant for the ordinary people, but is intended for instruction and for those only who are versed in sciences and arts. Moreover, comparing poetry with history, Castelvetro finds that they resemble each other in many points, but are not identical. Poetry follows, as it were, in the footsteps of history, but differs from it in that history deals with what has happened, poetry with what is probable; and things that have happened, though probable, are never considered in poetry as probable, but always as things that have happened. History, accordingly, does not regard verisimilitude or necessity, but only truth; poetry must take care to establish the probability of its subject in verisimilitude and necessity, since it cannot regard truth. Castelvetro in common with most of the critics of the Renaissance seems to misconceive the full meaning of ideal truth; for to the Renaissance—nay, even to Shakespeare, if we are to consider as his own various phrases which he has put into the mouths of his dramatic characters—truth was regarded as coincident with fact; and nothing that was not actual fact, however subordinated to the laws of probability and necessity, was ever called truth.

It is in keeping with this conception of the relations between history and poetry, that Castelvetro should differ not only from Aristotle, but from most of the critics of his own time, in asserting that the order of the poetic narrative may be the same as that of historical narrative. “In telling a story,” he says, “we need not trouble ourselves whether it has beginning, middle, and

end, but only whether it is fitted to its true purpose, that is, to delight its auditors by the narration of certain circumstances which could possibly happen but have not actually happened.” Here the only vital distinction between history and poetry is that the incidents recounted in history have once happened, while those recounted in poetry have never actually happened, or the matter will not be regarded as poetry. Aristotle’s fundamental requirement of the unity of the fable is regarded as unessential, and is simply observed in order to show the poet’s ingenuity. This notion of poetic ingenuity is constant throughout Castelvetro’s commentary. Thus he explains Aristotle’s statement that poetry is more philosophic than history—more philosophic, according to Castelvetro, in the sense of requiring more thought, more speculation in its composition—by showing that it is a more difficult and more ingenious labor to invent things that could possibly happen, than merely to repeat things that have actually happened.

III. The Function of Poetry

According to Strabo, it will be remembered, the object or function of poetry is pleasurable instruction in reference to character, emotion, action. This occasions the inquiry as to what is the function of the poetic art, and, furthermore, what are its relations to morality. The starting-point of all discussions on this subject in the Renaissance was the famous verse of Horace:—

Aut prodesse volunt aut delectare poetæ.

This line suggests that the function of poetry may be to please, or to instruct, or both to please and instruct; and every one of the writers of the Renaissance takes one or other of these three positions. Aristotle, as we know, regarded poetry as an imitation of human life, for the purpose of giving a certain refined pleasure to the reader or hearer. “The end of the fine arts is to give pleasure (πρὸς ἡδονήν), or rational enjoyment (πρὸς διαγωγὴν).” It has already been said that poetry, in so far as it is an imitation of human life, and attempts to be true to human life in its ideal aspects, must fundamentally be moral; but to give moral or scientific instruction is in no way the end or function of poetry. It will be seen that the Renaissance was in closer accord with Horace than with Aristotle, in requiring for the most part the utile as well as the dulce in poetry.

For Daniello, one of the earliest critical writers of the century, the function of the poet is to teach and delight. As the aim of the orator is to persuade, and the aim of the physician to cure,

so the aim of the poet is equally to teach and delight; and unless he teaches and delights he cannot be called a poet, even as one who does not persuade cannot be called an orator, or one who does not cure, a physician. But beyond profitableness and beauty, the poet must carry with him a certain persuasion, which is one of the highest functions of poetry, and which consists in moving and affecting the reader or hearer with the very passions depicted; but the poet must be moved first, before he can move others. Here Daniello is renewing Horace's

Si vis me flere, dolendum est
Primum ipsi tibi, —

a sentiment echoed by poets as different as Vauquelin, Boileau, and Lamartine.

Fracastoro, however, attempts a deeper analysis of the proper function of the poetic art. What is the aim of the poet? Not merely to give delight, for the fields, the stars, men and women, the objects of poetic imitation themselves do that; and poetry, if it did no more, could not be said to have any reason for existing. Nor is it merely to teach and delight, as Horace says; for the descriptions of countries, peoples, and armies, the scientific digressions and the historical events, which constitute the instructive side of poetry, are derived from cosmographers, scientists, and historians, who teach and delight as much as poets do. What, then, is the function of the poet? It is, as has already been pointed out, to describe the essential beauty of things, to aim at the universal and ideal, and to perform this function with every possible accompaniment of beautiful speech, thus affecting the minds of men in the direction of excellence and beauty. Portions of Fracastoro's argument have been alluded to before, and it will suffice here to state his own summing up of the aim of the poet, which is this, "Delectare et prodesse imitando in unoquoque maxima et pulcherrima per genus dicendi simpliciter pulchrum ex convenientibus." This is a mingling of the Horatian and Platonic conceptions of poetic art.

By other critics a more practical function was given to poetry. Giraldi Cintio asserts that it is the poet's aim to condemn vice and to praise virtue, and Maggi says that poets aim almost exclusively at benefiting the mind. Poets who, on the contrary, treat of obscene matters for the corruption of youth, may be compared with infamous physicians who give their patients deadly poison in the guise of wholesome medicine. Horace and Aristotle, according to Maggi, are at one on this point, for in the definition of tragedy Aristotle ascribes to it a distinctly useful purpose, and whatever delight is obtainable is to be regarded as a result of this moral function; for Maggi

and the Renaissance critics in general would follow the Elizabethan poet who speaks of “delight, the fruit of virtue dearly loved.” Muzio, in his versified *Arte Poetica* (1555), regards the end of poetry as pleasure and profit, and the pleasurable aim of poetry as attained by variety, for the greatest poems contain every phase of life and art.

It has been seen that Varchi classed poetry with rational philosophy. The end of all arts and sciences is to make human life perfect and happy; but they differ in their modes of producing this result. Philosophy attains its end by teaching; rhetoric, by persuasion; history, by narration; poetry, by imitation or representation. The aim of the poet, therefore, is to make the human soul perfect and happy, and it is his office to imitate, that is, to invent and represent, things which render men virtuous, and consequently happy. Poetry attains this end more perfectly than any of the other arts or sciences, because it does so, not by means of precept, but by means of example. There are various ways of making men virtuous,—by teaching them what vice is and what virtue is, which is the province of ethics; by actually chastising vices and rewarding virtues, which is the province of law; or by example, that is, by the representation of virtuous men receiving suitable rewards for their virtue, and of vicious men receiving suitable punishments, which is the province of poetry. This last method is the most efficacious, because it is accompanied by delight. For men either can not or will not take the trouble to study sciences and virtues—nay, do not even like to be told what they should or should not do; but in hearing or reading poetic examples, not only is there no trouble, but there is the greatest delight, and no one can help being moved by the representation of characters who are rewarded or punished according to an ideal justice.

For Varchi, then, as for Sir Philip Sidney later, the high importance of poetry is to be found in the fact that it teaches morality better than any other art, and the reason is that its instrument is not precept but example, which is the most delightful and hence the most efficacious of all means. The function of poetry is, therefore, a moral one, and it consists in removing the vices of men and inciting them to virtue. This twofold moral object of poetry—the removal of vices, which is passive, and the incitement to virtue, which is active—is admirably attained, for example, by Dante in his *Divina Commedia*; for in the *Inferno* evil men are so fearfully punished that we resolve to flee from every form of vice, and in the *Paradiso* virtuous men are so gloriously rewarded that we resolve to imitate every one of their perfections. This is the expression of the extreme view of poetic justice; and while it is in keeping with the common sentiment of the Renaissance, it is of course entirely un-Aristotelian.

Scaliger's point of view is in accord with the common Renaissance tradition. Poetry is imitation, but imitation is not the end of poetry. Imitation for its own sake—that is, art for art's sake—receives no encouragement from Scaliger. The purpose of poetry is to teach delightfully (*docere cum delectatione*); and, therefore, not imitation, as Aristotle says, but delightful instruction, is the test of poetry. Minturno (1559) adds a third element to that of instruction and of delight. The function of poetry is not only to teach and delight, but also to move, that is, beyond instruction and delight the poet must impel certain passions in the reader or hearer, and incite the mind to admiration of what is described. An ideal hero may be represented in a poem, but the poem is futile unless it excites the reader to admiration of the hero depicted. Accordingly, it is the peculiar office of the poet to move admiration for great men; for the orator, the philosopher, and the historian need not necessarily do so, but no one who does not incite this admiration can really be called a poet.

This new element of admiration is the logical consequence of the Renaissance position that philosophy teaches by precept, but poetry by example, and that in this consists its superior ethical efficacy. In Seneca's phrase, "longum iter per præcepta, breve per exempla." If poetry, therefore, attains its end by means of example, it follows that to arrive at this end the poet must incite in the reader an admiration of the example, or the ethical aim of poetry will not be accomplished. Poetry is more than a mere passive expression of truth in the most pleasurable manner; it becomes like oratory an active exhortation to virtue, by attempting to create in the reader's mind a strong desire to be like the heroes he is reading about. The poet does not tell what vices are to be avoided and what virtues are to be imitated, but sets before the reader or hearer the most perfect types of the various virtues and vices. It is, in Sidney's phrase (a phrase apparently borrowed from Minturno), "that feigning notable images of virtues, vices, or what else, with that delightful instruction, which must be the right describing note to know a poet by." Dryden, a century later, seems to be insisting upon this same principle of admiration when he says that it is the work of the poet "to affect the soul, and excite the passions, and above all to move admiration, which is the delight of serious plays."

But Minturno goes even further than this. If the poet is fundamentally a teacher of virtue, it follows that he must be a virtuous man himself; and in pointing this out, Minturno has given the first complete expression in modern times of the consecrated conception of the poet's office. As no form of knowledge and no moral excellence is foreign to the poet, so at bottom he is the truly wise and good man. The poet may, in fact, be defined as a good man skilled in language and

imitation; not only ought he to be a good man, but no one will be a good poet unless he is so. This conception of the moral nature of the poet may be traced henceforth throughout modern times. It is to be found in Ronsard and other French and Italian writers; it is especially noticeable in English literature, and is insisted on by Ben Jonson, Milton, Shaftesbury, Coleridge, and Shelley. In this idea Plato's praise of the philosopher, as well as Cicero's and Quintilian's praise of the orator, was by the Renaissance transferred to the poet; but the conception itself goes back to a passage in Strabo's *Geography*, a work well known to sixteenth-century scholars. This passage is as follows:—

Can we possibly imagine that the genius, power, and excellence of a real poet consist in aught else than the just imitation of life in formed discourse and numbers? But how should he be that just imitator of life, whilst he himself knows not its measures, nor how to guide himself by judgment and understanding? For we have not surely the same notion of the poet's excellence as of the ordinary craftsman's, the subject of whose art is senseless stone or timber, without life, dignity, or beauty; whilst the poet's art turning principally on men and manners, he has his virtues and excellence as poet naturally annexed to human excellence, and to the worth and dignity of man, insomuch that it is impossible he should be a great and worthy poet who is not first a worthy and good man.

Another writer of the sixteenth century, Bernardo Tasso, tells us that in his poem of the *Amadigi* he has aimed at delight rather than profitable instruction. "I have spent most of my efforts," he says, "in attempting to please, as it seems to me that this is more necessary, and also more difficult to attain; for we find by experience that many poets may instruct and benefit us very much, but certainly give us very little delight." This agrees with what one of the sanest of English critics, John Dryden (1668), has said of verse, "I am satisfied if it caused delight, for delight is the chief if not the only end of poesie; instruction can be admitted but in the second place, for poesie only instructs as it delights."

It is this same end which Castelvetro (1570) ascribes to poetic art. For Castelvetro, as in a lesser degree for Robortelli also, the end of poetry is delight, and delight alone. This, he asserts, is the position of Aristotle, and if utility is to be conceded to poetry at all, it is merely as an accident, as in the tragic purgation of terror and compassion. But he goes further than Aristotle would have been willing to go; for poetry, according to Castelvetro, is intended not merely to please, but to please the populace, in fact everybody, even the vulgar mob. On this he insists throughout his commentary; indeed, as will be seen later, it is on this conception that his theory of the drama is primarily based. But it may be confidently asserted that Aristotle would have willingly echoed the

conclusion of Shakespeare, as expressed in *Hamlet*, that the censure of one of the judicious must o'erweigh a whole theatre of others. At the same time, Castelvetro's conception is in keeping with a certain modern feeling in regard to the meaning of poetic art. Thus a recent writer regards literature as aiming "at the pleasure of the greatest possible number of the nation rather than instruction and practical effects," and as applying "to general rather than specialized knowledge." There is, then, in Castelvetro's argument this modicum of truth, that poetry appeals to no specialized knowledge, but that its function is, as Coleridge says, to give a definite and immediate pleasure.

Torquato Tasso, as might be expected, regards poetry in a more highly ideal sense. His conception of the function of poets and of the poetic art may be explained as follows: The universe is beautiful in itself, because beauty is a ray from the Divine splendor; and hence art should seek to approach as closely as possible to nature, and to catch and express this natural beauty of the world. Real beauty, however, is not so called because of any usefulness it may possess, but is primarily beautiful in itself; for the beautiful is what pleases every one, just as the good is what every one desires. Beauty is therefore the flower of the good (*quasi un fiore del buono*); it is the circumference of the circle of which the good is the centre, and accordingly, poetry, as an expression of this beauty, imitates the outward show of life in its general aspects. Poetry is therefore an imitation of human actions, made for the guidance of life; and its end is delight, *ordinato al giovamento*. It must essentially delight, either because delight is its aim, or because delight is the necessary means of effecting the ethical end of art. Thus, for example, heroic poetry consists of imitation and allegory, the function of the former being to cause delight, and that of the latter to give instruction and guidance in life. But since difficult or obscure conceits rarely delight, and since the poet does not appeal to the learned only, but to the people, just as the orator does, the poet's idea must be, if not popular in the ordinary sense of the word, at least intelligible to the people. Now the people will not study difficult problems; but poetry, by appealing to them on the side of pleasure, teaches them whether they will or no; and this constitutes the true effectiveness of poetry, for it is the most delightful, and hence the most valuable, of teachers.

Such, then, are the various conceptions of the function of poetry, as held by the critics of the Renaissance. On the whole, it may be said that at bottom the conception was an ethical one, for, with the exception of such a revolutionary spirit as Castelvetro, by most theorists it was as an

effective guide to life that poetry was chiefly valued. Even when delight was admitted as an end, it was simply because of its usefulness in effecting the ethical aim.

In concluding this chapter, it may be well to say a few words, and only a few, upon the classification of poetic forms. There were during the Renaissance numerous attempts at distinguishing these forms, but on the whole all of them are fundamentally equivalent to that of Minturno, who recognizes three *genres*,—the lyric or melic, the dramatic or scenic, and the epic or narrative. This classification is essentially that of the Greeks, and it has lasted down to this very day. With lyric poetry this essay is scarcely concerned, for during the Renaissance there was no systematic lyric theory. Those who discussed it at all gave most of their attention to its formal structure, its style, and especially the conceit it contained. The model of all lyrical poetry was Petrarch, and it was in accordance with the lyrical poet's agreement or disagreement with the Petrarchan method that he was regarded as a success or a failure. Muzio's critical poem (1551) deals almost entirely with lyrical verse, and there are discussions on this subject in the works of Trissino, Equicola, Ruscelli, Scaliger, and Minturno. But the real question at issue in all these discussions is merely that of external form, and it is with the question of principles, in so far as they regard literary criticism, that this essay is primarily concerned. The theory of dramatic and epic poetry, being fundamental, will therefore receive almost exclusive attention.