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THE NECESSITY
OF POETRY

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by

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THE NECESSITY OF POETRY

PART I

I AM here to talk about Poetry, and you little think how surprised you ought to be. I have refused many invitations to lecture on Poetry: but most of us now-a-days are doing what we most dislike, and it has come about that I have myself chosen the subject.

Let me explain why an artist is unwilling to discourse on his own art. The fact is that in every art it is only the formal side which can be formulated; and that is not what people congregate to hear about, when they call for Art-lectures. The grammar of any art is dry and unintelligible to the layman: it seems unrelated to the magic of its delight. In Poetry it is even deemed beneath the dignity of a poet to betray any consciousness of such detail. But, if you bid the artist leave this dull and solid ground to expatiate on Beauty, you invite him on to a field where speculations appear to him fanciful and unsound: and the venture cannot rashly be indulged in.

However here I am; and I hope to give such a

theoretic view of the fundamental basis of Poetry as may interest us both, and justify the claim of Poetry to that high place which is and always has been granted to it by almost universal consent in all countries and languages.

In a little house which I rented for a month of last summer a volume of Macaulay's *Essays* stood on the shelves—an inscription in it recorded how it had been won by its owner in a whist-drive—and I took it up, and read the greater part of it. I fear that I risk losing either your esteem or your complete confidence, when I say that this classical work was almost new to me. But, if I had never read much in it before, I now made up for past indolence or prejudice; and I was taken aback when I found Macaulay praising Shelley in these terms:

We doubt (he says) whether any modern poet has possessed in an equal degree some of the highest qualities of the greatest ancient masters. The words Bard and Inspiration, which seem so cold and affected when applied to other modern writers, have a perfect propriety when applied to him. He was not an author but a bard. His poetry seems not to have been an art but an inspiration.

It is this magic of language, which won the wide-ranging but somewhat uncongenial mind

of Macaulay, that I intend to explore; and I shall avoid philosophical terms and questionable assumptions.

Words the medium of Poetry

Poetry is an Art,—that is, it is one of the Fine Arts,—and, using the word in this recognised sense, all Art is the expression of Ideas in some sensuous material or medium. And the Ideas, in taking material forms of beauty, make a direct appeal to the emotions through the senses.

Thus the material or medium, as it is called, of Sculpture is stone or marble, and so on; the medium of Painting is colours; the medium of Music is sound; and the medium of Poetry is words.

Now while it would be manifestly preposterous to begin the study of Sculpture by an examination of stones, you will admit that in Painting a knowledge of Colours is less remote, and is even a necessary equipment of the artist: and you will further grant that in Music the study of the Sounds—i. e. the notes of the scale and their mutual relations—is an indispensable preliminary. So that in these three Arts, if they are taken in this order, Sculpture, Painting, Music, we see the medium in its relation to the Art rising step by step in significance: and I

think it is evident that in Poetry the importance of the material is even greater than it is in Music; and the reason is very plain.

All Art, we said, was the expression of Ideas in a sensuous medium. Now Words, the medium of Poetry, actually *are* Ideas; whereas neither Stone nor Colour nor mere Sound can be called Ideas, though they seem in this order to make a gradual approach towards them.

I hope this may reconcile you to the method of inquiring into Poetry by the examination of Words. I propose to consider Words, first as Ideas, secondly as Vocal Sounds.

WORDS AS IDEAS

Whether or no the first step of human language was to recognise certain vocal sounds as signs or symbols of objects perceived by the senses, we must now in our perfected speech admit the nouns or names of objects to be the simplest elements.

But the name of an object must have a different meaning to different persons, according as they know more or less about it; and it must convey a different emotion as they are differently affected towards it. And since knowledge concerning any one thing is really of an infinite character,—for complete knowledge of any one

thing would include its relations to everything else, which is more knowledge than any man may possess—these words, which appear so simple as mere names of objects, are, each one of them, of wide capacity of signification; and pass from being names of definite objects to being names of various and indefinite ideas or conceptions of things.

It is impossible to prevent a name from being the name of an idea; and (unless we make the doubtful exception of certain abstract ideas) it is impossible to keep the idea always similar and definite.

It is really a matter for wonder how rational intercourse through the medium of language can be so complete and easy as it is, when the ideas conveyed by the words are so different in each person. And yet in common talk and the ordinary business of life we find little inconvenience from the discrepancy of our ideas, and usually disregard it. A man who wants to go from London to Manchester, and is informed that his train will leave Euston at 10 a.m., and arrive at Manchester about 3 p.m., has no occasion to trouble himself because his informant's idea of Manchester is totally dissimilar to his own. We need not labour this point. All our practical life is carried on in this way, and whether a man

speak or write, we say that he speaks or writes well, according as his meaning is plain, his ideas clear, and his language unambiguous. And this current speech, which is a most elaborate instrument,—for it has symbols not only for all the objects of the senses, but for actions and emotions, and the subtlest notions of our intellect, and no less for their relations to each other—is accommodated by delicate self-adjustment to the practical needs of life, and has been further elaborated by Reason to become the sufficient apparatus for all our business, politics, science, history, and law, and whatever else is concerned with human affairs; and through printing it has become the indestructible storehouse of human knowledge. So that one may well inquire what more could be desired or expected of it; and it is common to find that practical folk call Poetry ‘tosh’, and maintain that if you have anything to say, it is best to say it as simply as possible.

Sir Isaac Newton, of blessed memory, wrote a book on the Chronology of Ancient Kingdoms: and the first words of his introduction are these:

The Greek Antiquities are full of Poetical fictions, because the Greeks wrote nothing in prose before the conquest of Asia by Cyrus the Persian. Then Pherecydes Scyrius and Cadmus Milesius introduced the writing in prose.

Now whatever appreciation or respect Newton may have had for the *Iliad*, he is complaining that it was of no use to him as a scientific historian, and I imagine him asking why those old poets could not tell us plainly what they really knew, instead of inventing 'irrelevant false fancies' about the Gods, and things that never were?

The opposition which he implies between Poetry and Prose cannot be absolutely insisted on : but we may take him to witness that Poetry has a field of its own, which is repudiated by Science as well 'as by Common-sense. The distinction is very real. The claim of prose is obviously high, and I could say more to exalt it : what I have to say will come later.

Insufficiency of Philosophy and Science

And here I would remind you of something which amid the routine and practical concerns of life we are apt to lose sight of,—and that is the incomplete and insufficient character of our best knowledge. I do not mean those individual differences that I have spoken of, nor that limitation which each one of us must feel if we compare ourselves with the wisest : but,—take the wisest man on earth, or all the wisest that have ever

lived, the one thing that they agree about is that the human intellect is incapable of solving the profounder problems of life, with which we are faced when we begin to think.¹

I am saying nothing derogatory of science and philosophy, nor need one be in any sense a sceptic in affirming that our highest efforts of intellect do not inform us even on that primary interest of all, namely for what purpose mankind exists on the earth, nor whether there be any such purpose. The so-called Laws of Nature, which we imagine to rule us, are but the latest improvements of our own most satisfactory guesses concerning the physical order of the universe: and when we ask how it is that our material bodies are able to be conscious of themselves, and to think, not only have we no answer, but we cannot imagine any *kind* of possible explanation.

Man does not know, and maybe never will know what he is. Let me quote the utterance of the good-hearted atheist in Anatole France's recent novel. He speaks frankly and typically as a convinced scientist, thus:

Nature, my only mistress and my sole teacher, has never given me any sign that she would have me think the life of a man to be of any value: on the contrary she informs me by all manner

¹ See note on p. 48.

of indications that it is of no account whatever. The one final cause of all living creatures seems to be that they should be the food of other living creatures, who are themselves destined to the same end. Murder has her sanction. . . . And yet I must confess that there is something rebellious in my instinct ; for I do not like to see blood flow : and that is a weakness from which all my philosophy has never been able to wean me.

He cannot reconcile his better human feelings with his Epicurean science.

How does the brag of scientific learning, the vaunt of its scrupulous well-informed prose look now ? Does it not seem that in trying to make our ideas definite we are confining ourselves to a method which refuses to deal with the mysteries of life ? and is driven to that refusal not because it can deny the mysteries, but only because it can make nothing of them ? Are we not building up our language into something of a prison house ? And is it not just because they have never done this, that untaught men are often more contented and at home in the world, far more like the ideal ' wise man ' than the best instructed men of science ?

Charles Darwin in his early book on the voyage of the *Beagle* quotes from Shelley's metaphysical poem *Mont Blanc* : and in his autobiography he writes :

Up to the age of thirty or beyond it, Poetry of many kinds, such as the works of Milton, Gray, Byron, Wordsworth and Shelley gave me great pleasure, and even as a schoolboy I took intense delight in Shakespeare. . . . But now for many years I cannot endure to read a line of Poetry. I have tried lately to read Shakespeare, and found it so intolerably dull that it nauseated me. . . . My mind seems to have become a kind of machine for grinding general laws out of a large collection of facts.

He regretted this, and said that if he had to live his life again, he would try to keep the poetic side of his mind alive.

Why did Darwin lose his interest in poetry? And why was he right in judging that his mental life had become poorer by the loss? His almost bitterly scornful description of his state shows that he meant (even if not quite consciously) something more than that he had lost what his memory told him was a source of keen pleasure.

It is difficult to quiet a suspicion that the natural indefinite quality of our ideas may be a healthy condition; and that the key to the mysteries of life, which is withheld from philosophical exactitudes, may lie in that very condition of our thought which Reason rejects as unseizable and delusive.

Account of Concepts

Suppose we look into our minds, and try to see these ideas at home, and picture to ourselves the manner of their behaviour. This may seem a difficult task. I will read a passage from a living writer which I think illuminating. It must of course be a visual picture, and therefore a clumsy translation into solids, but that is unavoidable.

It needs some introduction. Consider then by what gradual stages an idea is formed in the mind. There is a familiar example in the word *father*, which is very commonly misapplied by children to all grown-up men.¹ This mistake is

¹ The first arisings of the identification of the parent with a special sound or name are very hazy, and I should mistrust any general statement. The mere bubblings and babblings of the infant mouth, ma-ma and pa-pa, are taken up and with varying success appropriated by the parents, who may often be deceived. The word *father* comes later, when the child may be supposed to have labels for objects. But the identification of the father is no doubt very different in different children, not only from the great difference in their actual contact and experience, but also because (as I know from observation) children come at mental proficiency in quite different ways: some are born thinking, some have difficulty in learning to think.

The name for the father must in all cases come to the child only in connexion with his father. If he had no father living he would not hear the name: if his father were a white, and all other men that he saw were blacks, then he would probably not extend its application.

corrected, and the conception of father gradually clears itself, but cannot be completed until the child is himself grown up to manhood, and has himself become a father. For though as a bachelor he may have a very true conception of fatherhood, it must yet be imperfect, because emotions only imagined are not the same as emotions actually felt, and these, when they come, will add a new experience. And you must note that all, or almost all our natural ideas are coloured or warmed with emotion. It was absence of this indefinite blur in Peter Bell's understanding that Wordsworth so deplored when he wrote the famous lines,

A primrose by a river's brim
A yellow primrose was to him,
And it was nothing more.

I will strengthen our illustration with another example, a child on first hearing a church organ. —Contrast the vague wonder in his mind with his ideas and feelings when he has become an accomplished organist or organ-builder.

These ideas in the mind, of which words are the symbols, are called CONCEPTS. We may use that name.

Now my author compares a CONCEPT in the mind to a precious stone, say a diamond, and

the first state of the CONCEPT *father* or *organ* in the child's mind will be like the rough diamond, as it comes from the pit. He compares its growth to the change which comes over the diamond under the hand of the expert gem-cutter; who transforms it into a brilliant jewel with many structural facets, which reflect and refract all the light that falls on them.

I can now give you his picture.

Let us suppose (he writes) that our minds contain large numbers of such myriad-sided and many-coloured jewels, grouped together in various ways and forms; and then that light flashes through this grouped mass, darting into and through and between the several jewels. And further let us imagine that simultaneously with this flashing movement of the light through and between these myriad-sided jewels, there is also a stir and reshaping of the jewels themselves; a change of form by which they acquire new facets and a movement which brings them ever into new relations with one another, but again fitting closely together, joining themselves into new combinations of form and colour, linking themselves into new and ever-changing clusters. The movement of the light into and through and between the jewels, and the simultaneous change and remodelling and regrouping of the jewels themselves,—the two latter movements often caused by the former,—may serve

us for an image of what we call Thought,—the miracle or alchemy of Thought. And the jewels, which tumble apart and reform themselves into new and ever-changing harmonious combinations and clusters, are Concepts, and the light which flashes through and between them, and is often the cause of their movement and change of grouping, is the stream of new percepts (or perceptions), which the mind is unceasingly acquiring from the sense-data furnished by the nerves and sense organs.¹

I think this image of great value, and we may use its definite terms as a common basis of phraseology in this difficult subject, so that we can talk of it with the confidence of mutual understanding.

There are several remarks to make.

First, You see that the flashing light, which disturbs the jewels and causes their growth and regrouping, is the fresh experience of our senses. Our senses, while we are awake, are continuously supplying us with fresh material: and it is chiefly in this way that we learn, correcting our concepts by new experience.

¹ This quotation is shortened and simplified from the original to adapt it to oral communication. The author, Mr. Campion, had sent me the proofs of an essay not yet published.

Secondly, That these concepts, lying stored in our minds, are not all of them in that part of the mind which we can get at when we choose. The place where they are supposed to dwell is very deep, and the depths of it are almost altogether out of our reach. The strange tricks that Memory plays us show that there are many things in our minds which we cannot call up at will : and it is certain that there are many which we never bring into consciousness at all.

Thirdly, That the fresh experience of the senses, which we suppose to be the main agent in stimulating the concepts, need not be a conscious experience. A sight or sound may pass from the eye or ear into the brain, and do its work in the mind, without our observing (i.e. being conscious) that any virtue has passed into us.

Fourthly, That these concepts have a spontaneous life and growth of their own ; and in this respect are more like a crowd of men in a market-place, talking together in twos and threes, shifting about at will, and grouping themselves differently for different purposes ; gathering information, hailing and calling to each other, as one man sees a creditor to whom he has promised payment, another an acquaintance to whom he would sell something : a scene of confusion where every one is active and intent on his own affairs,

yet busily working out the common industry of the market.

Markets differ much in different parts of the country: and people differ in nothing more than in respect both of the quality and activity of the concepts in the subconscious region of their minds.

A genius is a man whose mind has most of a right spontaneous activity of the concepts among themselves.

This spontaneous activity within the mind is a definite fact of life: and it seems to me to be the best evidence that we have of the Reality of Truth.

Poetic use of Concepts

Now Poetry, when it is performing its essential function, and thereby provoking censure from Newton, and nausea in Darwin, uses our conceptions in their natural condition. It neither trims them nor rationalises them. Its art is to represent these spontaneous conjunctions of concepts, as they affect the imagination. And it was no doubt this that aroused the admiration of Macaulay. Perhaps he had been reading,

On a poet's lips I slept
Dreaming like a love-adept
In the sound his breathing kept;
Nor seeks nor finds he mortal blisses,

But feeds on the aerial kisses
Of shapes that haunt thought's wildernesses.
He will watch from dawn till gloom
The lake-reflected sun illumine
The yellow bees in the ivy-bloom,
Nor heed nor see what things they be ;
But from these create he can
Forms more real than living man,
Nurselings of immortality.

The value of this spontaneous imagination varies much. In William Blake it often seems like insanity : and true insanity is now attributed by experts to subconscious aberration, to a sort of mutiny of the concepts,—on a theory that would imply that the men in the market-place combine together in secret associations for evil purposes.

On the other hand this inspiration is sometimes wholly expended in making vivid emotional pictures of scientific or rational ideas, and its magic then lies in the imagery which satisfies even without interpretation. It goes home, as we say ; and is accepted as easily and naturally as it was created.

Thus, when Keats is speaking of the riddle of our life, his lines are :

Stop and consider ! Life is but a day ;
A fragile dewdrop on its perilous way
From a tree's summit ; a poor Indian's sleep
While his boat hastens to the monstrous steep

Of Montmorenci. Why so sad a moan ?
Life is the rose's hope while yet unblown ;
The reading of an ever-changing tale ;
The light uplifting of a maiden's veil ;
A pigeon tumbling in clear summer air ;
A laughing schoolboy, without grief or care,
Riding the springy branches of an elm.

Here are six different views of life, which translated into prose would be : first an atomic movement in a general flux ; then a dream on the brink of destruction ; then a budding hope ; then an intellectual distraction ; then an ecstatic glimpse of beauty ; and lastly an instinctive animal pleasure.

Different ways of using the Concepts

At this point I imagine an objector saying to me, ' You have proved too much. If you have truly described the behaviour of Ideas in the mind, then there can be no escape from it. All our thought must be more or less subject to this shifty and uncertain quality of our ideas, and to their spontaneous uncontrollable behaviour.'

And this is no doubt true. No absolute line can be drawn. You will remember that I said a genius was a man whose mind was unusually rich and active in spontaneous thought : and that is as true in science as in art. A new law in mathematics or physics is just as much

a bit of subconscious insight as is a composition in music by Mozart.

Lines of distinction may however be drawn ; thus—These concepts as we have pictured them can be regarded either in their definite or in their indefinite aspects : that is, we may take them with all their multiple facets or confused iridescent fringes, varying in different minds ; or we may shear them, and pay attention only to that part of them that we think we best understand and mostly agree about. And there seem to be mainly three ways of using them.

To take a simple example, the Concept MAN. We agreed that no one definitely and sufficiently knows what man is ; but that does not in any way hamper our conversation, although we may be aware that we are talking with a person who has a very different conception of MAN from our own ; as in the French story that I quoted, where the old atheist converses with the priest. They both fully recognise and even compare their differences : and in daily intercourse such differences are assumed and allowed for. And this is our way in the common conversation of social life.

But in Science MAN has a definite meaning ; and although he is recognised to be a thinking animal, who is liable to very unscientific opinions

concerning himself, and is subject to their effects on his conduct,—which may even justify a branch of philosophy being devoted to their manifestations—yet in no other way is science concerned with these ideas at all.

But Poetry, on the other hand, though it embraces all possible aspects, and the scientific among these, builds its temple preferably with the untrimmed stone, or—to take Shelley's metaphor—it is in 'thought's wildernesses' that the poet finds the home of his imagination. And thus he can write of MAN :

Man one harmonious soul of many a soul,
Whose nature is its own divine control,
Where all things flow to all, as rivers to the sea ;
 Familiar acts are beautiful through love ;
 Labour, and pain, and grief, in life's green grove
 Sport like tame beasts, none knew how gentle they
 could be !

His will, with all mean passions, bad delights,
 And selfish cares, its trembling satellites,
 A spirit ill to guide, but mighty to obey,
 Is as a tempest-wingèd ship, whose helm
 Love rules, thro' waves which dare not overwhelm,
 Forcing life's wildest shores to own its sovereign sway.

All things confess his strength. Thro' the cold mass
 Of marble and of colour his dreams pass ;
 Bright threads whence mothers weave the robes their
 children wear ;

Language is a perpetual Orphic song,
Which rules with Dædal harmony a throng
Of thoughts and forms, which else senseless and shapeless were.

This wild passage incidentally enforces a good many of my previous remarks. But now hear a scientist 'seeking to disclose the bleak anatomy of existence':

The powers, or faculties of all kinds of living matter diverse as they may be in degree, are all substantially similar in kind. . . . Either they are immediately directed towards the maintenance and development of the body, or they effect transitory changes in the relative position of parts of the body, or they tend towards the continuance of the species. . . . But the difference between the powers of the lowest animal, and those of the highest, is one of degree, not of kind, and depends (as Milne-Edwards long ago so well pointed out) upon the extent to which the principle of the division of labour is carried out in the living economy.

These illustrations must suffice to exhibit the extremely different effects of the extreme methods: but Huxley would no doubt reassure us that it was 'a difference of degree and not of kind as Milne-Edwards long ago so well pointed out', and we must not be surprised to find the poetic quality of imagination constantly enlivening our conversation, and making the beauties of the best prose.

So much then for the poetic treatment of words as ideas: and now if we come to consider words as vocal sounds, we shall be engaged in even more formal questions, of the dullness of which I have warned you. But I will take only such fundamental principles as I may expect to interest you, and satisfy at the same time my object in showing that the form of poetry is no more arbitrary than the sense.

WORDS AS VOCAL SOUNDS

It is somewhat of an artificial break that I am making here by thus separating the treatment of words as ideas from their treatment as sounds, for there is a very close and real connexion. The same impulse which prompts us to express our delight in the beauty of certain emotions, and of the images in which we clothe them, also prompts us to make the expression beautiful in sound. Even when there is no *conscious* art, the very sense of the beauty of the thought will tend to produce a sympathetic corresponding beauty in the language. And immediately that any consciousness of this arises, we find ourselves consciously inventing beautiful forms: and this is conscious ART. Man is by Nature an artist. The earliest relics of his draftsmanship date back

to a time when he probably had but the first rudiments of speech; and, as his speech developed, he was bound to take an aesthetic view of it, that is, to be more pleased with some sounds than with others.

Among all the means of beautifying speech, Rhythm stands out apart: and the first question that an inquirer will ask about poetic form will be this: Why is poetry written in metres? Is metre natural to it, or is it a mere convention and dispensable?

Rhythm of words

Rhythm is a difficult subject, and we must be content to let it pass. The basis of our feeling for rhythm is probably the comfortable satisfaction of easy and graceful muscular motion; and if you wish for an idea of rhythm you should train your feelings to follow the movements of a fine skater or a good dancer.

Speech-rhythm is infinite. Well-written prose is as rhythmical as verse, and in both prose and verse the rhythms should be congenial to the sense. The difference between the rhythms of prose and verse is this, that poetry selects certain rhythms and makes systems of them, and these repeat themselves: and this is metre. Whereas the rule for rhythm in well-constructed

prose is to avoid appearance of artifice ; so that the rhythms must not appear to repeat themselves ; or if they are repeated for any emotional or logical effect, they should not appear to make verses. This condition may be most simply stated by saying that metrical verse is forbidden in prose. With this one exception the rhythms of prose are quite free : and this freedom from constraint causes the best prose to be, in its rhythmic quality, superior to a poorly constructed poem, where the repetition of the metre has often enough no relation to the meaning, and only serves to hamper the diction ; as you can see by comparing the metrical version of a Psalm—even though Milton wrote it—with the prose in the Prayer-book.

There is a fine hymn by Isaac Watts, ‘O God, our help in ages past,’ frequently sung in our churches, which in ears familiar with Coverdale’s prose version of the original Psalm xc sounds futile and feeble, and almost insincere in its decadent artificiality.

When words are merely strung together so as to fit into a poetic metre, much more of the possible beauty of rhythmic speech is sacrificed than can be gained by the rhyme and prescribed cadences that please a common ear.

But the poets of the world, in their purpose

of making speech beautiful, chose to set it out in metres: why then did they so? why should poetry have *confined* itself to metres?

This very natural inquiry may be honestly satisfied by an appeal to the stupendous results attained by the great poetic metres. The examination of these being out of the question, I will read three examples of English blank verse.

First Shakespeare; this is how the somewhat footy little artist in the *Merchant of Venice* can talk:

How sweet the moonlight sleeps upon this
bank!

Here will we sit, and let the sounds of music
Creep in our ears: soft stillness and the night
Become the touches of sweet harmony.

Sit, Jessica: look, how the floor of heaven
Is thick inlaid with patines of bright gold.
There's not the smallest orb which thou be-
holdest

But in his motion like an angel sings,
Still quiring to the young-eyed cherubins.

Such harmony is in immortal souls:

But whilst this muddy vesture of decay

Doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it.

Now Milton; the Attendant Spirit in *Comus* introduces himself.

Before the starry threshold of Jove's Court
My mansion is, where those *immortal shapes*

Of bright aëreal spirits live inspear'd
 In Regions mild of calm and serene Air,
 Above the smoke and stir of this dim spot
 Which men call Earth, and with low
 thoughted care

Confin'd, and pester'd in this pin-fold here,
 Strive to keep up a frail, and feverish being
 Unmindful of the crown that Vertue gives
 After this mortal change, to her true Servan
 Amongst the enthron'd Gods on Sainte
 seats.

Yet some there be that by due steps aspir
 To lay their just hands on that *Golden Key*
That opes the Palace of Eternity :

To such my errand is, and but for such,
 I would not soil these pure Ambrosial weed
 With the rank vapours of this Sin-wor
 mould.

Now Shelley, where the Spirit of the Earth
 talks with Prometheus.

Ere Babylon was dust,
 The Magus Zoroaster, my dead child,
 Met his own image walking in the garden.
 That apparition, sole of men, he saw.
For know there are two worlds of life and
 death :

One, that which thou beholdest ; but the other
 Is underneath the grave, where do inhabit
The shadows of all forms that think and live
 Till death unite them, and they part no more
Dreams and the light imaginings of men,

And all that faith creates or love desires,
Terrible, strange, sublime and beauteous shapes.
There thou art, and dost hang, a writhing shade,
'Mid whirlwind-peopled mountains : all the gods
Are there, and all the powers of nameless worlds,
Vast, sceptred phantoms : heroes, men and beasts ;
And Demogorgon, a tremendous gloom.

These passages are in the most *prosaic* of all our English metres, and though it has no rhyme to mark its periods, yet the metrical unit is so effective and convincing that one cannot imagine it to be wrong in principle.

The common explanation of the metrical charm is, I believe, the love of patterns, and it is true that metrical poems can all be well considered as word-patterns ; there are certain stanza-forms in which the pattern is very obtrusive : yet I prefer to take a somewhat wider principle for basis.

First, all artistic beauty exhibits a mastery, a triumph of grace : and this implies a difficulty overcome,—for no mastery of grace can appear in the doing of whatever you suppose any man could do with equal ease if he chose. And since in a perfect work (music perhaps provides the best examples) all difficulty is so mastered that it entirely disappears, and would not be thence inferred,—it is necessary that for general appre-

ciation there should be some recognition or consciousness of the formal conditions, in which the difficulty is implicit. And thus one of the uses of second-rate works of art is that they reveal and remind us of the material obstacles.

Now the limitation of metre is of a kind which particularly satisfies the conditions just described: because it offers a form which the hearers recognise and desire, and by its recurrence keeps it steadily in view. Its practical working may be seen in the unpopularity of poems that are written in unrecognised metres, and the favour shown to well-established forms by the average reader. His pleasure is in some proportion to his appreciation of the problem.

Secondly, a great deal of our pleasure in beauty, whether natural or artistic, depends on slight variations of a definite form. Fancy if all roses were as similar in shape as all equilateral triangles! The fundamental motive of this pleasure may be described as a balance between the expected and the unexpected—the expected being a sedative soothing lulling principle, and the unexpected a stimulating awakening principle. Too much of the type would be tedious, too much of the unexpected would worry. The unexpected stimulates the consciousness, but you must also be conscious of

the type. Or this *balance* may be regarded as a *strife* between two things, the fixed type and the freedom of the variations: and metre gives the best possible opportunity for this kind of play, which is really comparable to Nature's, for no two lines of a poem are exactly alike: they differ much as do the leaves of a tree: and a pleasure arises from our knowledge of the normal rhythm (the type) beneath the varieties which the poet delights to extend and elaborate: his skill in this sort of embroidery being to push its disguises as far as he dare without breaking away from the type.

The ancient Greeks were as pre-eminent in scientific thought as they were in art, and since their early poetry still maintains its pre-eminence we are scarcely in a position to question the propriety of the metrical principles which we have inherited from them. If any man should ever invent a form superior to metre, the world would be much indebted to him; but we can hardly imagine it, and may therefore take metre as a necessity of the conditions and justified by results.

DICION

I hope by such considerations to have demonstrated the propriety and almost the necessity of

the metrical form of poetry. The other beauties of speech can be grouped under Diction.

However spontaneously the perfect poem may spring up in the poet's mind, like a melody in the mind of Mozart, the conditions to be fulfilled—over and above the elaboration of the metre—are

First, the right words : secondly, those words in the right order : thirdly, the agreeable sound of them in sequence.

And these three rightnesses are the factors of style, that supreme gift which immortalises the utterance of such different minds as Blaise Pascal and Robert Burns : for the laws are very similar in prose and in poetry. I shall pass them over, because such a brief account of them as we should have time for would be dull.¹

¹ If any one should be curious to see how dull, he may read to the end of this note, which I append for the sake of completeness.

First as to the choice of words : What words are the right words in poetic diction ? Plainly their sound must be one ruling consideration—as may be proved by the ill effect of extreme dissonance : yet their chief power lies either in their absolute correctness, or in what is called their suggestiveness, and this, which is the greater poetic beauty, lurks commonly in the fringes of the concepts, as was explained when we spoke of words as ideas. When correctness and suggestiveness coincide their power can be so great that quality of sound is sometimes outclassed ;

On order of words

But I think I may venture a short account of order. What is meant by a right ORDER of words? The principle is important and very

and harshness is unheeded. This we willingly concede to the imperfection of language, which is not so constituted as to combine all excellencies, whence the lesser must give way. Our English words especially have been shamefully and shabbily degraded, and are daily worsening, so as to be often very ill-adapted for poetic use. And the swarming homophones need special treatment.

As to the sound of words in sequence. Pure Euphony, i. e. the agreeable sound of a sequence of syllables, is as difficult a subject as rhythm: and it is like rhythm in this, that the ultimate judge is the expert ear, which depends on a natural gift: and again, as in rhythm, there are certain conditions which almost all men would agree to call pleasant, and others which they would deem unpleasant: but there is no universal principle that can be adduced to check the vagaries of taste or false fancy, since what theories have been proposed are themselves examples of false fancy: Either, for instance, that the vowels correspond respectively to the primary colours, and should be grouped as those colours should be: or that euphony is actually a musical melody made by the inherent pitch of the vowels, the sequences of which must be determined exactly as if we were composing a musical air of those inherent notes. The great indefinable complication is that this euphony, especially in poetry, is fused with the meaning: and this fusion of sound and sense is the magic of the greatest poetry. But even where the poet's success is most conspicuous and convincing, we are often quite

simple, but in application so subtle that it is seldom recognised. You may easily come at it by imagining the talk of savages in a language that has no grammar. In such a language a speaker could not make himself understood

unable to determine on what it actually depends: it is known only by its effects.

In English we find, strangely enough, that the eye comes meddling in with the business of the ear, and causes delusion. Our words are so commonly spelt so differently from their pronunciation that few writers know what sounds they are dictating; the word is a visible thing, 'pleasant to the eye and desirable to make one wise', it is perhaps of ancient and high descent, with a heroic history, it comes 'trailing clouds of glory': but that it has been phonetically degraded into an unworthy or ugly sound is overlooked.

I might give as an example the word *Dwdal* in the quotation from Shelley on p. 22. The original Greek word had a pleasant sound and a rich familiar signification: in English it has no meaning for most men, and is pronounced *deedle* (like *needle*), and if it were so spelt I doubt if any poet would use it. Shakespeare might have made fun of it in Peter Quince's play, and have set *diddle* alongside of *Phibbus* and *Ninny* for the use of that immortal actor, bully Bottom.

Euphony must also include the purely musical effects of a metre, when this is in delicate agreement with the mood of the poem: it so enhances the emotional effect of a harmonious sequence of words as to overrule common proprieties of order, and the melody will require that the sonorous words shall respect its intention and fall into the positions that it prescribes.

except by putting his words in a certain order. If, for instance, he wished to tell you that he went from one place to another, from A to B, and had no prepositions like our *to* and *from*, he would have to put A first and B second ; that is, he would have to set his nouns in the order in which he wished the idea of his movement to enter your mind. And this principle remains the primary law of order in good speech, whether prose or poetry : the words should be in the order of the ideas ; and poetry differs from prose only in its more aesthetic and subtler conception of the proper sequence, and in the greater artifices that it is able to employ, and the greater difficulties that it has to overcome.

There are all manner of exceptions to this rule ; but the most apparent inconsistencies are manifestly dependent on the primary value of the rule : for instance, an idea in an unexpected position in the sentence is often most effective : but the surprise is due to its being either grammatically or conceptually out of order.

The commonest cause of ineffective expression in bad writers of verse is that they choose their grammar so as to set the words that they wish to use in the order most convenient to the metre. The born writer or speaker is the man whose ideas flow spontaneously in a simple grammar

which preserves the right order of ideas. A fixed poetic metre must of course increase the difficulty of right order, and thus heighten the beauty and triumph and rarity of full success.

PART II

Art for the working man

You must very well know, and I should not wish to disguise from you, my intention in speaking to you of Poetry.

One main purpose of your society is to obtain and assure for the working men in England more leisure, in order that they may enjoy the fuller spiritual privileges which imply a higher education ; and I am, as you know, in sympathy with you, and we are all agreed that—apart from your just and honourable aspirations to individual development—a democracy that is to flourish must be an educated democracy.

I do not wish to talk politics, nor to theorise on the enormous practical difficulties of democracy ; I speak only of your desire to be better acquainted with the fine arts, and I deal with that art which I am best fitted to describe.

As for your personal development.

The reason why the working man's work does not satisfy him, and is therefore provocative of social disorganisation, is that it is generally concerned with the allocation or adaptation of some special object for some remote purpose, which purpose is itself only imperceptibly related to the life of the spirit, if indeed it is so fortunate as to be related to it at all.

For instance, it is possible to be convinced that railroads may subserve to human perfection; certainly they can be used for that purpose; but it is evident that they are very commonly the purveyors of man's wasteful and needless luxury, and that they have added greatly to the vain feverish turmoil, which is the worst foe to spiritual life.

Now this being so, it is difficult for a man, whose occupation is the straightening of rails, to feel any enthusiasm for his work beyond what he may get from the straightness of the rail and his skill in straightening it. There is no actual beauty, no field for the play of his mind, and no spiritual contact.

This is a fair example of how the laborious conditions of modern civilisation are unworthy of man's faculties. The best that can be made of such work is to regard it as a useful applica-

tion of the necessary and healthy exercise of the muscles, and to accept what satisfaction can be got from doing the job well, and remembering that it is of service to others and required for their physical convenience. This utilitarian aspect is wholesome and good; but it does not satisfy man's nature, and it is your experience that has rightly led you to look for escape.

Now, if you are to have intelligent communion with the fine arts, it is necessary that your contact with them should not be mere casual diversion and amusement; the fanciful pleasure which that might afford could be no permanent satisfaction. This sort of external contact is inevitable and pleasant, but your desire for these things is within you, and (unless it be only a superficial curiosity or vanity or mistaken envy) it is an emotion which must grow by natural development through personal education and purification.

Some sort of guidance as to what you should be looking for, if not absolutely essential, may be of good service: especially because the objects which will present themselves to you as works of fine art are most miscellaneous in kind, and often ingenious fakes and shams, commercial wares. In art, as in everything, there is more bad than good, more false than true. The

greatest number of serious art-products are mostly imitations of art,—and if I say that nothing is less like a work of art than its imitation (even though it should deceive), you will understand what is meant by such a paradox, if you allow poetry to be (as I contend) spontaneous; for it is plain that a conscious imitation of such a spontaneous process must be almost its opposite.¹

As a matter of fact the two activities are commonly mixed together in varying proportions.

When I was a small child, music excited in me the deepest wonder; and a military band, that used to play in the open air where I could get at it, was the best thing I knew. I would

¹ By spontaneous I do not of course mean instantaneous: only that the natural impulse must arise of itself and be strong enough to suggest and develop its own form. It may come to perfection only after long conscious toil and difficulty—and the sort of toil is different in the different arts. In all of them the Reason is a most active helpmate, but always the servant of the emotion. It is a note of the consummate artist that the more he works on his production, the more he ‘touches it up’, the more ‘spontaneous’ it will appear. That is the object of his toil in the mastery of his material: and his conscious Reason works humbly for him in the field of aesthetics, having become, so to speak, the conscious activity of his instinct. But a lesser artist when he seeks to better his original sketch will ruin it by the irrelevant additions or substitutions of another mood.

escape from the nursery-maid and steal between the legs of the performers into the magic circle, where I could stand close under the instruments and drink in their peculiar sonorities to my heart's content. The spectacle of my innocent delight must have amused the bandsmen and lightened the monotony of their routine: but I fancy that the bassoon-player may have been annoyingly rallied by his comrades for the special attention that his particular performance won from me; for the low notes of his register amazed me as much as anything of the kind ever has since, and I do not know that I have now quite lost my original feeling towards them.

Well, one day when I was exploring the cellars beneath my father's house, I suddenly beheld all my favourite instruments lying in a heap in front of me; basshorns, trombones, saxhorns, and all the rest of them, dusty indeed and tarnished by years of neglect, but there they were, of full size, the real things.

The account of their presence was that my father had once provided this orchestral apparatus for the use of himself and his friends: but that was in Oxford, and in his country house there had been no use for them, and they were thrown aside.

I thought that the time of my life had come;

and one by one I took them up and blew into them, expecting to evoke the marvellous tones that I so loved. Of course I blew in vain: but, supposing that the instruments had got out of working order, I persisted in the hope that at least one of them might have its virtue still left in it. My disappointment was intense.

Why this old memory should have been awaked in me just at this juncture I cannot say. It is a genuine example of the spontaneous movement of the concepts, and though it does not seem to me wholly applicable I accept it as it came. One association, I suppose, may be that I should have been very glad if somebody had told me about those horns, and how their sound was produced. And since it is probable that many of you will soon be writing poetry—indeed I should do you wrong to suppose that you have not already begun—it may be just as well that you should know how the horn is blown.

Relation of Poetry to Morals and Religion

The view of Poetry which I have presented to you suggests two enormous questions, namely, the relation of Poetry to Morals and to Religion: for it is evident that the basis of all three must be the same, that is, they all spring from those universal primary emotions of Man's Spirit, which

lead us naturally towards Beauty and Truth. Indeed the difficulty here is not in relating Poetry with Morals and Religion, but in discriminating between them : for we might almost contend that Morals is that part of Poetry which deals with conduct, and Religion that part of it which deals with the idea of God.

Morals

As for Morals. If you read the moral philosophers much you will find a very dry corpus of irreconcilable doctrines, which bear no comparison with what the poets can give you. The Sermon on the Mount you will recognise to be an inspired moral poem, which is rejected by the philosophers.

On this vast subject I shall offer only one practical remark, which is this :

You will often hear it asserted, as an enlightened doctrine, that Art has nothing to do with Morality : Art, you will be assured, is non-moral.

Now this is true only in so far as we take Morals to mean the conventional code of conduct recognised by the society to which we happen to belong. Art, it is true, has little to do with that. But pure Ethics is man's moral beauty, and can no more be dissociated from Art than

any other kind of beauty, and, being man's highest beauty, it has the very first claim to recognition.

Morals can be excluded from Art only by the school which maintains that Art is nothing but competent *Expression*, and that, since what I call ugly can be as competently expressed as what I call beautiful, Art can make no distinction. It must be admitted that no strict line of distinction can be drawn, and that the average man's conception of beauty is absurdly limited and conventional ; also that as much admirable skill may be used in the expression of crime as of virtue and so on : the portrait of a man suffering from confluent small-pox might thus be a masterpiece ; but if theorists assert that all these things are equally beautiful because equally capable of competent expression, and that such expression (which expression after all produces different impressions on different minds) makes all things equally beautiful,—to this I reply that we live in a free country where every one may think and say what he pleases.

The championship of ugliness seems to be but a part of the general denial of the ordinary distinctions between good and bad of all kinds. The argument is this. It is pointed out that the distinction which is commonly drawn between beautiful and ugly or good and bad is merely

due to mankind seeing all things from a human point of view. But this is the only possible point of view for mankind to take: his pretended universal standpoint is really only one particular attitude of his mind: for it is inconceivable that the 'universality' which he imagines can be a complete universality, or anything like it: and if it was so, then the object of introducing it into art could only be to make art inhuman; which is absurd.

At least that is how the case appears to me; but this summary way of disposing of it neglects many side issues, on which agreement is not to be expected nor wholly to be desired.

Religion

As to the relation of Poetry to religion. True Religion, the conviction and habit of a personal communion between the soul and God, is of too unique and jealous a temper to allow of any artistic predominance: and yet we find the best expression of it in Poetry: indeed the poetic expression of the spiritual life is of such force that its beauty may hold the mind in slavery to false ideals.

I believe it to be greatly due to this that the English people are still mentally enslaved to a conception of God altogether unworthy and

incompatible with our better notions : and, if it is the old Hebrew poetry which is greatly responsible for this delusion, then it seems reasonable to look to our own poets for our release.

On this general question of religion I shall take only that one point. We have spiritually outgrown the theology of the Reformation, and our churches, in endeavouring to make their obsolete ideals work, find their most effective agent in the beauty of our English translation of the Old Testament which, while secular art was in decay, captured the artistic susceptibility of the people.

Art was discouraged by the Reformers, it was uncongenial to their furious and somewhat gross minds ; and it was at the cost of the destruction of a priceless heritage of mediaeval art that they got rid of their mental servitude to Papistry, which its beauty embellished and sanctified. That alliance of art with the monstrous ecclesiastical system which Rome had built on the Gospels drove art into disrepute : but since man cannot live in the absence of all ideals of beauty, the people satisfied their craving for it by the beauty of the religious literature, when the Bible was put into every man's hands. Art was thus diverted, and its place appropriated by the religious ideals of the Reformation ; but these

being archaic and harsh, and in some respects a real defection from Christian law to the Mosaic, and from one point of view a political compromise, the substitute daily grew less convincing and satisfying, and now, when its ideal, if ever it had one, is practically dead, our people have neither one thing nor the other. Religion and art have equally suffered.

The Christian churches will not leave the old ruts. The Pope still hankers after temporal power, and to get it would crown Tiglath-Pileser in St. Peter's, while our Protestant church still begins its morning devotions by singing of 'God swearing in his wrath that his people should not enter into his rest'.

Now in the religion of Christ, which, whether we will it or not, whether we know it or not, is deeply ingrained in our heart's reverence and the life of our souls, and is ever rebuking and overruling our conduct—in this world-conquering Christianity the essentials are love and unity and brotherhood. But look at the Protestant sects, all quarrelling about crude absurdities and ridiculous unessentials. And ask yourselves how the Church shall be purified and edified when those who should compose it remain outside of it.

Collaboration of Democracy in Art and Religion

And in Art also I believe that your collaboration is all-important: but the conditions are more difficult. In both Art and Religion it is true that one would wish every man to be effective, in so far as that is possible. In Art, as in Religion, we look for salvation in individual emotion: but Art is nothing if not creative, and on that side of the subject William Morris spoke freely and well,—I guess that much of your enthusiasm may be inspired by his exhortations.

The aesthetic gospel of William Morris is easy to preach, and it would not be so difficult to act on if you had been brought up in a good tradition. In the absence of that you must serve a long apprenticeship in studying the works of the great masters. Not that we are to be enslaved to those old models; but until we understand them we shall not understand either the limit of our faculties or the conditions of success.

p. 10, line 4. A friend warns me that this sentence needs qualification, indeed my utterance provoked the protest of a gnostic at the time; and it is an axiom with some philosophers that there is no problem concerning man which his intellect or Reason is incapable of solving. But I suppose that such gnostics would associate Instinct with Reason, nor did I dogmatise against the 'may be', but asserted the 'has not been'.

Throughout my address the antagonism of Reason and Instinct must appear exaggerated, because it is their differentiation and opposition that is being attended to. Where they mingle it is impossible to dissociate them, and difficult to consider them apart; and yet the sense of my general contention is plain enough, and may be well illustrated and sustained by the common acceptance of the gnome that it is easier for a man to act rightly than to give a true and reasonable account of his motives: and so I think that most sensible people, when they are faced with a perplexing problem of conduct, trust much less to deliberation and Reason than to a 'growing conviction' which they allow to mature without conscious interference. So, too, the advantage which religious people find in prayer, when they seek inward light to guide them, implies a definite rejection of logical deliberation in favour of instinct and feeling; for they accept that as the channel if not the source of their guidance. So, again, the respect for 'revelation' and 'inspiration', when these are freed from the husks which theologians are so intent to shape and carve, is merely the recognition of genius (as I have defined it) in things spiritual. Certainly, also, any artist who has got into trouble with his work will put it aside, and wait for a subconscious solution.

p. 20. The analysis of Keats's lines is from my Essay on Keats, published 1895.

p. 23. The quotation from Huxley is from *Lay Sermons*, Macmillan, pp. 122-5.

On pp. 9 and 23 the phrases in inverted commas are from my friend George Santayana's book, *Reason in Art*, Constable, 1905.

