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The Nature of English Poetry

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An Elementary Survey

By

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With a Preface by

Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch

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PREFACE

I COMMEND this book, reserving a grain of envy; because it says some few things that had not occurred to me; simply and straightly expresses many that, through business (or laziness), had never been rightly ordered to a purpose: and so presents them to an audience possibly, because wider, in these days very likely more valuable than my own.

But the point is that neither in these days nor any other can any one afford to disregard Poetry without cutting himself from one of the best rewards of living, at once the cheapest to purchase and the most refined to enjoy. To listen to a man or a woman who "has no use" for Poetry is like listening to a husband or a wife who "has no use" for children. They can never be answered, for the simple and sufficient reason that they know not what they are talking about.

To put it in another way: we know that the immense Universe about us revolves to a calculable rhythm; that —to descend to our own little planet—the moon swings its oceans to a calculable rhythm; and—descending lower yet to our own small selves—on a calculable rhythm, so many times a minute, our hearts pump the blood through our bodies to be aerated, received back, and dispatched again on that health-giving mission. If its beat be interrupted, we fall sick and seek a physician. Is it then credible that men can rule their bodies out of the general rhythm? And if we cannot rule out our bodies and *their* inheritance, what presumption is it to vote man's highest gifts—thought and speech—out of duty which even the stars obey? The most ignorant sailor knows what it means to pull rhythmically on a rope: and it was not in idle fancy that

the Greeks made Apollo the president god at once of Song and of Medicine.

It is because Mr. Harris goes straight to the core of this very simple mystery (so often clouded) and elucidates it, page by page, practically, with examples, that I think his book so valuable. For poetry has always been to me just "the stuff the poets have written." Speculations on the "nature" of poetry, its "reactions," how A, B, or C came to write it, have always left me cold, as they must always chill an ordinary man's approach, or cheat the dullard who demands the use of it all. We need not start by arguing that many things which "don't pay" are priceless. Let us start by arguing that, thanks to the poets, things priceless to his enjoyment of life are within his reach for a few pence. I once, when a boy, bought Dick's *Shakespeare* for a shilling, and will swear—setting even the grand emotion of the plays all aside—that no man, even in some habitual English landscape, can look (say) on the morning sunshine

" Gilding pale streams with heavenly alchemy,"

or on December woods,

" Bare, ruin'd choirs where late the sweet birds sang,"

without, in the recall of those lines, refreshing his eyes, disburdening his memory of many trivial cares, near to that moment, so often on the edge of it neglected, when

" We feel that we are greater than we know."

ARTHUR QUILLER-COUCH.

CONTENTS

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INTRODUCTORY

When we are deeply excited most of us find it hard to make words give more than an inkling of what we feel. Suppose a boy, staying in the country or by the sea, in the holidays, goes up to his room at night, dog-tired and happy, and finds unexpectedly that the moon is shining outside. He may open the window and look out for a few minutes; and as he looks on the trees and fields in the soft light he feels a deep satisfaction at being alive.

Perhaps, as he stays watching, he begins to have dim but pleasant sensations. He feels vaguely that something rare and exciting should happen on a night like this. But if he says anything, he says only: "It's a topping night!"—or something like that. And even if he wanted to, it would be hard for him to put his feelings into words so that other people could understand them. But there are specially gifted men who can do it. Such a one can look out of his window at night and write:

"Dark fir-tops foot the moony sky,
Blue moonlight bars the drive;
Here at the open window I
Sit smoking and alive.

Wind in the branches swells and breaks
Like ocean on a beach;
Deep in the sky and my heart there wakes
A thought I cannot reach." [1]

[1] *At Night*, Sir John Squire.

And another, a Scotsman exiled in Samoa, when filled with a passionate longing to see once more before he died the hills and moors of his country, could express his longing in this way:

"Blows the wind to-day, and the sun and the rain are flying,
Blows the wind on the moors to-day and now,
Where about the graves of the martyrs the whaups[1] *are crying,*
My heart remembers how!

Grey recumbent tombs of the dead in desert places,
Standing stones on the vacant wine-red moor,
Hills of sheep, and the homes of the silent vanished races,
And winds, austere and pure:

Be it granted me to behold you again in dying,
Hills of home! and to hear again the call;
Hear about the graves of the martyrs the peewees crying,
And hear no more at all."[2]

What these two men wrote is poetry. And the speech in which men have always expressed their deepest feelings is poetry, for POETRY IS THE MOST POWERFUL KIND OF SPEECH. *I shall try to show how and why this is in the first three chapters of this book.*

[1] Curlews. [2] *To S. R. Crockett,* R. L. Stevenson.

CHAPTER I

THE MOST POWERFUL KIND OF SPEECH: RHYTHM

§ 1

Rhythm

To begin with, all poetry is made up of words which go to a regular beat, that is to say, which have a regular rhythm. The poems I have quoted are written in stanza-form, but even if they were not you would find that you could not read them without marking the regular rhythm.

Rhythm has an immense influence on people's minds and bodies. By the rhythmic beating of drums the witch-doctors of Africa can hypnotize a whole tribe of negroes and fire them with the lust to kill. There is an American play called *Emperor Jones*, the greater part of which shows the flight of a strong and brave negro through a forest. A tom-tom is beating faintly in the distance. At first it is beaten at exactly the same rate as the normal pulse-beat—seventy-two to the minute—but the beating grows gradually faster and increases up to the climax of the play. It has a terrible effect on the negro. It makes him see imaginary shapes and ghosts; it rouses all his superstition: and finally drives him into a panic so that he loses his way in the forest, runs round in a circle and finally into the hands of his pursuers.

Rhythm works in the same way, but not so obviously, on the minds and bodies of more civilized people. Rhythm is the basis of music and dancing. The rhythm of a military band sends a message directly to our legs which makes it hard for us not to walk in time with the music.

Not only has rhythm this powerful influence over our feelings, but it is a fact that when any one tries to express strong feeling in speech, an instinct makes him tend to speak in words that go to a regular rhythm. An orator will begin his speech in ordinary prose. But if he is speaking on something which he has at heart, as he rouses to his subject, and grows excited, his words will become more and more rhythmical; he will repeat a word here, and put in an extra word there which is not necessary to the sense of the sentence, until at last he is speaking blank verse. And it is this rhythmical part which makes most impression on an audience. Some men are able to move a crowd's enthusiasm as easily as the African witch-doctor can move that of his tribe. An audience may be roused to the utmost indignation by an eloquent speaker and not be able to remember any of his arguments the next day. This means that the speaker has not impressed their reason, their intellects, but has worked on their emotions. His own indignation has been so fierce that it has put rhythm into his speech and helped to rouse the indignation of the audience.

It is the same in writing. When a writer is deeply excited about what he is writing, his prose begins to go to a measured beat. Sir Walter Raleigh, a prisoner in the Tower, in disgrace after a life of adventure and glory, wrote thus about death:

> "O eloquent, just and mighty Death! whom none could advise, thou hast persuaded; what none hath

dared thou hast done; and whom all the world hath flattered, thou only hast cast out of the world and despised: thou hast drawn together all the far-stretched greatness, all the pride, cruelty, and ambition of man, and covered it all over with these two narrow words, 'Hic jacet.'"

(*A History of the World.*)

If you read that aloud you will see how the words rise and fall at fairly regular intervals.

George Meredith wrote in a novel:

"Golden lie the meadows: golden run the streams; red gold is on the pine-stems. The sun is coming down to earth, and walks the fields and the waters.

(*The Ordeal of Richard Feverel.*)

The Bible is full of rhythmic prose. Ruth says to Naomi:

"Whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God: where thou diest will I die, and there will I be buried: the Lord do so to me, and more also, if ought but death part thee and me."

And David, when he hears that his son is dead, says:

"O my son Absalom! my son, my son Absalom! would God I had died for thee, O Absalom, my son, my son!"

As far as actual *meaning* goes, the repetition of "my

son, my son Absalom" has no value at all, but if the speech had been simply, "O my son Absalom, would God I had died for thee," it would not have stuck in people's minds as it has done.

And in a prose play, when one of the characters is worked up to a pitch of intense feeling, the writer of the play, himself often sharing for the moment in the feeling of his character, will usually make the character speak in words that go to a regular rhythm. The old Irishwoman in *Riders to the Sea*, having heard that the last of her sons is drowned, speaks thus:

> "They 're all gone now, and there isn't anything more the sea can do to me. . . . I 'll have no call now to be up crying and praying when the wind breaks from the south, and you can hear the surf is in the east, and the surf is in the west, making a great stir with the two noises, and they hitting one on the other. I 'll have no call now to be going down and getting Holy Water in the dark nights after Samhain, and I won't care which way the sea is when the other women will be keening."
>
> (*Riders to the Sea*, J. M. SYNGE.)

And in the play *Hassan*, when Rafi and Pervaneh, the woman he loves, have chosen to die for their love, Pervaneh, in an ecstasy, cries:

> "The splendour pours from the window—the spirits in red and gold. Death with thee, death for thee, death to attain thee, O lover—and then the garden —then the fountain—then the walking side by side.
>
> . . . . .

"Come, love, for the fire that beats within us, for the air that blows around us, for the mountains of our country and the wind among their pines, you and I accept torture and confront our end. We are in the service of the World. The voice of the rolling deep is shouting: 'Suffer that my waves may moan.' The company of the stars sing out: 'Be brave that we may shine.' The spirits of children not yet born whisper as they crowd around us: 'Endure that we may conquer.' "

(*Hassan*, J. E. FLECKER.)

Wherever strong excitement is expressed in words, there is usually an approach to regular rhythm.

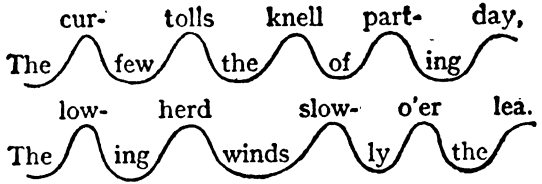
So poetry always consists of speech with a regular rhythm, which is verse. BUT THOUGH POETRY IS ALWAYS IN VERSE, ALL VERSE IS BY NO MEANS POETRY. Do not make the mistake, therefore, of calling verse poetry unless it really is poetry, and do not say a thing is written "in poetry."

This rhythm of poetry is not absolutely regular like a machine; but regular in the sense that sea-waves are regular. Take two familiar lines of verse:

"The curfew tolls the knell of parting day,
The lowing herd winds slowly o'er the lea . . ."

If you read these slowly but without stopping between the words, you find that you emphasize or stress every second syllable, so that words go to a regular beat and the beat falls on every second syllable. Each line consists

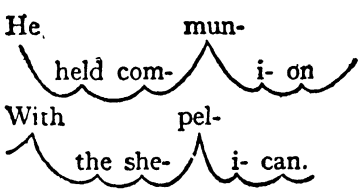
of five waves and each wave of two sounds. We can show it in this way:



If you read the lines:

"He held communion
With the she-pelican
Of lonely piety"

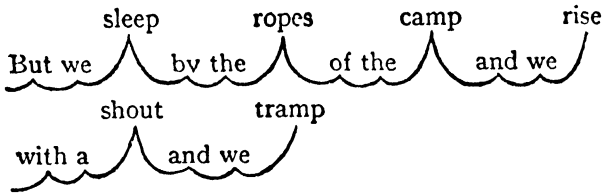
in the same slow way, you find that you stress "He" and "mu-" in the first line, "With" and "pel-" in the second, and "Of" and "pi-" in the third—that is, the first and fourth syllables of each line. Each of these lines consists of two waves and each wave of three sounds.



And the lines:

"But we sleep by the ropes of the camp, and we rise with a shout, and we tramp
With the sun and the moon for a lamp, and the spray of the wind in our hair"

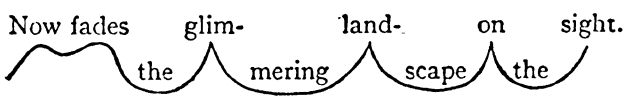
are also made up of waves of three sounds, but the *third* sound is the one you stress.



I repeat that the waves of sound in a poem are not perfectly regular if you pronounce the words naturally, any more than sea-waves are. One may be much less or weaker than the others, two may be merged together. For example, in Gray's *Elegy*, from which the first two lines come, there is such a line as:

"Now fades the glimmering landscape on the sight."

I think it would come natural to many people to put the same stress on the "Now" as on the "fades" (i.e. to stress them both). This makes the line go:



so that the first wave is greater than the others, being, in fact, a double wave. And there are lines which you can pronounce in more than one way. But though the lines of this poem vary a little, they are all based on the same rhythm, and though the verse of some poetry, such as Old English poetry, is built more loosely than the verse

I have been quoting, in all poetry you can hear an unmistakably measured beat.

With the possible ways in which the rhythm of poetry works, and of the difference between it and metre, which is a fixed pattern of accented syllables, I shall not deal at present. All I want to show now is that speech with a more or less regular rhythm has more effect on us than ordinary speech; and that all poetry has this more or less regular rhythm. And this is one of the reasons for poetry being the most powerful kind of speech.

§2

Alliteration

Among the peoples descended from the Anglo-Saxons a phrase or a sentence in which many of the syllables, particularly the emphasized syllables, begin with the same consonant sound, sticks in the mind more than an ordinary phrase. It is because of this that we have so many odd phrases such as "kith and kin," "spick and span," "do or die," "king and country," "friend or foe," "rack and ruin," "left in the lurch," and "waste not want not." It is because of this, I think, that advertisements used to have such legends as "Dr. Williams' Pink Pills for Pale People." *Alliteration* is the name given to this repetition of consonant sounds. Of course it would be hard to write a few lines without repeating some consonant sounds, so the repetition must have a definite effect before it can be said to be alliteration. (You should remember that a consonant sound may be shown by different letters, e.g. "F" and "PH" have the same sound, as have "R" and "WR.")

Men writing poetry, consciously or unconsciously, often

use alliteration, and it adds to the effect of rhythm, and also gives pleasure to the ear.

If you examine a verse which you particularly like, sometimes you will find that a good part of your pleasure is due to alliteration. A favourite poem of mine is R. L. Stevenson's *Requiem*, the last verse of which goes:

"Here he lies where he longed to be;
Home is the sailor, home from sea,
And the hunter home from the hill."

A good deal of the pleasure I get from these lines comes from the repeating of "s" in "sailor" and "sea," and of "h" in the two "homes," in "hunter," and in "hill." If I write the last line so that it does not alliterate—

"And the hunter back from the wood"—

I do not like it half so much.

In the kind of verse that the Anglo-Saxons wrote, alliteration was one of the most important things. The lines were of uneven length and did not rhyme, but each of them had four stressed syllables and the first three of these were always alliterative.

"Wæs se *g*rimma *g*est *G*rendel heten
*M*ære *m*earcstepa, se the *m*oras heold."

Alliteration in poetry pleases the ear; but it does not follow that the more alliteration there is in a verse the more pleasure it will give you. If it is overdone it becomes tiresome. Sometimes men use it to be funny, as Gilbert did when he wrote:

"To sit in solemn silence in a dull, dark dock,
In a pestilential prison with a lifelong lock,
Awaiting the sensation of a short, sharp shock
From a cheap and chippy chopper on a big, black block."

But if he had written a few hundred lines like this, the humour would have worn very thin by the end.

Shakespeare made fun of too much use of alliteration in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, when he made Bottom say:

> "Whereat with blade, with bloody blameful blade,
> He bravely broached his boiling bloody breast."

As a rule, when alliteration is making most impression on you, you do not notice it. I find the following verse musical:

> "Softly along the road of evening,
> In a twilight dim with rose,
> Wrinkled with age, and drenched with dew,
> Old Nod the shepherd goes. . . ."

When I examine it, I find that the "d" sound comes eight times in it, the "l" sound five times, and the "r" sound four times.

> "Soft*l*y a*l*ong the *r*oa*d* of evening,
> In a twi*l*ight *d*im with *r*ose,
> *W*r*i*nk*l*e*d* with age and *dr*enched with *d*ew,
> O*l*d No*d* the shepher*d* goes." [1]

But I did not realize this before I examined it.

Partly because of its regular rhythm and its use of alliteration, poetry is the most powerful kind of speech.

[1] As Mr. A. P. Tolfree points out, there is a "d" sound in "age." The "d" in "and" is merged in the initial "d" of "drenched"; and the final "d" of "drenched" is pronounced as "t."

CHAPTER II

THE MOST POWERFUL KIND OF SPEECH: SOUND

§ 1

Now a man writing poetry will not only tell his feeling in words that go to a regular rhythm, but he will also, by his instinct, choose such words and put them together in such a way, that their *sound* by itself expresses his feeling, or at any rate helps to express it. (Some men have this instinct more than others, but if a man has not got it at all, he can hardly write poetry.) So Tennyson, describing the drowsy Lotos-Eaters' Island, has made the sound of his verse slow, dreamy, and musical:

"All round the coast the languid air did swoon,
Breathing like one that hath a weary dream.
Full-faced above the valley stood the moon;
And like a downward smoke, the slender stream
Along the cliff to fall and pause and fall did seem."

You have only to read this through twice to see how many words there are which you cannot say quickly: "swoon," "breathing," "weary," "dream," "moon," "smoke," "stream," "seem." The last word in each line ends in "m" or "n" and so dies away gradually, because you go on sounding the last part of a word like "dream" even after you have closed your lips.

Flecker, on the other hand, putting into words the challenge and the pride of the Saracen warriors he has

imagined, makes the sound of his verse stirring and warlike and defiant:

"We are they who come faster than fate: we are they who ride early or late:
We storm at your ivory gate: Pale Kings of the Sunset, beware!
Not on silk nor in samet we lie, not in curtained solemnity die
Among women who chatter and cry, and children who mumble a prayer.
But we sleep by the ropes of the camp, and we rise with a shout, and we tramp
With the sun or the moon for a lamp, and the spray of the wind in our hair."

"Camp," "tramp," and "lamp" are words which you cannot say slowly without difficulty.

The fact that the words in the first passage are *about* slow dreamy things makes you particularly ready to find a slow, dreamy effect in the sound; and if it is possible to say a line in two different ways, the sense of the words will make you unconsciously say it in the slowest and dreamiest way. I mean that if you were a foreigner who knew no English and someone read the lines aloud to you, you would get a vague impression of dreaminess from the mere sound of them, but it would not be so powerful as the impression given to a man who understood the sense of the words. For the sound and the meaning of a word make their effect at the same time, and the meaning of the words of a poem makes what would perhaps be the vague impression of the sound by itself, into a definite and much stronger impression.

It is possible to have a poem with a neutral sound which by itself gives neither a sad nor a joyful nor any special

impression; what is *impossible*, is to have a poem whose sound does not harmonize with its sense. When the sound of a verse says one thing and the meanings of the words another, the result is either pitiful or comic. Mr. Greening Lamborn gives a good example of this in his book *The Rudiments of Criticism*. He quotes some lines from a piece called *The Old Arm-chair* by Eliza Cook, a lady well known in the last century. In them she has tried to make poetry out of her love for her dead mother. Although this love, as Mr. Lamborn says, is one of the deepest emotions that the heart can know, she has not succeeded in making poetry, because, while the meaning of her words is pathetic, the sound is chirpy and jingling:

"I love it, I love it; and who shall dare
To chide me for loving that old arm-chair?
I 've treasured it long as a sainted prize;
I 've bedewed it with tears and embalmed it with sighs:
'Tis bound by a thousand links to my heart;
Not a tie will break, not a link will start.
Would ye learn the spell? A mother sat there;
And a sacred thing is that old arm-chair."

A foreigner who did not know English could not tell what these lines were about, merely from hearing them spoken; but I think he would guess from the sound of the following lines—in which Mr. Masefield writes about his mother—at least that they were about something serious and sad:

"If the grave's gates could be undone
She would not know her little son,
I am so grown. If we should meet
She would pass by me in the street,
Unless my soul's face let her see
My sense of what she did for me."

§2

Sound and Sense

But not only will a poet make the sound of his poem as a whole describe his mood; he will often make the sound of each line echo the sense of the words in it, especially when he is describing sound or movement. Sometimes he will imitate closely the sound of what he is describing, as poets have done in these lines:

(*a*) "The mumbling, grumbling humble-bees."

(*b*) "Myriads of rivulets hurrying through the lawn,
The moan of doves in immemorial elms,
And murmuring of innumerable bees."

(*c*) "There was a rustling that seemed like a bustling
Of merry crowds justling at pitching and hustling,
Small feet were pattering, wooden shoes clattering,
Little hands clapping and little tongues chattering."

(*d*) (These lines are about church bells tolling.)
"Keeping time, time, time,
In a sort of Runic rhyme."

(*e*) (And these imitate the throstle's song.)
"Summer is coming, summer is coming,
I know it, I know it, I know it,
Light again, leaf again, life again, love again,
Yes, my wild little Poet."

But this exact imitation, which is called ONOMATOPŒIA, is not very common and does not make for good poetry. More often a poet will just *suggest* the sense by the sound.

Read, for example, the following stanza; it is from a poem called *Solitude*, by Mr. Harold Monro:

> "The little dog rolls over half awake,
> Stretches his paws, yawns, looking up at you,
> Wags his tail very slightly for your sake,
> That you may feel he is unhappy too."

Just as the dog pauses in his rolling and stretching for a moment while he yawns, the word "yawns," coming after "paws," makes you halt in reading the second line.

In the same way there is a change in the rhythm in Coleridge's *Kubla Khan*:

> ". . . And sank in tumult to a lifeless ocean:
> And 'mid this tumult Kubla heard from far
> Ancestral voices prophesying war!
> The shadow of the dome of pleasure
> Floated midway on the waves;
> Where was heard the mingled measure
> From the fountain and the caves."

After the threatening line "Ancestral voices prophesying war!" the words begin to describe a pleasure-dome and so they go to a rippling light-hearted rhythm.

The following lines suggest the gallop of horses:

(*a*) "'Neath our feet broke the brittle bright stubble like chaff."

(*b*) "When the pods went pop on the broom, green broom,
And apples began to be golden-skinned,
We harboured a stag in the Priory coomb,
And we feathered his trail up-wind, up-wind."

These lines from Mr. Kipling's *Boots* express the unbearably monotonous tread of soldiers marching in Africa:

"Don't—don't—don't—don't—look at what 's in front of you.
(Boots—boots—boots—boots—movin' up and down again.)
Men—men—men—men—men go mad with watchin' 'em,
An' there 's no discharge in the war!"

(You should read them as though you were calling out "Left—right—left—right" to keep a squad in step, or, better still, "Left—left—left." Pause for one beat at the end of the third line.)

And the sound of these lines echoes the crying of gulls and the murmur of the sea:

". . . wistful, eerie, thin
As the gull's cry—as the cry in the bay,
The mournful word the seas say
When tides are wandering out or in."

These lines imitate the sounds of a tramp steamer leaving dock:

"See the shaking funnels roar, with the Peter at the fore,
And the fenders grind and heave,
And the derricks clack and grate, as the tackle hooks the crate
And the fall-rope winds through the sheave."

And these the noise the breeze makes in a willow-tree:

"And there flows
A delicate wind from the Southern seas
Kissing her leaves. She sighs . . ."

To sum up, poetry can, and usually does, express a mood and suggest the sounds and movements which it describes, by its own sound. Because of this, young children can feel part of the effect of a poem though they do not understand the meaning of its words, and a man who knows no Greek can sometimes recognize from its sound an emotion or mood expressed in Greek poetry and be moved by it. And partly because of this, poetry is the most powerful form of speech.

CHAPTER III

THE MOST POWERFUL KIND OF SPEECH: THE FLAVOUR OF WORDS

§ 1

The Flavour of Words

Words have not only meanings. They have also what are called *associations*. And poetry is fuller of meaning than prose because it uses these associations far more than prose does. The words "horse" and "steed," for example, have the same meaning, according to the dictionary. But whenever I see or hear the word "steed" I think of knights of the Middle Ages, of armour and lances and plumes, of fights against dragons and ogres, of high adventurous quests in strange lands, and all the legends of King Arthur, Roland, and the Black Prince. These are its *associations*. But "horse" has no distinct flavour. It calls up in my mind a sort of composite picture which has traces of thoroughbreds and hunters in it, but which is mostly made up of the horses I see every day ploughing the fields and pulling the coal wagons and milk carts.

Now Mr. de la Mare has written in a poem called *Never-to-be*:

> "His hound is mute; his *steed* at will
> Roams pastures deep with asphodel."

He has imagined that all the people who have been drowned are ruled over by an old mad king, the King of Never-to-be,

in a weird unearthly kingdom. The poem describes the king, who mutters all day long to himself, with a shadow for sentinel, and pine-trees for his guards, because all his subjects are asleep in the sea and the only sound is the

"foam and rain
Whispering of what comes not again."

Mr. de la Mare used the word "steed" because he wanted its flavour. As he was out to put the weirdness of his idea so powerfully into poetry that whoever read the poem should feel it as much as he did himself, he did not use a word which might remind people of a coal cart or a farm-yard—and the ordinary world we live in, where kings usually go about in motor cars—but took the word which would remind them of the old legends and fairy-tales. For the same reason Keats made the knight in *La Belle Dame sans Merci* put the witch-lady on his "pacing steed."

But when a man wants to keep his readers' minds firmly fixed on the solid earth he calls a horse a "horse," as Hardy does in the verse:

"Only a man harrowing clods
In a slow silent walk
With an old horse that stumbles and nods
Half asleep as they stalk."

And in the following verse—

"'Romance,' the season tickets mourn,
'*He* never ran to catch his train,
But passed with coach and guard and horn—
And left the local—late again!'
Confound Romance! . . . And all unseen,
Romance brought up the nine-fifteen"—

Mr. Kipling, who is showing that there is romance in things which seem to most people commonplace, has used, on purpose, those words, "local," "nine-fifteen," which remind you of all that is stale and banal about a train. Such words as the "night mail," the "Flying Scotsman," the "Scotch express," have a spice of adventure about them. But "the nine-fifteen" has a desolate flavour of uninteresting people from uninteresting suburbs catching the same old train to business day after day.

Every word in the language is constantly being loaded with "associations."[1] And as a rule, the longer people use a word the heavier its load gets.[2] That is why a word like "father," which we and our Saxon ancestors have been using for many centuries, makes so much more impression than the words "male parent," which have exactly the same *meaning*. That is why lines such as the following, which are made up of very old words, are so moving:

> "Love had he found in huts where poor men lie;
> His daily teachers had been woods and rills,
> The silence that is in the starry sky,
> The sleep that is among the lonely hills."

Everything that men say and do and write (if it becomes known) puts something more into the load of some word. For instance, shipbuilders put a little more into the word "liner," and even into "ship," when they built the *Majestic*

[1] There are several scientific and technical words which have no associations except for the few specialists who use them. But there is no knowing when some invention like that of wireless telegraphy will not put some of these words into common use and so set them on the way to storing up associations.

[2] The associations of a word like "steed," which is not used of anything alive to-day, do not increase much. But so long as the word is used at all its flavour is apt to change a little.

and the *Queen Mary*. And Stevenson, when he wrote *Kidnapped*, put a little more into the words "Highlander" and "dirk." Sir Arthur Conan Doyle put a lot into the word "detective" when he wrote the "Sherlock Holmes" books, but what he put in has been almost covered up by that which hundreds of detective stories have since loaded on to it.[1]

History is stored up in the flavour of words as a garden is distilled and stored up in bottles of scent. Robin Hood is, as it were, packed away in the word "outlaw" and helps to give it its flavour, just as Captain Scott and Sir Ernest Shackleton are packed away in "explorer." Nobody can use the word "trenches" now without having at the back of his mind all the terrible things the Great War has crammed into it. Yet it used to remind people of nothing more than gardening and the draining of fields. The gold and precious stones from America, the Armada, and all the exciting things done on the Spanish Main, are stored away in "galleon"; and the pilgrimages, runaway marriages, coach journeys, highway robberies, that have happened on the English highways during some four centuries have each put something into the word "inn," so that it has quite a different flavour from "public-house," "pub," or "hotel."

Poets are men who have a keener feeling than other men for the flavours of words, and a knack of using them.

[1] Sometimes a word is loaded with associations which cover up the ones it had before. The word "barge" now puts people in mind of clumsy tub-like boats on canals and mouths of rivers, of mudbanks, tugs, and of bad language. But in the times when Queen Elizabeth sailed magnificently up and down the Thames in the royal barge it reminded them of all that was splendid and elegant:

> "The barge she sat in, like a burnished throne,
> Burned on the water; the poop was beaten gold,
> Purple the sails . . ."
>
> *Antony and Cleopatra*, SHAKESPEARE.

So a man making poetry will not only by his instinct and judgment use

(1) Regular rhythm and alliteration to express strong feeling; and
(2) The sounds of vowels and consonants to express his particular kind of feeling;

he will also choose words and put them together in such a way that their flavour, the associations they call up, will thrill us when we read and make us feel as he did.[1]

In the lines:

"Blows the wind to-day, and the sun and the rain are flying,
Blows the wind on the moors to-day and now,
Where about the graves of the martyrs the whaups are crying,
My heart remembers how!"

the word "whaups" at once reminds me of the place where I have heard curlews called "whaups"—Scotland—so that when I come to the words "vacant wine-red moor" I think of a Scottish moor. And it makes me think of the people who use such words as "whaup"—the solemn Scots shepherds, and the homely people of the country, so fiercely honest, and I begin to feel as Stevenson did in Samoa when he thought of his home and made this poem. I don't mean that I stop and think of all these things one by one. I feel the combined effect

[1] Words have their flavour in prose, of course, as well as in poetry, as is pointed out later in this chapter. But in ordinary prose words are not so combined as to make their flavour produce definite effects any more than noises in a street or a wood are combined to make a tune.

of them all at once, without noticing why, when I read the poem. It is only when I have considered the matter and examined the verses that I can trace them back to the word "whaups."

There is a short poem called *Cargoes*, by John Masefield, in which there is not a single statement or verb. The first stanza gives a list of the things in the hold of a "quinquireme of Nineveh" coming home from Ophir, where, you may remember, King Solomon had his mines; the second, of the things in a "stately Spanish galleon" coming from Panama; and the third, of the things in a

"Dirty British coaster with a salt-caked smoke-stack,
Butting through the Channel in the mad March days."

The quinquireme has a cargo of

"ivory,
And apes and peacocks,
Sandalwood, cedarwood, and sweet white wine."

These words as a whole put me in mind of elegant, luxurious things. The word "peacocks" not only makes me think of peacocks, but also of stately terraces, and spacious gardens and pictures of kings' palaces in old tales and legends. "Cedarwood" I no sooner see than I think of the scent of burning cedarwood, then of the cedars of Lebanon, and all the time I have at the back of my mind a vague memory of the Bible and incense, and such people as Solomon. "Ivory" has for me a vague flavour of rare, precious, elegant things without making me think of anything definite. "Sandalwood" has a strong flavour of Eastern luxurious things, and so has "sweet white wine" when the phrase comes after the other words. Finally, "apes" coming in the midst of such words as "ivory" and "sandalwood" gives the whole list an outlandish,

grotesque flavour quite out of keeping with this country, with this period, and with everyday life. So the list of the cargo, together with the names "Nineveh," "Ophir," "Palestine," the word "haven" (so different in flavour from "dock"), and the first word of the poem—"quinquireme," which is so strange that it startles me into imagining the ship—puts me in mind of the world as a whole at a certain time—when Nineveh flourished. And it makes me feel the elegant, rare, fantastic, luxurious side of the life of that time. In short, it makes me for a moment see an epoch of the world's history as John Masefield saw it at a certain time.

In the same way, the words which describe the cargo of the British coaster—

> "Tyne coal,
> Road-rails, pig-lead,
> Firewood, iron-ware, and cheap tin trays"—

put me in mind of the sordid, prosaic side of life in the world to-day. The flavour of the words describing the cargo is strengthened by those that describe the ship—"smoke-stack," a harsher, more prosaic word even than "funnel"; "butting," and so on. The graceful rhythm and the pleasant sound of vowels and consonants in the first stanza help to suggest the graceful appearance and movement of the quinquireme, and the choiceness of its cargo; and the jerky rhythm and harsh, staccato words of the last stanza, the far from graceful appearance and movement of the coaster, and its prosaic cargo. But the main part of the poem's effect is due to the flavour of the words—to the associations they call up in the reader's mind.

John Keats was a man who used the flavour of words to the full; he called it "loading every rift with ore." He turned his delight in the beauty and fruitfulness of

autumn in England into a famous poem called the *Ode to Autumn*: and the words in this are all soaked in the flavour of the season—or, at any rate, certain aspects of it—so that they make you see and hear and smell the country on a fine autumn day, and in the way that Keats did on a certain day many years ago.

"Where are the songs of Spring? Ay, where are they?
Think not of them, thou hast thy music too,—
While barrèd clouds bloom the soft-dying day,
And touch the stubble-plains with rosy hue;
Then in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn
Among the river sallows, borne aloft
Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies;
And full-grown lambs loud bleat from hilly bourn;
Hedge-crickets sing; and now with treble soft
The redbreast whistles from a garden-croft;
And gathering swallows twitter in the skies."

Two words are sufficient to give this, which is the last stanza, a flavour of sadness. They are "wailful" and "mourn."

Sometimes a word at the beginning will colour a whole poem, as "softly" at the beginning of *Nod*, by Walter de la Mare.

Sometimes you may come across an outlandish word. The Chief Grocer in *Hassan*, a play about Persia, describes the goods he is going to take to Samarkand in this way:

"We have rose-candy, we have spikenard,
Mastic and terebinth and oil and spice,
And such sweet jams meticulously jarred
As God's own Prophet eats in Paradise."

You know what oil and spice are; you probably remember

from the Bible what spikenard is, and so you can guess that mastic and terebinth are some sort of oils or spices. Their musical Oriental sounds suggest something far more rare and wonderful than ordinary oil and spices. And so the very fact of your not knowing what the words mean makes the Chief Grocer's goods seem wonderful and mysterious and adds to the effect of the verse. But if the familiar words "oil and spice," well loaded with associations, had not been there, the unfamiliar words would have sounded pleasant but would have had little effect otherwise.

Poetry makes full use of all the associations which a word has, and partly because of this it is the most powerful kind of speech.

§ 2

Poetry and Prose

The difference between poetry and prose is that prose affects only the intellect or reason of a man, and poetry affects the whole man, not only through his intellect but through his senses and what is loosely called his imagination, and works upon his emotions.

But it would be wrong to think that everything that is written is either pure prose or pure poetry. Between the domain of pure prose and that of genuine poetry there is a vast no-man's-land in which most imaginative writing lies. In the domain of pure prose are such writings as Euclid's propositions or the instructions on income-tax forms. In the no-man's-land are all prose writings which make use of more than the dictionary meanings of words to produce a definite effect. In the middle lies a great amount of prose which uses the flavour and sound of

words as well as their meaning—most essays, some books of travels, a large part of most novels. Nearer the poetry line is prose like that by Raleigh and Flecker quoted in chapter i, which has the beginnings of a regular rhythm. Here also lies a good deal of verse which for one reason or another does not succeed in being poetry. But thoroughly bad verse has no place at all; it is neither near enough to poetry to lie with the good verse that is not quite poetry, nor, because of its metre, can it be put with the prose near the pure prose line, because words in a definite metrical pattern cannot work in the same way as prose; you do not look at them in the same way.

Different critics have different views about just where the domain of poetry extends to. Some would have it that the Book of Job and several parts of the Bible are poetry, while others hold that these are prose—rhythmic prose, it is true—but still definitely prose.

CHAPTER IV

THE MOST PLEASING KIND OF SPEECH: MUSIC

§ 1

The SOUND of poetry can not only thrill you and make you *feel* what the words are saying, but it can give you great pleasure in itself. Besides being the most powerful kind of speech, poetry is the most pleasing to listen to. (Poetry which is not pleasing to listen to does exist but it is rare. Verses made up of harsh words can still please the ear by their rhythm. And even in a poem made up entirely of harsh lines, if it is a real poem, the sound of its words as a *whole*, together with their meaning and flavour, will often be pleasing.)

To begin with, the *rhythm* of poetry, besides having the influence described in chapter i, pleases the ear. Then a man making poetry usually has an instinct to arrange and balance sounds of vowels and consonants so that they please the ear still more, just as a musician arranges notes to make a tune. It was this instinct, I imagine, which made Mr. de la Mare write "conies" in the following verse:

> "The hedge is quick and green with briar,
> From their sand the conies creep;
> And all the birds that fly in heaven
> Flock singing home to sleep."

As far as meaning and associations go, I think "rabbits" would be as good and suitable a word here, although it

has not *quite* the same flavour as "conies." But to put "rabbits" for "conies" would spoil the verse just as much as to play a wrong note would spoil a piece of music.

§ 2

Assonance

If you look closely into poetry that has a particularly satisfying sound you will find that some of its effect is due to certain sounds being repeated in it. We have seen in chapter i how consonant sounds can be repeated so that they give pleasure, and this repeating is called *Alliteration.*

Vowel sounds can also be repeated in such a way that they give pleasure. And this repeating of vowel sounds is called *Assonance.* The words "cry" and "side," for instance, are in *assonance* because they have the same vowel sound; and so are the words "Ovid" and "porridge." Here are some examples of *assonance*:

(1) "Philomel with melody
Sing in our sweet lullaby."

(2) "Therefore all seasons shall be sweet to thee,*
Whether the summer clothe the general earth
With greenness, or the redbreast sit and sing
Betwixt the tufts of snow on the bare branch
. . . . .
whether the eave-drops fall
Heard only in the trances of the blast,

* Note also the "th" sound, which occurs seven times in the first two lines.

Or if the *se*cret *mi*n*i*st*ry* of frost
1 3 3 3

Shall hang them up in *si*lent *ici*cles,
5 5 3

Qu*i*etly sh*i*n*i*ng to the qu*i*et Moon."
5 5 3 5

§ 3

Rhyme

Rhyme is the repetition of syllables having the same vowel sound and, where there is a final consonant sound, the same final consonant sound. Rhymes in most English poetry come at more regular intervals than assonances or sounds in alliteration.

It must be clearly understood that rhyme is not a thing that poetry cannot do without. Regular rhythm is an essential part of all poetry; rhyme is not. But rhyme is common in English poetry made during the last three hundred years and when it is well used it is a lovely thing. It can actually be used to help to express things, but it is not always so used. It serves also to mark the rhythmical pattern, coming as it does at the end of a line or a wave of sound, and to bind lines together.

The pleasure that rhyme gives is that which comes from recognizing similarity in different things. When you have read a few lines of a poem you get the hang of the pattern; your ear knows when to expect a certain vowel sound combined with a certain consonant sound.

Having heard "wells" at the end of one line it is gratified to hear "bells" two lines farther on; and all the more pleased because though it was expecting the "-ells" sound you did not know beforehand what the first consonant sound was going to be.

The poems quoted in chapter i would lose a lot if we took the rhyme away from them:

"Dark fir-tops foot the moony sky,
Blue moonlight bars the drive;
Here at the open window I
Sit smoking and alive."

In good poetry rhymes do not call attention to themselves; they seem to come quite naturally, as in the poems in chapter i, and in such a stanza as this of Flecker's:

"Sweet to ride forth at evening from the wells,
When shadows pass gigantic on the sand,
And softly through the silence beat the bells
Along the Golden Road to Samarkand."

But in the following lines the word "bollard" seems to have been dragged in by the scruff of the neck to rhyme with "collared":

"His tackling was the crowd's delight
In many a danger close to goal,
The pride in the three-quarter's soul
Dropped, like a wet rag, when he collared.
He was as steady as a bollard."

Abundant rhyme often has the same effect as abundant ornament on a building or much fancy-work in a design. The stanzas which follow are from a poem which a Persian intones outside the window of Yasmin, in *Hassan*. Yasmin, which is the Persian form of "jasmine," is the name of a woman he loves. He says he sees the roses and the lilies in the morning:

"But when the silver dove descends I find the little flower of friends,
Whose very name that sweetly ends, I say when I have said, Yasmin."

He is not bold enough to approach in daylight, so he continues in this way:

"But when the deep red eye of day is level with the lone highway,
And some to Mecca turn to pray, and I toward thy bed, Yasmin,
Or when the wind beneath the moon is drifting like a soul aswoon,
And harping planets talk love's tune with milky wings outspread, Yasmin,
Shower down thy love, O burning bright! for one night or the other night
Will come the Gardener in white, and gathered flowers are dead, Yasmin!"

Its many rhymes make this poem of the love of an Eastern man sound luxurious. It is heavy with rhymes just as Eastern carpets are full of colour and Eastern cigarettes rich in aroma.[1]

Rhymes of course can only express a feeling or mood when they are working in conjunction with all the other things that go to make up a poem—the meanings of words, the rhythm, the general sound-effect, and the associations of words. But much rhyme in a poem will usually give the effect of high spirits—if the other things that make up the poem are not hostile to a high-spirited mood. For example:

"I cannot eat but little meat,
My stomach is not good;
But sure I think that I can drink
With him that wears a hood.

[1] It is verse like this which has led Mr. Clifford Bax to describe Flecker's poetry as "Turkish Delight."

Though I go bare, take ye no care,
I nothing am a-cold;
I stuff my skin so full within
Of jolly good ale and old."

and:

"Wanton with long delay the gay Spring leaping cometh;
The blackthorn starreth now his bough on the eve of May:
All day in the sweet box-tree the bee for pleasure hummeth:
The cuckoo sends afloat his note on the air all day."

In these examples there are rhymes inside the lines as well as at the ends—"delay," "gay"; "now," "bough"—as you will have seen.

§ 4

The Most Pleasing Kind of Speech

When a cricketer hits the ball a long way in the direction he wants without wasting any of his strength, he makes a graceful stroke whether he has any ambition to be graceful or not; for in this world, when a thing is done as well as it can be done, it is beautiful. As aeroplanes and racing motor cars become more efficient they grow more beautiful. An aeroplane designed for the Schneider Trophy Competition is really a beautiful thing, and yet the men who design it and make it cannot afford to think about beauty, or of anything but speed, when they are working on it.

In the same way, when a poet expresses his intense feeling perfectly without any waste of words, his poem, heard as a whole, is beautiful to the ear. But there are many poems which are not perfect, many stanzas which do

not deserve the name of poetry, which are also beautiful to the ear. Some of these are more musical than genuine poems. For a man making poetry will usually choose and arrange words so that their sound will give pleasure even if he does not manage to express his feeling perfectly. Some men have a sharper ear for beauty of sound than others; some seem to take a greater delight in writing musical verse than others. Only the finest poems of Wordsworth are musical; but Tennyson hardly ever wrote an ugly-sounding stanza, though he wrote a good deal of verse that is not really poetry at all. Many poets show their delight in pleasant sound for its own sake by bringing in fine-sounding names, or inventing them, whenever they have a chance. For example:

"Three dwarfs there were which lived in an isle,
And the name of the isle was Lone,
And the names of the dwarfs were Alliolyle,
Lallerie, Muziomone.

Alliolyle was green of een,
Lallerie light of locks,
Muziomone was mild of mien
As ewes in April flocks."
(*The Isle of Lone*, WALTER DE LA MARE).

"whose names
Are five sweet symphonies,
Cecily, Gertrude, Magdalen,
Margaret and Rosalys."
(*The Blessèd Damozel*, D. G. ROSSETTI.)

To repeat, poetry is not only the most powerful kind of speech: it is also the most pleasing.

CHAPTER V

THE MEN WHO WRITE POETRY

A poet differs from an ordinary man in the same way that a specially powerful radio receiving set differs from an ordinary set. Just as the powerful set picks up messages from stations beyond the range of the ordinary set, he is constantly being excited by things which have no effect on the ordinary man.[1] One man who was a poet wrote:

> "To me the meanest flower that blows can give
> Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears."

And just as a message from a station within the range of both sets will sound louder in the powerful one, so the feelings which every one has—exhilaration on a frosty morning; delight in the sudden sight of a yacht, or in a fierce game of Rugger, or in the colours of the trees in autumn; home-sickness; love for a woman; sorrow for somebody's death—these are much keener in a poet than in an ordinary man. That is why poetry is always showing you things about life that you would otherwise miss. It makes life more exciting and richer by putting things in a new light and by passing on to you the most exciting experiences of other men. As Shelley says, "Poetry is the record of the best and happiest moments of the happiest and best minds."

[1] "He is a point of intensest feeling thrown out like an antenna by the social body to test the amorphous limits of existence, the nature of 'becoming.' He is the advance-guard of experience."—HERBERT READ.

And because poets feel things more keenly than ordinary people, they, in common with painters, musicians, and other artists, have the reputation of being easily upset, of being "nervy" and "temperamental," apt to make a fuss over, say, the shape of a chair or the colour of a curtain. But "nerviness" and "temperament" are also caused by lack of exercise, by indigestion, by a desire to make oneself important; so these things are no proof that a man is a poet.

A few men, such as Shakespeare, have had the power of seeing and hearing more than other men all their lives. A great many have had it in their prime, but lost it when they began to grow old. Such a one was Wordsworth, who unfortunately went on writing verse for more than thirty years after he had ceased to have anything to say which could not have been put perfectly well in prose. Some men have it at intervals—like Mr. A. E. Housman. Mr. Housman made a whole series of poems in the first half of the year 1895 and published them in the book called *A Shropshire Lad.* After that he wrote an odd poem at intervals until 1910. From his own account, Mr. Housman apparently gave up poetry altogether then until something excited him in April 1922, when he produced about a dozen poems which he published in a second book—*Last Poems*—in the same year.[1] Thomas Hardy, similarly, called one of his books of poems *Moments of Vision,* implying that only at inspired moments did he

[1] "I publish these poems, few though they are, because it is not likely that I shall ever be impelled to write much more. I can no longer expect to be revisited by the continuous excitement under which in the early months of 1895 I wrote the greater part of my other book, nor indeed could I well sustain it if it came. . . . About a quarter of this matter belongs to the April of the present year, but most of it to dates between 1895 and 1910."—Preface to *Last Poems.*

see and feel things so keenly that he was moved to make poetry.

Some men have their eyes opened and their senses sharpened by some upheaval in their lives. For example, the Great War tore up men from the homes and habits in which they were planted and dropped them in a completely strange country. Here they had to live from day to day without knowing where they might be sent, or what they might be doing on the next day. This and the possibility of being killed at any moment heightened their feelings, and the result was a crop of poems from men who otherwise might never have written a line.

But everybody has now and again in his life the sharpened power of feeling that a poet has. At times—particularly when one is undergoing some new experience, camping out for the first time, say, or arriving at a foreign country—one seems like an insect that has suddenly developed longer feelers or antennæ. But before he can make poetry a man must have a natural *gift* for using words. He must have the same sort of feeling for the flavour and sound of words and the rhythm of phrases that a painter has for colours and shapes.

He must also have a strong instinct for *making* something—for not only turning his feeling into words but for putting words together and arranging them or altering them so that they gratify him and make something complete in itself which is also beautiful.

This knack of using words and gift for making something beautiful come by nature. If you have them you can develop them by practice, but if you do not have them to begin with, you will never have them. That is why poets are said to be "born, not made."

Roughly, then, a man who can make poetry has

(1) Sharper feelings than normal men;

(2) A gift for using words;

(3) An instinct for making a beautiful thing.

He usually has the second and third all his life, but may have the first only for a time or at intervals. All of us have the first at certain times, but very few have the second and third. Those who have the second and third usually have had to develop them by practice and sometimes by study, for even the men who make the finest poetry write very crude stuff when they first begin.

The men who have these three things do not belong to any particular class. One good modern poet began life as a tramp; another as a barrister; one was a sailor; one is still a professor of Latin; one was in an insurance office; and one was a doctor. But for a long time in England many men who must have had the power to make poetry could not because they did not know how to read or write. That is why nearly all our early poets were courtiers, nobles, or priests.

In later times to make poetry seems to have been easier for a man with sufficient money to choose where he shall live, and what sort of work, if any, he shall do, than a man who has to struggle to earn his living. Lack of spare time or of education seems to act as a sort of sieve through which only the best poets pass. So one finds that the very good poets are men from all stations of life, while the much larger body of "minor poets" consists almost entirely of men and women who are comfortably off and who have usually been to a university.

The Angles and Saxons made much of a man who had the three gifts. They called him a *scop* (pronounced "shope"). They lived in tribes or clans, each governed by a chieftain. Each tribe had a company of warriors of noble birth, called *thegns*, who were sworn to follow their chief to the death. These all lived with the

chief in a great hall called the *mead-hall*, and were fed by him and supplied with horses and armour. A scop had the rank of thegn. When they returned at night to the hall after the day's hunting or foraging or skirmishing, and the huge meal was over, they would drink mead and take their ease, and the scop would strike a harp and begin to chant a song or a "lay," usually about some fierce adventure of the Teutonic people, some battle, or struggle against the sea, deeds of superhuman strength done by a legendary ancestor of the chieftain's, but sometimes just a short poem expressing the seafarer's incurable longing for the sea, which gave him nothing but hardships, but always called him back from the land each spring. The scop did not have to make up the poems completely himself. He usually was telling the tale of something that his hearers knew and in a way which they had been used to from childhood. But he would concentrate on those parts which impressed him most and these he would turn into poetry of his own.

After him one or two of the other thegns would take the harp and try their hand.

The scops liked to wander from court to court about Northern Europe; and everywhere they went they found a welcome, for, apart from their songs, the people delighted to hear their news of strange events and their gossip of other tribes.

CHAPTER VI

LYRIC AND NON-LYRIC

§ 1

When you begin to open books of poetry one of the first words you come across is "lyric."

LYRIC poetry is that which a man makes when he turns his feeling or mood straight into poetry as Robert Louis Stevenson did in *Blows the Wind To-day*.

NON-LYRIC poetry is that which a man makes when he has to tell the story of people or events, or to set out some theory or belief, or give some information, which is so exciting to him that he cannot do justice to it in prose.

Now these are not two different kinds of poetry at all. It would be more accurate to call lyric poetry "pure poetry" and non-lyric poetry "mixed poetry"; but these names are not used, so I shall keep to "lyric" and "non-lyric."

§ 2

Lyric Poetry: Shortness of Lyric Poems

Lyric poems are always short poems. They are seldom more than a hundred lines long and are usually from twenty to fifty lines long. The reason is that a single mood, a single intense feeling, does not take long to

express.[1] And the intense feeling, the ecstasy, which goes to make a lyric, does not last long. It blazes up to a white heat and dies away in a moment.

§ 8

How Lyric Poetry Expresses Feeling without Describing it

A collection of poems such as the *Golden Treasury* is described on the title page as a collection of lyrical poems. A lyrical poem we have defined as the poem a man makes when he turns his feeling or mood straight into poetry. But, you may say, there are many poems in the *Golden Treasury*, and collections like it, which don't say anything about feeling at all. Take Keats's *Ode to Autumn* for example. This seems to come in every collection of lyrics that has been made. Yet there is no mention of Keats feeling happy or sad, angry or in love, no mention of any particular mood, from start to finish.

Yet Keats's poem is really a lyric, for a poem can easily *express* feeling without actually saying anything about feeling. Consider the *Ode to Autumn*:

"Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness!
Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun;
Conspiring with him how to load and bless
With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eaves run;
To bend with apples the moss'd cottage-trees,
And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core;
To swell the gourd, and plump the hazel shells
With a sweet kernel; to set budding more,

[1] Note that the word is *express*. An intense feeling, however short-lived, may take a long time to *describe* completely or *analyse* completely.

And still more, later flowers for the bees,
Until they think warm days will never cease,
For Summer has o'er-brimm'd their clammy cells.

Who hath not seen thee oft amid thy store?
Sometimes whoever seeks abroad may find
Thee sitting careless on a granary floor,
Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind,
Or on a half-reap'd furrow sound asleep,
Drowsed with the fume of poppies, while thy hook
Spares the next swath and all its twinèd flowers;
And sometimes like a gleaner thou dost keep
Steady thy laden head across a brook;
Or by a cider-press, with a patient look,
Thou watchest the last oozings hours by hours.

Where are the songs of Spring? Ay, where are they?
Think not of them, thou hast thy music too,—
While barrèd clouds bloom the soft-dying day,
And touch the stubble-plains with rosy hue;
Then in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn
Among the river sallows, borne aloft
Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies;
And full-grown lambs loud bleat from hilly bourn;
Hedge-crickets sing; and now with treble soft
The redbreast whistles from a garden-croft;
And gathering swallows twitter in the skies."

What does it *say*? Suppose you were asked to put the gist of the statements in it on a telegram. You would get something like this:

> Autumn, who has not seen you often on a granary floor, a half-reaped furrow, across a brook, or by a cider-press? Where are the songs of Spring? Never mind them, you have your music too.

There is no poetry left when you have whittled the poem down to this! So the poetry must have existed mostly in the parts of the poem which we have thrown away Let us see what there is in the poem besides the above two questions and command.

It consists of a number of *images* of things that Keats saw in the English countryside in autumn, things which most of us have seen often ourselves. By "images" I mean the mention of things in such words that you see them at once in your imagination: "mossed cottage-trees bent with apples," "hazel shells," "half-reaped furrow," "the swath and all its twined flowers," "barred clouds blooming the soft-dying day," "stubble-plains touched with rosy hue." It also names a number of sounds you can hear on a fine autumn evening: "in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn," "full-grown lambs loud bleat," "hedge-crickets sing," "with treble soft the redbreast whistles from a garden-croft," "gathering swallows twitter in the sky." It mentions one autumn scent: the "fume of poppies," but you remember the scent of such things as vines, apples, granaries, corn, cider-press, as soon as they are named. It names other things that remind you of autumn in England: "mists," "winnowing wind," "full-grown lambs," "gathering swallows."

These statements, images, sounds, scents, and autumnal things are expressed in words which are chosen and arranged so that they go with a regular, slow, almost drowsy gait, and their sound is rich and musical, and the lines rhyme in an unobtrusive, unmonotonous way that pleases the ears of most people. In a way the poem is a bottle filled with the essence of autumn.

Everything in it has a strong flavour of the English country in autumn, everything named in it makes you remember unconsciously other things that are connected

with it and with autumn. Mention of hazel shells may remind you of some expedition for nuts, and when you remember the expedition you remember also the look of the trees and the fields and sky and the feel of the air. If you have ever been in a cornfield at harvest time, the mention of "the next swath and all its twined flowers" will remind you of the scent of the corn and the stubble and all that goes with harvesting.

But though the poem is a sort of essence of autumn it is not the essence of autumn in general, but of a certain aspect of autumn, autumn seen in a certain light. For one man, autumn may mean chiefly shooting pheasant; for another, the opening of the football season; for another, rheumatism; for a schoolboy, getting ready to go back to school. And autumn means different things at different times to the same man; he feels differently about it at different times.

On a particular evening in September 1819, John Keats was walking among the stubble-fields in Hampshire, near Winchester. The fine autumn weather of the past days and its effect on the countryside pleased him. It would please other people too; but as Keats felt such things more than other people it made him almost drunk with delight. On this particular evening his delight became an ecstasy and he turned his ecstasy, his excited feeling, into a poem. In the poem he described autumn as it seemed to him in his delight—as the incarnation of mellowness and fruitfulness, as a sort of friendly, homely god who carried about with him all the exhilarating tangs and rich colours of the season, who conspired with the sun to give good loads of fruit to the country folk, and who was soaked in the comfortable English country life. And he named those things which bring to mind the fruitfulness, the rich colours, and the completeness of autumn (with just a hint

of sadness at the approach of winter in "Then in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn" and in "And gathering swallows twitter in the skies").

But while describing autumn as it appeared to him *in* a particular mood, Keats was really *expressing that particular mood.*

And that is what a poet always does when he is making poetry which describes. He describes things not as they are, but as they seem to him in a particular state of excitement. And in so doing he really describes the excitement. As J. S. Mill says: "If a poet describes a lion, he does not describe him as a naturalist would, nor even as a traveller would, who was intent upon stating the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. He describes him by imagery, that is, by suggesting the most striking likenesses and contrasts which might occur to a mind contemplating the lion, in the state of awe, wonder, or terror, which the spectacle naturally excites, or is, on the occasion, supposed to excite. . . . The lion may be described falsely or with exaggeration, and the poetry be all the better; but if the human emotion be not painted with scrupulous truth, the poetry is bad poetry, i.e. is not poetry at all."

At another time Keats was moved to another mood by autumn and wrote:

"In the mid days of autumn, on their eves
  The breath of winter comes from far away,
And the sick west continually bereaves
  Of some gold tinge, and plays a roundelay
Of death among the bushes and the leaves,
  To make all bare before he dares to stray
From his north cavern."

On another occasion autumn made another man—Lord

Tennyson—feel gloomy and sad, and he turned his sadness into poetry just as Keats turned his delight into poetry. He did it in the same way—by describing an English garden in autumn as it seemed to him in his sad mood:

"The air is damp, and hush'd, and close,
As a sick man's room when he taketh repose
An hour before death;
My very heart faints and my whole soul grieves
At the moist rich smell of the rotting leaves,
And the breath
Of the fading edges of box beneath,
And the year's last rose.
Heavily hangs the broad sunflower
Over its grave i' the earth so chilly;
Heavily hangs the hollyhock,
Heavily hangs the tiger-lily."

Mr. Robert Graves has suggested that the daffodils which Wordsworth describes in *I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud* pleased him because he was feeling lonely and their nodding heads and rich colour reminded him of his childhood and companionship. The poem is an expression of Wordsworth's delight in them. Now if, says Mr. Graves, Wordsworth had had disagreeable memories of daffodils, if he had had to pick them, against his will, when he was young, with companions whom he hated; and if he had not been feeling lonely but had been seeking complete solitude like a hurt animal when he came across them, he would perhaps have been struck with a sudden horror. This might have been so keen as to move him to make a poem of it. Then he would have described the daffodils as they seemed to him in his horror; and instead of:

"They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;

And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils"—

he might have written:

They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the *curse* of solitude;
And then my heart with *horror* fills,
And *shudders* with the daffodils.

§ 4

Dramatic Lyric

Besides making lyric poetry out of his own feeling, a man can make it out of somebody else's feeling, going partly by what he has felt at some time himself and partly by imagination. For example, Mr. Padraic Colum has imagined the longing of an old Irish tramp woman, tired of wandering on the roads in the cold and the damp, for a little house of her own, and has turned it into a poem called *An Old Woman of the Roads.*

"O! To have a little house!
To own the hearth and stool and all!
The heaped-up sods upon the fire,
The pile of turf against the wall!

To have a clock with weights and chains
And pendulum swing up and down!
A dresser filled with shining delph,
Speckled and white and blue and brown!

I could be busy all the day
Clearing and sweeping hearth and floor,
And fixing on their shelf again
My white and blue and speckled store!

I could be quiet there at night
Beside the fire and by myself,
Sure of a bed, and loth to leave
The ticking clock and the shining delph!

Och! but I 'm weary of mist and dark,
And roads where there 's never a house nor bush,
And tired I am of bog and road,
And the crying wind and the lonesome hush!

And I am praying to God on high,
And I am praying Him night and day,
For a little house—a house of my own—
Out of the wind's and the rain's way."

In the same way Mr. Kipling has imagined and made a poem out of the feeling of an old ship's engineer, a Scotsman, for his engines, in *M'Andrew's Hymn*:

" The crank-throws give the double-bass, the feed-pump sobs and heaves,
An' now the main eccentrics start their quarrel on the sheaves:
Her time, her own appointed time, the rocking link-head bides,
Till—hear that note?—the rod's return whings glimmerin' through the guides.
They 're all away! True beat, full power, the clangin' chorus goes
Clear to the tunnel where they sit, my purrin' dynamoes."

—and another, *Mandalay*, out of the feeling of an ex-regular soldier, a Cockney, who is sick of London pavements and English drizzle and wants to go back to Mandalay and the Burmese girl he has left there:

" By the old Moulmein Pagoda, looking eastward to the sea,
There 's a Burma girl a-settin', and I know she thinks of me;
For the wind is in the palm-trees, and the temple-bells they say:
' Come you back, you British soldier; come you back to Mandalay.' "

Robert Browning wrote many poems of this kind, and called them " Dramatic Lyrics," so that people should understand that the " I " in the poems was not himself.

But the first place to look for dramatic lyric is in drama. In tragedies and in many comedies there are times when a character is full of grief or delight, of anger or love. In prose plays he gives voice to this strong feeling in a prose which often verges on poetry. But in plays like Shakespeare's, which are written in verse, when a character's feelings grow intense, his speech rises easily to poetry; and this poetry is, essentially, of the same kind as *An Old Woman of the Roads* and Browning's "Dramatic Lyrics."

For example:

(1) Othello, in Shakespeare's *Othello,* believing that his dearly-loved wife is false to him, feels that his life is wrecked and expresses his grief in these words:

"Farewell the tranquil mind! farewell content!
Farewell the plumed troop and the big wars
That make ambition virtue! O, farewell,
Farewell the neighing steed and the shrill trump,
The spirit-stirring drum, the ear-piercing fife,
The royal banner and all quality,
Pride, pomp, and circumstance of glorious war!
And, O you mortal engines, whose rude throats
The immortal Jove's dread clamours counterfeit,
Farewell! Othello's occupation 's gone!"

(2) Macbeth, in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, having nerved himself to murder his king, expresses the horror and foreboding he cannot help feeling in these words:

"Now o'er the one half-world
Nature seems dead, and wicked dreams abuse
The curtain'd sleep; witchcraft celebrates
Pale Hecate's offerings; and wither'd murder,
Alarum'd by his sentinel, the wolf,
Whose howl 's his watch, thus with his stealthy pace,
With Tarquin's ravishing strides, towards his design
Moves like a ghost. Thou sure and firm-set earth,
Hear not my steps, which way they walk, for fear
Thy very stones prate of my whereabout,
And take the present horror from the time,
Which now suits with it. Whiles I threat, he lives:
Words to the heat of deeds too cold breath gives.
[*A bell rings*
I go, and it is done: the bell invites me.
Hear it not, Duncan, for it is a knell
That summons thee to heaven, or to hell."

(3) Later, when he finds that the prophecies on which he has founded his hopes have deceived him; when news comes of his wife's death and he himself is sore beset, he bursts into a rage at the emptiness of life, which he expresses in these words:

" To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
To the last syllable of recorded time;
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
Life 's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage

And then is heard no more: it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing."

(4) In Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus,* when the time comes for Lucifer to carry Faustus off to hell, Faustus expresses his frantic terror in these words:

" Ah, Faustus,
Now hast thou but one bare hour to live,
And then thou must be damn'd perpetually!
Stand still, you ever-moving spheres of heaven,
That time may cease, and midnight never come;
Fair Nature's eye, rise, rise again, and make
Perpetual day; or let this hour be but
A year, a month, a week, a natural day,
That Faustus may repent and save his soul!
O lente, lente currite, noctis equi!
The stars move still, time runs, the clock will strike,
The devil will come, and Faustus will be damn'd.
O, I 'll leap up to heaven!—Who pulls me down!—
See, where Christ's blood streams in the firmament!
One drop of blood will save me: O my Christ!—
Rend not my heart for naming of my Christ;
Yet will I call on him: O, spare me, Lucifer!—
Where is it now? 'tis gone;
And, see, a threatening arm, an angry brow!
Mountains and hills, come, come, and fall on me,
And hide me from the heavy wrath of heaven!
No!
Then will I headlong run into the earth:
Gape, earth! O, no, it will not harbour me!
You stars that reign'd at my nativity,
Whose influence hath allotted death and hell,
Now draw up Faustus, like a foggy mist,

Into the entrails of yon labouring cloud,
That, when you vomit forth into the air,
My limbs may issue from your smoky mouths;
But let my soul mount and ascend to heaven!"

(5) John of Gaunt, in Shakespeare's *Richard II*, expresses his love for England in these words:

"This royal throne of kings, this sceptr'd isle,
This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars,
This other Eden, demi-Paradise,
This fortress built by Nature for herself
Against infection and the hand of war,
This happy breed of men, this little world,
This precious stone set in the silver sea,
Which serves it in the office of a wall,
Or as a moat defensive to a house,
Against the envy of less happier lands,
This blessèd plot, this earth, this realm, this England,
This nurse, this teeming womb of royal kings,
Fear'd by their breed and famous by their birth,
Renowned for their deeds as far from home,—
For Christian service and true chivalry,—
As is the sepulchre in stubborn Jewry
Of the world's ransom, blessèd Mary's Son:
This land of such dear souls, this dear, dear land."

§ 5

As was said at the beginning of this chapter, LYRIC and NON-LYRIC *are not different kinds of poetry.*

They work upon the feelings and senses of the reader in the same way, and they both come from the same

thing—strong feeling. When a man makes lyric poetry he translates his strong feeling directly into words. When he makes non-lyric poetry he tells a story, or puts forward a theory, or argues, or gives information, but all the time he is expressing in rhythm, imagery, and arrangements of sounds and flavours of words, the feeling that the events of the story—or the theory, or the knowledge—have aroused in him. And he describes the events, the theory, or the knowledge, not as a historian or a scientist, but as they seem to him in his strong feeling. And we have agreed that when a man does this he is really expressing his feeling.

If a man sets out to tell in verse the story of events which do not move him deeply he will not produce poetry. Poetry is the most powerful form of speech, but the essence of it is, not speech, but emotion.

The writers of the old *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, who had to set down the most important things that happened each year, usually wrote in prose. But sometimes there would be a dramatic and exciting happening to describe. Perhaps the writer had to describe some tremendous fight—like the Battle of Brunanburh—in which he had himself taken part. The memory of it would set the blood tingling through his veins, and he would find himself so enthusiastic about it that prose would not be strong enough to describe it properly (i.e. as it seemed to the writer in his excitement). Then he would break into verse, and breaking into verse, produce poetry.

The real difference between LYRIC and NON-LYRIC is that LYRIC IS SIMPLY POETRY, WHILE NON-LYRIC IS POETRY AND AT THE SAME TIME SOMETHING ELSE, be it a story, or a theory, or an argument.

It is impossible to draw a line and say, "All on this side is lyric; all on that is non-lyric." For in non-lyric poems there is nearly always some passage of pure lyric.

The following poem by Burns is a lyric poem:

"O my Luve 's like a red, red rose
That 's newly sprung in June:
O my Luve 's like the melodie
That 's sweetly played in tune!

As fair art thou, my bonnie lass,
So deep in luve am I:
And I will luve thee still, my dear,
Till a' the seas gang dry:

Till a' the seas gang dry, my dear,
And the rocks melt wi' the sun;
I will luve thee still, my dear,
While the sands o' life shall run.

And fare thee weel, my only Luve,
And fare thee weel a while!
And I will come again, my Luve,
Tho' it were ten thousand miie."

And Keats's *Ode to Autumn*, R. L. Stevenson's *Blows the Wind To-day*, Masefield's *Sea-Fever*, Browning's *Oh, to be in England*, Wordsworth's *It is a Beauteous Evening*, Tennyson's *Crossing the Bar* and *Break, Break, Break*, are lyric poems.

§ 6

Non-Lyric Poetry

These are non-lyric poems:
Dauber, by John Masefield;

The Princess, by Lord Tennyson;
Paradise Lost, by John Milton;
The Armada, by Lord Macaulay;
Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*, by Geoffrey Chaucer;
The Dunciad, by Alexander Pope.

In the first three, at any rate, of these there are parts which are definitely lyric poetry. (In *The Princess* there are even nine lyric passages which are complete poems in themselves, standing out from the rest of the verse because they are in different metres.)

But they are all something else besides poems. *Dauber* and *The Princess* are stories made up by their authors, *Paradise Lost* a story founded on the Bible story; *The Armada* is a bit of history, the *Prologue* a series of character-sketches, and *The Dunciad* a satire.[1] It would be a waste of time to set down in prose the statements in a poem like Keats's *To Autumn*; but if you set down the statements in these poems, you would lose the poems but you would still have three stories, a bit of history, a series of character-sketches, and a satire.

Non-lyric poetry, therefore, can interest people in two ways: (1) as poetry; and (2) as story, history, satire, or whatever it may happen to be in addition to poetry. That is why people who never read short lyric poems will yet read productions like *Hiawatha*, *The Widow in the Bye-Street*, *Idylls of the King*. They may not feel the effect of the poetry but they are interested in the story. And that is why there are so many collections of "story-poems" in use in schools. Teachers hope to coax young boys and girls into contact with poetry by giving them verse which they will want to read to "see what happened next." And

[1] Satire=a showing-up of weaknesses and vices by ridicule.

many of these stories in verse—*The Wreck of the Hesperus*, *Casabianca*, and the like—are not poetry at all.

§ 7

The Two Ways of Judging Non-Lyric Poetry

As a non-lyric poem is two things it can be judged on two grounds: as poetry, and as the other thing it is—story, history, or what not. And you can condemn, say, *The Armada*, as history, and still enjoy and admire it as poetry and widen your own experience from it as you do from all true poetry. I myself do not consider *The Armada* to be a very fine poem. But let us assume for the sake of argument that it *is* a fine poem. Now suppose historians suddenly declared that what is described in *The Armada* is quite different from what really took place. Suppose they declared that the evening when the alarm was given was wet and clouded, and not "the lovely close of a warm summer day" as it is in the poem; that the bells did *not* ring out all night from Bristol town, that there is no ground at all for saying that three hundred horse met on Clifton Down. *The Armada* would still be a fine poem. For though it might not be true to history it would still draw a convincing picture. And whether the things described in it happened in fact or happened only in the imagination of Macaulay, as long as they are convincing when you read them, and since the verses express the excitement and pleasure of Macaulay in the thrilling scenes he imagined, *The Armada* is a success as a poem. So if the historians did as we supposed, we could say that *The Armada* was bad history but good poetry.

In the same way you may not agree with Wordsworth when he says:

"Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:
The Soul that rises with us, our life's star,
Hath had elsewhere its setting,
And cometh from afar"

—but still be pleased and nourished by the poetry of these lines (and of those that follow) in the *Ode on Intimations of Immortality*.

On the other hand, you might say that Chaucer's *Prologue* was an excellent piece of character description, neat and witty, cramming an immense amount of information into a small space, making each character stand out distinct and vivid, and showing a ripe knowledge of the world and the men and women in it, and yet you might not find that you were getting the special pleasure that poetry gives from it. (This is not my own opinion.) So you would say that it was good characterization but not good poetry.

CHAPTER VII

KINDS OF POEMS

§ 1

The Difference between Poems and Poetry

POETRY AND POEMS ARE NOT THE SAME THING, although a poem consists of poetry, in the same way as a symphony consists of music. Poetry is a kind of speech—the most powerful, pleasing, and permanent kind of speech. You can cut a passage of poetry into three and have three passages of poetry, but if you cut a poem into three you may have three passages of poetry, but you will certainly not have three separate poems. A poem is a thing which does not do its job properly until it is complete. Its parts depend upon each other for their full effect. The last two lines in it may be good poetry in themselves, but you cannot get their full effect until you have read or heard the whole thing. On the other hand the last two lines may not be poetry at all in themselves but excellent poetry when joined to what has gone before, and the flavour and sound of their words blended with those of the other lines.

The two lines—

> ". . . many and many a day he thither went,
> And never lifted up a single stone"—

are, when read by themselves, just prose with a regular rhythm. But when they are read in their proper place, at the end of the poem *Michael*, they are two of the most

pathetic lines written, full of meaning, making the reader feel deeply and at the same time pleasing him in the way that poetry alone pleases.

There are even lines or passages which are thoroughly ugly by themselves, but which add to the beauty of a poem in the same way as salt improves a stew, by heightening the flavour and effect of the other lines. The third quality that a poet has—the instinct to make a beautiful thing—drives him to shape poetry into a poem.

The shape and structure of a poem increase the effect of the poetry and add to the pleasure which the poetry gives. But the shape and structure of short poems have far more effect than those of long poems, and this brings us to the questions: Is there such a thing as a long poem? And if there is, is it different from a short poem in other things besides its size?

§ 2

Long and Short Poems

Long poems are never purely lyric (I have pointed out already on p. 42 that purely lyric poems are never long). Besides being poems they are also stories, descriptions of ideas or of knowledge, or the like. Now no matter how deeply a man is excited by some great adventure, when he comes to tell the story of it he will find that he has to describe certain things, in order to make his story clear, which do not excite him at all. As he feels no excitement he does not produce poetry when he describes these things, but uses verse to express what could have been fully expressed in prose. So one meets with passages of flat verse which do not come near being poetry, like this from Wordsworth's *Michael*:

"Long before the time
Of which I speak, the shepherd had been bound
In surety for his brother's son, a man
Of an industrious life, and ample means—
But unforeseen misfortunes suddenly
Had prest upon him—and old Michael now
Was summoned to discharge the forfeiture."

And this from Thomas Hardy's *The Dynasts*:

"I had great work in getting in, my dear!
They failed to recognize me at the gates,
Being sceptical at my poor hackney coach
And poorer baggage."

It is the same with long poems which set forth ideas or give information.

Most poems of over five hundred lines have these passages, so that some people say there is no such thing as a long poem; that a long poem is only a series of passages of poetry (or even complete poems) strung together by the thread of the story or idea or explanation. You can agree or not with them, but no one, to my knowledge, has written a long English poem that is all poetry.

Edgar Allan Poe said that there could never be such a thing as a long poem because the excitement which a man must have before he can make poetry does not last long. It is true that the ecstasy which a man expresses in a lyric does not last long, but I believe a man can feel deeply whenever he writes part of the long story of events or ideas which have excited him. Only his deep feeling is not so intense as the ecstasy expressed in a lyric, and so, except in short passages, the poetry of a long poem is apt to be less concentrated than the poetry of a lyric. So the verse of a long poem is usually less different from prose than the

verse of a lyric. The favourite verse for long poems in English is blank verse, which has a regular rhythm and is divided into lines of five beats, but which has otherwise no obvious differences from prose, such as rhyme. E.g.

> "A storm was coming, but the winds were still,
> And in the wild woods of Broceliande,
> Before an oak, so hollow, huge and old
> It looked a tower of ruin'd masonwork,
> At Merlin's feet the wily Vivien lay."

In any but the shortest of poems, the poetry is bound to be at different strengths, and sometimes in a long poem a poet will express a burst of stronger feeling in a different kind of verse, as Byron did in *Don Juan* when he wrote the passage beginning, "The isles of Greece! the isles of Greece!" and as Tennyson did in *The Princess*.

If you plotted the graph of the strength of the poetry in a long poem you would get a wavy line which at some points would dip below the level at which speech becomes poetry. But just where the level at which speech becomes poetry should be drawn every one would have to decide for himself.

There are a number of writings in verse which are just in the borderland between poetry and ordinary speech, e.g.

The Brothers, by Wordsworth;
Enoch Arden, by Tennyson;
Essay on Criticism, by Pope.

The graphs of these would run just above the poetry level where some people would put it and just below where others would put it. And there are some writings, like Crabbe's *Tales in Verse*, and most *satirical* poems, which rarely rise into real poetry. But though these are

not poetry they are more effective in verse than they would be in prose, for they are always in *plain* verse. Though they do not give the genuine pleasure of poetry, except in snatches, and though they express less feeling than poetry does, except in snatches, they express more than ordinary prose does.

The more concentrated poetry a long poem has in it the more difficult it is to read it straight through, because people cannot take in powerful feeling for more than a short time. That is why *Paradise Lost*—until one gets to know it well—is hard to read except in instalments. But it is harder still to read elaborate verse that does not succeed in being poetry.

To sum up: Long poems usually have flat passages; the poetry in them varies in strength; they are usually written in plainer verse than lyric poems.

Many long writings in verse are not poetry at all, but are more effective in verse than they would be in prose.

§ 8

Kinds of Poems and their Labels

Poetry may be more concentrated in one passage than in another, but it works in the same way and gives the same kind of pleasure wherever you find it. There are really no different kinds of poetry.

But you can divide poems up into groups; and it is sometimes useful to do so. You can group them

(1) according to their shape and build (i.e. their FORM) and label the groups "Sonnets," "Rondels," "Ballades," etc.;

(2) according to the kind of feeling they express, and label the groups "Elegies," "Epics," etc.;

(3) according to what they are besides poems, and label the groups "Epigrams," "Stories," "Satires," etc.

I shall deal with the first way in the next chapter. The third way does not need any illustration. The second way is a loose and not very satisfactory business, for a poem can belong to more than one group. And the names used to label the groups make it more unsatisfactory still. Like the unsatisfactory term "lyric" they are Greek and do not fit English poetry well, for English poetry is different in many ways from Greek, and people do not all give the same meaning to them. I will explain below what the commoner names mean. The others you will find explained shortly in the Glossary.

§ 4

Odes

A poem which addresses somebody or something is often entitled "Ode to So-and-so." By an ode the Greeks meant a poem which a number of people chanted in public at the end of a war, at the celebration of a god, or on any other great occasion. The poem expressed the feelings of a whole nation or tribe. There are very few English odes in this sense of the word. But Mr. Binyon wrote in the manner of one when he wrote these lines about the British killed in the Great War:

"They shall not grow old as we that are left grow old;
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.
At the going down of the sun and in the morning
We will remember them."

And Mr. Kipling wrote one which expressed the feeling of the British Empire as a whole in 1897, when Queen Victoria's sixtieth year of rule was celebrated. It is called *Recessional*. Other English odes are Marvell's *Ode to Cromwell* and Dryden's *Alexander's Feast*.

Odes like those of Keats and Wordsworth express only what their authors feel and so are not odes in the strict sense, although one might argue that in his *Ode to Autumn* Keats is speaking for the human race as a whole. What a Pindaric ode is you will find in the Glossary.

What you must remember at this point is that an ode is a poem addressed to something or somebody; and in the strict sense of the word, a poem which expresses the feeling of a nation, tribe, or group of people.

§ 5

Elegies

A poem which expresses grief for the death of someone is called an "Elegy." An elegy may be a pure lyric (as it usually is when the grief of the man who writes it is fresh and keen). But it is often partly lyric: and partly a story, discussion about Life and Death, or description of the dead man's character.

These are elegies which are purely lyrics:

A Slumber did my Spirit Seal, by Wordsworth;
Heraclitus, by William J. Cory;

These are elegies which are not purely lyric:

Lycidas, by Milton;
Adonais, by Shelley;
Thyrsis, by Arnold;
Elegy written in a Country Churchyard, by Gray;
In Memoriam, by Tennyson.

Some poems which do not express grief are still called elegies because the death of someone moved their authors to write them.

§ 6

Epics

There is a special sort of long poem called "Epic." People sometimes wrongly use this name for any long poem that tells a tale. Real epic poems are made only at certain periods in the history of a nation, when it is young and fighting for some great cause, in a time of struggle and adventure. They tell the story of some struggle or adventure which affects the whole nation. The Greeks had the epics of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, the French the *Chanson de Roland*, the Germans the *Nibelungenlied*, and the Anglo-Saxons *Beowulf*. All these tell of the exploits of supermen, the heroes of a nation, such men as our Robin Hood or Robert the Bruce. One man would make up an epic (any poem is more or less bound to be, in the first place, the work of one man) but he would be influenced by the whole of his fellow-countrymen, because he was writing about events which were still in their memory. The events had happened; they had been described; they had been exaggerated; they had been told with additions and alterations by fathers to children and had taken a shape which the nation as a whole had given them. So, in a

way, not only had the deeds been done by the nation but the nation had shaped the story of them. The nation as a whole had produced the epic. But the epic was only a good poem if the one man who first wrote it was a good poet.

Epics are written in verse that is not intricate. They are always long, dignified, simple, and massive.

After a country has become civilized and settled, men have written poems in the same shape as epic poems and in something the same manner. (In England, Milton wrote *Paradise Lost*, and Tennyson *Idylls of the King*.) Sometimes they are better poems than the real epics, but they are different in kind, because they are the work of one man expressing himself, and not his nation and his age. Lord Tennyson, for example, wrote about King Arthur and his knights, and King Arthur lived so long ago that the British people as a whole have no feelings about him. Matthew Arnold wrote about Sohrab and Rustum, who never had anything to do with England.[1]

§ 7

Plays

Plays such as Shakespeare's which are mostly written in verse are not poems in the sense in which I have been using the word. Most of the scenes in them are written in verse of a kind which is close enough to the rhythm of ordinary speech not to sound ridiculous in the mouths of his characters when they talk about prosaic business

[1] Mr. Herbert Read uses the word "epic" to denote a poem in the epic manner which is "intimately related to the aspirations of the age." He calls Wordsworth's *Prelude* the last English epic.

matters, such as the bond between Shylock and Antonio, in the *Merchant of Venice*, or about the dividing up of England, in 1 *Henry IV*; and at other times it heightens the effect of their speech above that of the speech of ordinary human people just as they themselves—Othello, Macbeth, King Lear, and the rest—are on a larger scale than ordinary people. And when things have come to a crisis, when feelings run high, and the people of the play give voice to their fury, their passionate love, their ecstasy of delight, or their great despair, the verse nearly always rises into true and often magnificent poetry.

Another thing about poetry in Shakespeare's plays is this. There was no scenery in the theatres when Shakespeare began to write, nor were there any lighting effects. So Shakespeare and the other dramatists of his day had to remind the audience from time to time what the scene was supposed to be and what time of day it was supposed to be by making their characters speak about their surroundings and point out to each other that the sun was setting or the dawn was appearing and so on. These remarks are often the cause of fine poetry in Shakespeare's plays. Shakespeare was a poet before he was anything else, and as he went about the country he must often have been delighted, and excited in the poet's way, by a sunrise,[1] a sunset, or the stars, by a wood, say in Warwickshire, in the spring, and a hundred other things. Now it might happen that he found it necessary to make it clear to the audience at a certain point in, say, *Macbeth*, that

[1] One of his non-dramatic lyrics is largely the expression of his delight in the sight of the sun rising:

> "Full many a glorious morning have I seen
> Flatter the mountain tops with sovereign eye,
> Kissing with golden face the meadows green,
> Gilding pale streams with heavenly alchemy."

it was getting dark. He has three hired murderers on the stage. So he makes one of them say:

> "The west yet glimmers with some streaks of day:
> Now spurs the lated traveller apace
> To gain the timely inn . . ."

and in doing so puts down what he had noticed himself and felt at the time, perhaps some weeks before. And having to make it clear in *Romeo and Juliet* at a certain point that the dawn is approaching, he makes Romeo say:

> ". . . look what envious streaks
> Do lace the severing clouds in yonder east:
> Night's candles are burnt out, and jocund day
> Stands tiptoe on the misty mountain tops . . ."

and again expresses, I imagine, the impression he had had himself on some occasion when he saw the dawn.

CHAPTER VIII

HOW POETRY IS MADE

§ 1

The Raw Material

A man can take orders for fifty motor cars or half a dozen chairs and then go away and make them. But he cannot make poems to order; for the substance of poetry is a thing which he cannot obtain just when he wants, as he can obtain steel and wood for cars and chairs.

By "substance" I do not mean a short outline of the story or statements in a poem. I mean the stuff of which the poem is an expression. It may be a simple gust of strong feeling, such as the longing for Scotland which Robert Louis Stevenson turned into *Blows the Wind To-day*. It may be the combination of a whole number of intense feelings fused together in one mood, as in Keats's *Ode to a Nightingale*. It may be thought and intense feeling fused together, as in many poems of Donne. The substance of poems like *Kubla Khan*, which was made in a dream, seems at first to be mysteriously different, but I shall try to show that it is not. And the substance of non-lyric poems, as I have already tried to show, is the deep feeling which a series of events or ideas has aroused in a man and which he feels when he goes over them in his mind and when he tells of them. The gust of strong feeling which is the first kind of substance may be caused by some quite trifling thing. A young Irishman walked down

Fleet Street one day. He was a country-bred man and had lived as a boy on the wild west coast of Ireland, in County Sligo, so he was apt to grow weary of London. He was thoroughly sick of it on this particular day as he walked in Fleet Street, sick of the din and the dirt and the shoddiness of the people in the street and the "flashiness" of the shops. Suddenly he heard a tinkle of water. It came from a fountain in a shop window which balanced a little ball on a jet of water. Now when he was a boy this Irishman had often thought how good it would be to go and live on a little island on Lough Gill (which was near his home in Sligo), building a hut and growing his own food and generally leading a Robinson Crusoe sort of existence. The tinkle of water suddenly made him remember the lake, and its peace and freshness and pure air; and the contrast between being in Fleet Street and being on the island as he had so often planned occurred to him so sharply that he had a sudden overpowering longing for Sligo; and for the moment, the best thing in the world, it seemed to him, would be to go and build his hut on the island. He turned this longing into the poem called *The Lake Isle of Innisfree.*

Or a man may have a feeling which grows gradually until it reaches a climax and *overflows*—i.e. it becomes so strong that he must get it out of him somehow, express it in some way—and being a poet he turns it into poetry. In this way Keats's delight in the fields of Hampshire in autumn grew deeper and deeper for four days until he turned it into the *Ode to Autumn.*

Now another of Keats's poems, the *Ode to a Nightingale,* as Mr. T. S. Eliot points out, expresses a number of feelings which have nothing particular to do with the nightingale, but which the nightingale, partly, perhaps, because of its attractive name, and partly because of its reputation,

served to bring together. Such poems, however, express only one *mood*. Something happens which excites a poet, and not only makes him feel a particular emotion strongly, but also arouses in him the memory of intense feelings he has had in the past which are in some way in harmony with each other. And with them spring up the images associated with them which are sleeping in his mind.

"The poet's mind," says Mr. Eliot, "is, in fact, a receptacle for seizing and storing up numberless feelings, phrases, and images, which remain there until all the particles which can unite to form a new compound are present together."[1]

It is that part of the mind over which we have no control, the "subconscious," as it is sometimes called—which does this work of fusing feelings and phrases and images together. And the "subconscious," from what poets say, does a good deal of the work in making any poem, and most of the work in a lyric poem. In some poems it has done *all* the work. And the most notable of these is *Kubla Khan*, which was made in the following way:

§ 2

"Kubla Khan"

A young man—in the early twenties—was sitting by himself in a Devonshire farmhouse. Two years before he had taken some opium to deaden the pain of neuralgia, and he had gone on taking it, off and on, ever since. He had just taken some now, and he was falling asleep. He had an old book of travels in his hand—*Purchas his Pilgrimes*—open at an account of China. The last words he read before he dropped off to sleep were:

" In Xamdiu did Cublai Can build a stately Palace.

[1] *The Sacred Wood*, by T. S. Eliot.

encompassing sixteene miles of plaine ground with a wall, wherein are fertile Meddowes, pleasant springs, delightfull Streames, and all sorts of beasts of chase and game, and in the middest thereof a sumptuous house of pleasure."

He slept for three hours.

When people drug themselves with opium they nearly always dream. This young man had a dream. In it things appeared and happened, and as far as he could afterwards remember, words at the same time somehow came together in his mind, apparently of their own accord, describing these things. When he awoke he found that he had a complete poem in his head. In excitement he took his pen and wrote down:

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan[1]
A stately pleasure-dome decree:
Where Alph, the sacred river, ran
Through caverns measureless to man
Down to a sunless sea.
So twice five miles of fertile ground
With walls and towers were girdled round:
And there were gardens bright with sinuous rills
Where blossom'd many an incense-bearing tree;
And here were forests ancient as the hills,
Enfolding sunny spots of greenery.

But O, that deep romantic chasm which slanted
Down the green hill athwart a cedarn cover!
A savage place! as holy and enchanted
As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted
By woman wailing for her demon-lover!
And from this chasm, with ceaseless turmoil seething,
As if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing,
A mighty fountain momently was forced:
Amid whose swift half-intermitted burst

[1] Note how the excitement made him change "Xamdiu" to "Xanadu," thus making prose into verse.

Huge fragments vaulted like rebounding hail,
Or chaffy grain beneath the thresher's flail:
And 'mid these dancing rocks at once and ever
It flung up momently the sacred river.
Five miles meandering with a mazy motion
Through wood and dale the sacred river ran,
Then reached the caverns measureless to man,
And sank in tumult to a lifeless ocean:
And 'mid this tumult Kubla heard from far
Ancestral voices prophesying war!
  The shadow of the dome of pleasure
  Floated midway on the waves;
  Where was heard the mingled measure
  From the fountain and the caves.
It was a miracle of rare device,
A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice!

  A damsel with a dulcimer
  In a vision once I saw:
  It was an Abyssinian maid,
  And on her dulcimer she played,
  Singing of Mount Abora.
  Could I revive within me
  Her symphony and song,
  To such a deep delight 'twould win me,
That with music loud and long,
I would build that dome in air,
That sunny dome! those caves of ice!
And all who heard should see them there,
And all should cry, Beware! Beware!
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!
Weave a circle round him thrice,
  And close your eyes with holy dread,
  For he on honey-dew hath fed,
And drunk the milk of Paradise.

But when he had written so much he was interrupted. A man had come over from Porlock. Could Mr. Coleridge —for that was the name of the young man—see him? Mr. Coleridge left his poem and went to the door. This untimely visitor kept him for nearly an hour, and when

at last he was gone, and Coleridge could take up his pen again, he found that the poem had gone quite out of his head and that he had only the vaguest blurred memory of his dream.

Several other poems have been written in this way, and some verse that cannot be called poetry. At first sight there seems something magical about it. But let us go back to Coleridge.

A man's mind is stored with a vast number of impressions, or, in Mr. Eliot's words already quoted, "numberless feelings, phrases, and images," which he has received from his experiences during his life, and also from books he has read. Coleridge was one of those people whose minds make images of the things they read about—particularly the things that interest them and please them in their reading—which are as powerful as the images stamped upon their minds by actual experiences.

Now an impression—that is to say, a cluster of memories of sights, sounds, scents, tastes, and touch-sensations—which has something in common with another impression, will never rise up in a man's mind without bringing the other one with it. And when a new impression enters the mind, it will draw up other impressions which have something in common with it.

It has been fairly easy to find out some of the impressions lying in Coleridge's mind, because he had a habit of making notes about things that impressed him as he went about the country, about plans for poems or other writings, and particularly about things that caught his imagination in the books he read. Professor John Livingstone Lowes has shown, in his fine book *The Road to Xanadu*, that Coleridge had been reading books of travel eagerly during the previous months, and proves that he had been really

excited by the following two passages from a book of travels by one William Bartram:

> (1) "I was however induced to touch at the inchanting little Isle of Palms. This delightful spot, planted by nature, is almost an entire grove of Palms, with a few pyramidal Magnolias, Live Oaks, golden Orange, and the animating Zanthoxilon; what a beautiful retreat is here! *blessed inviolate spot of earth!* rising from the limpid waters of the lake; its fragrant groves and blooming lawns invested and protected by encircling ranks of the Yucca gloriosa; a fascinating atmosphere surrounds this blissful garden; the balmy Lantana, ambrosial Citra, perfumed Crinum, perspiring their odours, wafted through Zanthoxilon groves. I at last broke away from *this enchanting spot* . . . then traversing a capacious semi-circular cove of the lake, verged by low, extensive grassy meadows, I at length by dusk made a safe harbour."

Two pages earlier there were these words: "the dew-drops twinkle and play . . . on the tips of the lucid, green savanna, sparkling" beside a "serpentine rivulet, meandering over the meadows."

> (2) "I seated myself upon *a swelling green knoll,* at the head of the chrystal bason. Near me, on the left was a point or projection of an entire grove of the aromatic Illisium Floridanum; on my right and all around behind me, was a fruitful *Orange grove,* with *Palms* and *Magnolias* interspersed; in front, just under my feet was the *inchanting and amazing chrystal fountain, which incessantly threw up, from dark, rocky caverns below, tons of water every minute, forming* a bason, capacious enough for large shallops to ride in, and *a*

> *creek* of four or *five* feet depth of water, and near twenty yards over, *which meanders six miles through green meadows*, pouring its limpid waters into the great Lake George. . . . About twenty yards from the upper edge of the bason . . . is a *continual and amazing ebullition, where the waters are thrown up in such abundance and amazing force* as to jet and swell up two or three feet above the common surface; *white sand and small particles of shells are thrown up with the waters . . . when they . . . subside* with the expanding flood, and gently *sink again.*"

It is likely then that the impressions given him by these descriptions were asleep in his memory.

Now the last sentence that he read before falling asleep was this:

> "*In Zamdiu did Cubla Can* build *a stately* Palace, encompassing sixteene *miles of* plaine *ground with a wall* wherein are *fertile* Meddowes, pleasant Springs, delightfull Streames, and all sorts of beasts of chase and game, and in the middest thereof a sumptuous house of *pleasure*, which may be removed from place to place."

So his mind when he fell asleep was occupied chiefly with the combination of the images of an enclosed space, fertile meadows, springs, streams, and a pleasure-house.

And some of these are among the first images in the poem:

> "*In Xanadu did Kubla Khan*
> *A stately pleasure*-dome decree:
> . . . . . .
> So twice five *miles of fertile ground*
> *With walls* and towers were girdled round."

Again, the idea of a pleasant, fertile patch of ground, with flowers and fountains, was one that Coleridge loved to dwell upon in the way that a boy likes to dwell upon the idea of a powerful, perfect motor car. In the year in which he wrote *Kubla Khan* he wrote in a letter to his brother:

> "Laudanum gave me repose, not sleep; but you, I believe, know how divine that repose is, *what a spot of enchantment, a green spot of flowers and trees* in the very heart of a waste of sands."

He also wrote, about the same time, in his note-book:

> ". . . *some wilderness-plot, green and fountainous* and unviolated by Man."

As Coleridge fell asleep, this cluster of images seems to have roused up the cluster of images which he had got from reading passage I (for they both contained images of an enclosed space, meadows and water) and to have aroused the memory also of the lines about the "*serpentine rivulet, meandering over the meadows.*" It seems clear that these two clusters blended, as things do blend in dreams, and the result was the lines:

> "And there were gardens bright with *sinuous rills,*
> Where *blossom'd* many an *incense-bearing* tree:
> *And here were forests* ancient as the hills,
> *Enfolding sunny spots of greenery.*"

The "balmy Lantana, ambrosial Citra," and other spice-trees in passage I became "*many an incense-bearing tree.*" The impression of an "*enchanting spot,*" "*a blessed unviolated spot of earth,*" which had in Coleridge's mind taken the form already of "*a green spot of flowers and trees,*" as the letter to his brother shows, became in the poem "*sunny*

spots of greenery." The "serpentine rivulet" with the sparkling dewdrops "on the tips of the lucid, green savanna" became "*gardens bright with sinuous rills.*" It is even likely that "*enfolding*" comes from the "*encircling* ranks of the Yucca gloriosa" which "invested" the lawns and groves of Bartram's Isle of Palms.

If you look again at passage 2, you will see mention of several of the most striking things in passage 1: "*green knoll,*" "*aromatic grove,*" orange, palms, magnolias.

So the cluster of images from passage 1 would rouse up the cluster of images which Coleridge had got from reading passage 2; in fact they might already have blended in his mind to form one cluster. There is also mention in passage 2, of meadows and a fountain, which gives it a link with the sentence Coleridge read just before falling asleep. But the chief image in the cluster from passage 2 was of a *fountain* "which incessantly threw up, from dark, rocky caverns below, tons of water every minute." And this, no doubt, was where the image of the fountain in the poem comes from:

"And from this chasm, *with ceaseless turmoil seething,*
As if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing,
A mighty fountain momently was forced:
Amid whose swift half-intermitted burst
Huge *fragments vaulted* like rebounding hail,
Or chaffy grain beneath the thresher's flail:
And 'mid these dancing rocks at once and ever
It flung up momently the sacred river.
Five miles meandering with a mazy motion
Through wood and dale the sacred river ran,
Then reached the caverns measureless to man,
And sank in tumult to a lifeless ocean."

All the images described in the italicised words had risen

up in Coleridge's mind before when he read the words underlined in passage 2.

And in Bartram's *Travels* Coleridge had read and been impressed by accounts of other such springs, one of which has the words: "The ebullition is astonishing, and continual, though its greatest force or fury *intermits*, regularly, for the space of thirty seconds of time . . . the ebullition is . . . from a vast ragged orifice through a bed of rocks. . . ." This seems to be where "*swift half-intermitted burst*" comes from.

So Professor Lowes shows how one cluster of images roused up another, how the idea of a sacred river came from a passage about a green island and a fountain in a book Coleridge knew well — James Bruce's *Travels to Discover the Sources of the Nile.* This book has also a passage about an eruptive spring, and one about the Nile making sharp, unnatural windings, "making above twenty sharp angular peninsulas *in the course of five miles.*" The memory of this five miles of winding plus the memory of the creek in passage 2 " which *meanders six miles* through green meadows," resulted in the poem's

"*Five miles meandering* with a mazy motion."

He shows how the name "Abora," which is not the name of any place on this earth, is a blend of "Abola," a river mentioned by Bruce, "Astaboras," and "Atbara," the two names of another river also mentioned by Bruce, in connection with a river tearing up rocks and "forcing down their broken *fragments.*" The "*Mount*" part of "Mount Abora," he suggests, came from Coleridge's recollection of a passage in *Paradise Lost* about the Garden of Eden full of images similar to those in passages 1 and 2, and to the passages, which I have not quoted, from Bruce's book about the Nile—

"Nor, where Abassin kings their issue guard,
Mount Amara (though this by some supposed
True Paradise) under the Ethiop line
By Nilus' head, enclos'd with shining rock,
A whole day's journey high"—

for Coleridge knew *Paradise Lost* through and through, and we know that he was particularly impressed by these lines because he once expressed the opinion that in the description of Eden Milton's powers were to be seen at their utmost.

So all the ingredients of *Kubla Khan* were in Coleridge already; they did not come from outside. What we can loosely call his imagination took from his memory a number of impressions, and, fusing them together, fashioned something quite new, "something rich and strange." The mystery is: What set this fusing and fashioning process going? It is a process which usually occurs in the making of any poem when a man is in a state of deep excitement and sets about expressing his excitement. But Coleridge was asleep.

As for the putting of words together in a dream, I cannot explain that, but I can point out that the verse into which they are put in *Kubla Khan* is the verse of *The Ancient Mariner* and of *Christabel*, two poems which Coleridge had written a short time before *Kubla Khan*. He had worked out a new metre for these poems and he had thought about it, and practised it, a good deal. Apparently the "craftsman" part of him had grown so used to this metre that it could do it automatically when Coleridge was asleep. Note how the "craftsman" changed "Xamdiu" into "Xanadu."

§ 3

The Stuff of Non-Lyric Poetry

The substance of non-lyric poetry can come to a man in different ways. He may have been present when the events he describes were taking place, as Wordsworth was when the events he described in *The Prelude* took place; or he may have only imagined them from reading or hearing about them from someone else, as Tennyson imagined the last fight of the *Revenge* in *The Revenge*, and Jean Ingelow the breaking of the dykes in *High Tide on the Coast of Lincolnshire*. Yet again he may have imagined [1] the whole story as Mr. Masefield imagined *Reynard the Fox* and Mr. Kipling *The Ballad of East and West*; but always, before he can produce poetry, the events, real or imaginary, must have roused him to deep feeling.

§ 4

In the Workshop

The making of poetry is a matter of instinct. But this does not mean that a poet sits down and writes a poem

[1] You may think it is hard for a man to feel very deeply about things which never really happened. But when a man imagines a series of events he is building up all the time on his own experience. It is as though he were a sculptor and all he had seen, felt, heard, smelt, and tasted were the clay he had to work with. So he is constantly expressing real emotions when he describes things he has imagined. For example, a man can express in a poem which is the imaginary story of a fox-hunt—a poem such as Mr. Masefield's *Reynard the Fox*—the excitement he has had in real life when hunting at various times, and the deep feeling he has been roused to by the sight of horses at the gallop, of fences taken boldly by a rider, of the sound of the pack in full cry, and the thrilling glimpse of the fox. And he will know instinctively, as most of us do, how it feels to be hunted (perhaps because our ancestors were hunted many thousands of years ago), and so can imagine the hunt as the fox experiences it.

straight off without thinking at all about what kind of verse he shall use or without having any difficulty with rhymes.

We can get a fairly true conception of the matter if we think, for the moment, of a poet as having inside him a sort of judge. When he has the substance of a poem in him, the craftsman part of him sets about expressing it in words. He may have planned out a verse scheme and have written a line or two when the judge part of him stops him and says: "This won't do." So the craftsman part of him tries again and the judge part of him lets the craftsman go on. The craftsman gets warmed up and finds that things come easily to him; he does things which he did not know he could do; the judge approves; in the old phrase, the poet is "inspired." When the poem is finished perhaps the judge is satisfied with it as a whole, but points out one or two flaws—here the flavour of a word is wrong; there some part of the substance has not been expressed; in another place the sound of the words hinders instead of helping either the expression or the beauty, or both. But the craftsman has cooled down now and he may take several days before he can remove these flaws. He has to go on experimenting, trying one combination of words for another until the judge is satisfied and the poet suddenly feels that the line is right, just as when you come into a strange room you feel that something jars on you but cannot tell what it is until, after shifting things about and experimenting with them in different positions, you get them all at once to suit you. And sometimes the craftsman part of a poet never succeeds in satisfying the judge, and you find a poet like Wordsworth altering words fifteen years or more after a poem is written. The craftsman may make up an entirely new kind of verse or he may take one of the well-known ready-

made models—the sonnet, the quatrain, the Spenserian stanza—but whether he invent a form or take an old one he must satisfy the judge. And the judge part of a real poet is never satisfied until the poem (1) expresses the emotion, and (2) is beautiful. The judge part of a poet is what I mean by his "instinct."

The craftsman part of one poet may work more quickly and skilfully than that of another poet. The legend is that Shakespeare "never blotted a line"—i.e. he wrote straight on without altering and trying to improve. If he did so it means that the craftsman part of him satisfied the judge part of him at the first attempt. On the other hand, Wordsworth's sister has written in her diary such entries as these: "William tired himself with seeking an epithet for the cuckoo." . . . "William very nervous. After he was in bed, haunted with altering 'The Rainbow.'" . . . "William tired himself with hammering at a passage." The craftsman part of Wordsworth did not usually finish the job at the first attempt. Some men (Swinburne was one) have been excellent craftsmen but less gifted in the other qualities of a poet. Some men are conscientious and go on striving to satisfy the judge part of themselves to the last detail. Keats, for example, revised nearly every one of his poems after it was complete; so did Tennyson; and Mr. Robert Graves has shown how he makes some five or six drafts of a poem before he satisfies himself. Some men have a particularly sensitive ear and go through their verses, taking out every sound that jars on them. Tennyson was such a man.

But though poets make several drafts, at different times, of a poem, they all seem to agree that the *body* of all but long non-lyric poems is written at a sitting, in a state of excitement, and that the alterations and additions are done in cold blood.

§ 5

Inspiration

This state of excitement in which a man makes poetry is what people usually mean when they talk about "Inspiration." ("Inspiration" is a vague word and people use it loosely. They often say a poet is "inspired" when they simply mean that he has some emotion to express—i.e. the passages in a long non-lyric poem which are necessary to the story or argument but which are not poetry are often called "uninspired passages." And "inspiration" is also used to describe the coming of the substance of such poems into a man's head as *Kubla Khan*.)

And when a man is actually in the heat of creation he has no thought of the people who are going to read his poem. His one aim is to *express* his feeling or feelings. It is later that he thinks about *communicating* them, when he polishes and trims.

It is wrong to think that the substance of a poem usually lies complete in itself in a man's mind, waiting to be put into words. It does not begin really to exist as a thing distinct and complete in itself until a man begins to write, to bring his deep feeling into contact with words and stanza-forms. The very difficulty of making stanzas, of keeping the metrical pattern, of finding rhymes, is in some measure a help in bringing the poem to birth. And the very act of choosing words warms a man up and excites him so that his original feeling grows still more intense; and it, in its turn, gives power to the "craftsman" part of him. The process, as Mr. C. E. Montague points out,[1] is often to be seen in a painter. "He will begin a portrait almost apathetically and handle his paint in a common-

[1] In *A Writer's Notes on his Trade.*

place way, and see no more than you or I can see at a glance on the face of a sitter. But soon the feel of the paint on the canvas begins to enliven his mind, and the mind thus roused grows curious about the creature before him. And the mind excited with this curiosity transmits more liveliness to the working hand and makes it work in swift, brilliant strokes."

Even the most ordinary of us have at times something approaching the heat of creation which great artists have. At some time or other nearly every one, in writing a letter, an essay, or something perhaps for a school magazine, gets absolutely bound up in what he is doing. He forgets the time, his surroundings, and everything else; finds words coming into his head that are strangely right; and the scene or incident he is describing becomes more and more amusing, or fine, or pathetic, as he goes over it in his mind. At such times we feel that our understanding has grown, that we can enter into other people's feelings as never before. The whole business of living on this earth suddenly seems greater, finer, more capable of beauty and humour and adventure. We feel as if at any moment we shall become aware of new and wonderful things. And at the end we are tired but pleased; and when we read through what we have written, after we have cooled down it seems that we are reading the work of a stranger.

CHAPTER IX

SHAPES AND PATTERNS

§ 1

Golf Clubs and Poems

If you look at a large number of short poems, say those in the *Oxford Book of Verse* or the *Golden Treasury*, you will find that they are of all sorts of shapes (though many are built on the same pattern—the stanza of four lines, with the alternate lines rhyming). But if you look at long poems you will find that they are nearly all written in one of four kinds of verse.

Verse-patterns are in several ways like golf clubs. Men, having played golf in these islands, or at any rate in Scotland, for some five hundred years, have found in the course of time that a certain kind of club is best for hitting the ball a long distance off a tee, but that a club of vastly different shape is best for hitting it out of a bunker, so they have experimented and invented, rejecting some inventions, keeping others and modifying them, until they have produced a number of recognized types of clubs—driver, brassie, iron, mashie, niblick, putter—each of which is best fitted to play a particular stroke. The shape of all clubs is due to the way men are built, to the material of which the clubs are made, and to the nature of the golf ball and the ground on which men play. The difference in shape between a brassie and a niblick, or a putter and

an iron, is due to the difference in the jobs they have to do.

So with poems. English-speaking men have been expressing deep feeling in speech for hundreds of years, and have produced a number of verse-forms, which have a good deal in common, but are each specially fitted for doing a particular job, and differ from each other according to the job they do. While clubs are made of wood and iron, verse-forms are made of language. (There is this important difference between golf clubs and verse-forms: that wood is the same to-day as it was a thousand years ago, but language is always slowly changing.)

And just as a man buys a club but finds it not exactly to his liking and so has the shaft shortened or lead put into the head, a man making a poem will take up one of the traditional forms and find it does not satisfy his instinct completely and so will alter it until it does.

Again, for some strokes there is only one club possible if the shot is to be successful; for some sorts of poems there is likewise only one possible form. But for other shots it depends on a man's taste which of two clubs he uses. For one of these one man may use a brassie and another do equally well with an iron; for a particular kind of poem one man may write in ten-syllable couplets and another in blank verse. There are golfers, of course, so bad that they will hit the same bad shot whichever club they use. They are like the men who will not produce real poetry whichever verse-form they use.

There is a club called the *cleek* which golfers use for hitting a long low shot, when their ball lies in rough grass. But when its handle is shortened and the angle of the head very slightly altered it is excellently fitted for *putting* (i.e. tapping the ball from a few yards' range into the hole). In the same way a verse-form has sometimes been shaped

to do a particular job, and then men have found that, with a slight superficial alteration, it would do another different job equally well.

I have already said that the material of which a club is made partly determines its shape. Manufacturers have begun to make drivers of steel, for example, but they do not make them exactly in the same proportions as wooden drivers. If they did, the clubs would not do the job so well. So when Englishmen have taken verse-forms invented in foreign countries they have found that these, when made up of English speech, would not work in the same way as they would when made up of Greek or Italian speech. Some they have been able to use after altering them; others they have had to reject.

Some poets are like golfers who can use one club, and play one kind of shot, to perfection; some are like golfers who like one club so much that they use it for shots for which it is not intended.

The better a shot is played, and the less waste of energy there is in the playing of it, the more graceful will be the stroke, just as, other things being equal, the best runners are the most graceful. This is true also, I think, as I said in chapter iv, of poems. When deep feeling has been expressed completely, the expression is a thing of beauty. But this does not prevent many poets from working often as though they were golfers who are determined to make a graceful stroke whether the ball goes just where they want it or not. I mean that some poets who have not succeeded in expressing in full their deep feeling will tinker with their verse in order to satisfy at least their ear.

Golf clubs are different in many important ways, however, from verse-forms. You cannot, for one thing, separate the form of a poem from the job it is doing. It is as though you could not see a golf club exept when it

was making a shot. A poet, too, is not only a player, he is a club-maker, too. He cannot buy clubs ready-made; what he *can* get ready-made is models of the clubs other men have made.

§ 2

Some Verse-Forms: Blank Verse

Let us consider some of the verse-forms men have hammered out. One of the commonest forms for long poems is the verse in which the following lines are written:

"Night's candles are burnt out, and jocund day
Stands tiptoe on the misty mountain tops:
I must be gone and live, or stay and die."

"Deep in the shady sadness of a vale
Far sunken from the healthy breath of morn,
Far from the fiery noon, and eve's one star,
Sat grey-hair'd Saturn, quiet as a stone.
Still as the silence round about his lair;
Forest on forest hung about his head
Like cloud on cloud."

"And there, that day when the great light of heaven
Burn'd at his lowest in the rolling year,
On the waste sand by the waste sea they closed.
Nor ever yet had Arthur fought a fight
Like this last, dim, weird battle of the west.
A deathwhite mist slept over sand and sea:

. . . . .

. . . and in the mist
Was many a noble deed, many a base . . ."

It is called "Blank Verse." It consists of words put together in lines which have five "beats," or which are made up of five waves—

Stands tip | toe on | the mist | y moun | tain tops

and each wave is made up of two sounds, and as a rule the beat falls on the second of the two:

/ / /
. . . had Ar | thur fought | a fight |

The rhythm of blank verse is very close to the rhythm of natural, prevailing speech. Now if you take a passage of ordinary prose speech and make the rhythm of it regular with the least alteration possible, you produce blank verse, e.g.:

Now if you take a passage of prose speech,
And with the slightest alteration, you
Make regular its rhythm, you 'll produce
Blank verse.

Mr. G. F. Bradby[1] has taken a few well-known utterances made in excitement and has printed them as blank verse:

(*a*) "My seat hath been the seat of kings, and I
Will have no rascal to succeed me."
(QUEEN ELIZABETH.)

(*b*) "It is, for aught I know, a crowning mercy."
(OLIVER CROMWELL.)

The pattern of blank verse is a line of ten syllables with a stress on the second, fourth, sixth, eighth, and tenth syllables. But the greatest poetry in blank verse is full of

[1] In *About Shakespeare and his Plays.*

variations upon this pattern. It would be otherwise unbearably monotonous.

In blank verse alone have men written English poems in the authentic epic manner. Milton used it for *Paradise Lost*, Wordsworth for *The Prelude*, Tennyson for *Idylls of the King*, and Browning for *The Ring and the Book*.

It is one of the best forms made so far for long story-poems. As it is a very elastic sort of verse a poet writing it can use assonance, alliteration, and combine the flavours of words in such a way as to express the most powerful feeling; and he can also use it for telling of things which do not excite him to feeling at all, in a plain way, without being ridiculous. For this reason, as I pointed out in chapter vi, it is the best of all kinds of verse for plays in the English language. *Hamlet*, as Professor Charlton says, "must have a verse in which at one time he can talk of drinking customs, and at another of the 'undiscovered country from whose bourne no traveller returns.'" He can do this in blank verse.

§ 8

Heroic Couplets

Men have found that verse like the following—

> "In arguing, too, the parson owned his skill,
> For e'en tho' vanquished, he could argue still;
> While words of learnèd length and thundering sound
> Amazed the gazing rustics ranged around,
> And still they gazed, and still the wonder grew,
> That one small head could carry all he knew."—

which is called "Heroic Couplets"—and is like blank verse with rhymes—is fairly good verse for long story-poems, but has a tendency to become monotonous.

But the job for which it is specially fitted is for holding things up to ridicule, for exposing weaknesses and folly in a biting, witty, merciless way in a long poem. It is also particularly good for argument and for stating a case forcibly. When one writes in it, it tends to make one end one's sentence with the rhyme, and to squeeze most of one's sentences into two lines, so that a writer of skill can hardly help saying something sharp and snappy:

"A little learning is a dangerous thing;
Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian spring."

"The hungry Judges soon the sentence sign
And wretches hang, that jurymen may dine."

"The rest to some faint meaning make pretence,
But Shadwell never deviates into sense."

(It sometimes forces a poor writer to fill up four lines with padding because he has said all that he had to say in two and a half.) It has nothing vague or elastic about it, but is hard and glittering. It puts an edge on what in prose would be quite ordinary statements, so that many lines and couplets have become common proverbs:

"And fools rush in where angels fear to tread."

"To err is human, to forgive divine."

"A wit 's a feather, and a chief a rod;
An honest man 's the noblest work of God."

"Hope springs eternal in the human breast:
Man never is, but always to be, blest."

In the hands of a man of talent it says more by leaving more unsaid. It puts things in a rounded, final, way that makes one feel that the last word has been said on the matter. This is a great help to a man who is putting forward an

argument. The regular hammer-note of the rhythm makes one conscious all the time of the piling up of one argument upon another. Dryden was the first great writer to show the possibilities of the heroic couplet for expressing ridicule. He died in 1700; but as far back as 1390, Chaucer had used words in the same arrangement for the same purpose, and in 1930 Mr. Humbert Wolfe used the same arrangement in *The Uncelestial City*, to hold up to contempt and ridicule the wrongs and vulgarities of the present time. But the greatest writer of heroic couplets was Alexander Pope, who died in 1744. In this form he abused his enemies:

(This is about Lord Hervey.)

"Yet let me flap this bug with gilded wings,
This painted child of dirt, that stinks and stings;
Whose buzz the witty and the fair annoys,
Yet wit ne'er tastes, and beauty ne'er enjoys:

* * * * *

Whether in florid impotence he speaks,
And, as the prompter breathes, the puppet squeaks;
Or at the ear of Eve, familiar toad,
Half froth, half venom, spits himself abroad,
In puns, or politics, or tales, or lies,
Or spite, or smut, or rhymes, or blasphemies,
His wit all see-saw, between that and this,
Now high, now low, now master up, now miss,
And he himself one vile antithesis."

In it he argued about life and art with great clearness.

"Behold the child, by Nature's kindly law,
Pleased with a rattle, tickled with a straw:
Some livelier plaything gives his youth delight,
A little louder, but as empty quite."

"True ease in writing comes from art, not chance,
As those move easiest who have learned to dance.
'Tis not enough no harshness gives offence;
The sound must seem an echo to the sense. . . .
Avoid extremes; and shun the fault of such,
Who still are pleased too little or too much.
At every trifle scorn to take offence:
That always shows great pride or little sense;
Those heads, as stomachs, are not sure the best,
Which nauseate all, and nothing can digest.
Yet let not each gay turn thy rapture move;
For fools admire, but men of sense approve."

I have said that for story-poems the heroic couplet is apt to be monotonous. Crabbe, however, uses the very monotony of the verse, in his *Tales,* to express the monotony and dreariness of the lives and scenes he is describing. A thing to remember is that though the heroic couplet is the best form for *long* poems which express ridicule (i.e. long "satiric" poems) it is by no means the only form for *short* satiric poems.

§ 4

Octosyllabic Couplets

Another kind of verse which is good for long story-poems, and which is specially fitted for those story-poems which are full of rapid movement and exciting events, is that made up of lines of eight syllables, rhyming in pairs:

"Then each at once his falchion drew,
Each on the ground his scabbard threw,
Each look'd to sun, and stream, and plain,
As what he ne'er might see again;

Then foot, and point, and eye opposed,
In dubious strife they darkly closed."
(*The Lady of the Lake*, SIR WALTER SCOTT.)

This tends to go with a rollicking swing, and so it is a good verse, as Samuel Butler showed in the seventeenth century, for satire which is comic and good-natured.

"He 'd undertake to prove, by force
Of argument, a man 's no horse,
He 'd prove a buzzard is no fowl,
And that a lord may be an owl,
A calf an alderman, a goose a justice,
And rooks committee-men and trustees."

But it is not nearly so neat or so biting as the heroic couplet.

§ 5

Spenserian Stanzas

Another form in which several fine poems of medium length—what we can call *short* long poems—have been written, is "Spenserian Stanzas." (Stanzas are unusual for long poems.) These are made up of nine lines, the first eight of which, as in blank verse and heroic couplets, have ten syllables. The ninth line (called an Alexandrine) is longer by two syllables and rounds off the stanza in a graceful, final way.

"Both roofe, and floore, and walls were all of gold,
But overgrowne with dust and old decay,
And hid in darkenesse, that none could behold
The hew thereof: for vew of chearefull day

Did never in that house it selfe display,
But a faint shadow of uncertain light;
Such as a lamp, whose life does fade away:
Or as the moone, cloathèd with clowdy night,
Does shew to him that walkes in feare and sad affright."

But this rounding off, which makes each stanza very much complete in itself, means that it is hard to tell a continuous story of quick incidents in Spenserian stanzas. If you read Keats's *Eve of St. Agnes*, simply for the story, to find out "what happened next," you will soon get impatient, for the poem is full of such stanzas as the following:

"And still she slept an azure-lidded sleep,
In blanched linen, smooth, and lavender'd,
While he from forth the closet brought a heap
Of candied apple, quince, and plum, and gourd;
With jellies soother than the creamy curd,
And lucent syrops, tinct with cinnamon;
Manna and dates, in argosy transferr'd
From Fez; and spiced dainties, every one,
From silken Samarcand to cedar'd Lebanon."

—in which Keats is chiefly concerned with expressing his delight in the situation he has imagined: the lovely woman in the elegant bed and the heap of rare luxurious fruits, and the thought of the mysterious Eastern places from which they have come.

So Spenserian stanzas are best fitted for story-poems in which the story is to be told leisurely, and in which the *setting* of the story is more important than the story. Edmund Spenser made the form famous by using it in the sixteenth century for the *Faerie Queene*, an immense poem which is really a number of separate poems and impossible to read appreciatively all at once. Lord Byron wrote *Childe Harold* in Spenserian stanzas.

§ 6

Forms of Short Poems

Short poems usually have a more elaborate form than long ones. They are nearly always in stanzas, for example. This is because they are usually expressing more concentrated feeling than long poems, and must have the rhythm that stanzas give as well as the rhythm of lines. Moreover, a short poem expresses one mood only and does not, like a long poem, have to have an elastic form suitable for expressing different strengths of feeling.

There is an endless variety of short-poem patterns.

Poets can afford to disregard the danger of monotony altogether in a short poem; and as a short poem is usually pure lyric, they try to make its form in itself express the substance—the deep feeling—of the poem, and not merely be in harmony with it. The result is such different forms as the following:

1. "The mountains look on Marathon—
   And Marathon looks on the sea;
   And musing there an hour alone,
   I dream'd that Greece might still be free;
   For standing on the Persians' grave,
   I could not deem myself a slave."

2. "O sing unto my roundelay,
   O drop the briny tear with me;
   Dance no more at holyday,
   Like a running river be:
   My love is dead,
   Gone to his death-bed
   All under the willow-tree."

1. *The Isles of Greece,* Lord Byron.
2. *Song from Ælla,* Thomas Chatterton.

3. "The pine-tree drops its dead;
They are quiet, as under the sea.
Overhead, overhead
Rushes life in a race,
As the clouds the clouds chase;
And we go,
And we drop like the fruits of the tree,
Even we,
Even so."

4. "For the field is full of shades as I near the shadowy coast,
And a ghostly batsman plays to the bowling of a ghost,
And I look through my tears on a soundless-clapping host
As the run-stealers flicker to and fro,
To and fro—
O my Hornby [1] and my Barlow [1] long ago!"

5. "I cannot see what flowers are at my feet,
Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs,
But in embalmèd darkness, guess each sweet
Wherewith the seasonable month endows
The grass, the thicket, and the fruit-tree wild;
White hawthorn, and the pastoral eglantine;
Fast-fading violets cover'd up in leaves;
And mid-May's eldest child,
The coming musk-rose, full of dewy wine,
The murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves."

6. "Too quick despairer, wherefore wilt thou go?
Soon will the high Midsummer pomps come on,

[1] Famous Lancashire cricketers of a past generation.

3. *Dirge in Woods*, G. Meredith.
4. *At Lord's*, Francis Thompson.
5. *Ode to a Nightingale*, John Keats.
6. *Thyrsis*, Matthew Arnold.

Soon will the musk carnations break and swell,
Soon shall we have gold-dusted snapdragon,
Sweet-William with his homely cottage-smell,
And stocks in fragrant blow;
Roses that down the alleys shine afar,
And open, jasmine-muffled lattices,
And groups under the dreaming garden trees,
And the full moon, and the white evening star."

7. "The splendour falls on castle walls
And snowy summits old in story:
The long light shakes across the lakes,
And the wild cataract leaps in glory.
Blow, bugle, blow, set the wild echoes flying,
Blow, bugle; answer, echoes, dying, dying, dying."

8. "I remember the black wharves and the slips,
And the sea-tides tossing free;
And Spanish sailors with bearded lips,
And the beauty and mystery of the ships,
And the magic of the sea.
And the voice of that wayward song
Is singing and saying still:
'A boy's will is the wind's will,
And the thoughts of youth are long, long thoughts.' "

9. "Let us begin and carry up this corpse,
Singing together.
Leave we the common crofts, the vulgar thorpes,
Each in his tether

7. *Blow, Bugle, Blow,* Lord Tennyson.
8. *My Lost Youth,* H. W. Longfellow.
9. *A Grammarian's Funeral,* R. Browning.

Sleeping safe on the bosom of the plain,
Cared-for till cock-crow:
Look out if yonder be not day again
Rimming the rock-row!"

10. "Where the quiet-coloured end of evening smiles,
Miles and miles
On the solitary pastures where our sheep
Half-asleep
Tinkle homeward thro' the twilight, stray or stop
As they crop—
Was the site once of a city great and gay,
(So they say)
Of our country's very capital, its prince
Ages since
Held his court in, gathered councils, wielding far
Peace or war."

11. "Now air is hush'd, save where the weak-eyed bat
With short shrill shriek flits by on leathern wing,
Or where the beetle winds
His small but sullen horn."

12. "The glories of our blood and state
Are shadows, not substantial things;
There is no armour against Fate;
Death lays his icy hand on kings:
Sceptre and Crown
Must tumble down,

10. *Love Among the Ruins*, R. Browning.
11. *Ode to Evening*, William Collins.
12. *Death the Leveller*, James Shirley.

And in the dust be equal made
With the poor crookèd scythe and spade."

13. "Weary the cry of the wind is, weary the sea,
Weary the heart and the mind and the body of me,
Would I were out of it, done with it, would I could be
A white gull crying along the desolate sands!"

14. "Weep you no more, sad fountains;
What need you flow so fast?
Look how the snowy mountains
Heaven's sun doth gently waste!
But my Sun's heavenly eyes
View not your weeping,
That now lies sleeping
Softly, now softly lies
Sleeping."

And poets are always trying experiments as men might make new kinds of golf clubs for certain shots. For example:

"The wind of evening cried along the darkening trees,
Along the darkening trees, heavy with ancient pain,
Heavy with ancient pain from faded centuries,
From faded centuries . . . O foolish thought and vain!

O foolish thought and vain to think the wind could know,
To think the wind could know the griefs of men who died,
The griefs of men who died and mouldered long ago:
'And mouldered long ago,' the wind of evening cried."
(*Behind the Lines*, SIR JOHN SQUIRE.)

13. *Sorrow of Mydath*, John Masefield.
14. *Tears*, Anonymous, 1603.

"I hear a sudden cry of pain!
There is a rabbit in a snare:
Now I hear the cry again,
But I cannot tell from where.

But I cannot tell from where
He is calling out for aid; . . .
(*The Snare*, J. STEPHENS.)

But poets seldom succeed in making the form of their poems exactly express the substance of the poems. If they did, no two poems would have the same form. As it is, they usually get only part of the way; so that several forms are common to a large number of poems. And often poets have simply satisfied themselves with making poetry in the simplest stanzas ready to their hand and expressed their feeling by the meaning, sound, flavour, and rhythm of words without the help of a special pattern. Hence the large number of short poems in *quatrains*, the common four-line stanzas in which hymns are written.

"Dark fir-tops foot the moony sky,
Blue moonlight bars the drive;
Here at the open window I
Sit smoking and alive."

§ 7

The Sonnet

There are a number of "cast-iron" intricate forms, having not only a definite arrangement of lines and rhymes, but also a definite size. Such are the Sonnet, the Rondeau, the Triolet, the Ballad, and others described in the Glossary.

The only one of these in which great poems have been made in English is the Sonnet. Now when several men have produced great poems in exactly the same elaborate, small form, it means that that form is almost perfectly adapted for a particular purpose. The shape of the sonnet is like the shapes of crystals into which certain substances will always solidify. It has fourteen lines for the same reason that a cat has four feet, because, for the job it does, fourteen lines, neither more nor less, are necessary. Professor Charlton, in his *Art of Literary Study*, gives a good account of the origin of the sonnet.

The first man to use the form extensively was an Italian called Petrarch. He lived in the beginning of the Renaissance, when new ideas were seething in men's minds and men's whole attitude to life was changing. Petrarch was in love. But he felt love differently from the men of the Middle Ages, so differently that it amounted to a new experience. He found he could not express the feelings that came with this new experience properly in the old forms of verse, and so he took the new form, the sonnet. He found it just what he wanted to express the blend of subtle thoughts and delicate feelings arising from his love. Other Italians were feeling as he did and they began to write sonnets too.

In the course of time men in England began to have Petrarch's attitude to life and to have the same experience of love as he had. As it was a time in which everything Italian was fashionable, those who were poets naturally imitated Petrarch's sonnet-form But Petrarch's sonnets were made of Italian words. And Petrarch's sonnet-form made of English words had no more of the effect it had when made of Italian words than a steel golf club would have of the effect of a wooden club if both were made in exactly the same shape. As the material was different

the English copy of Petrarch's sonnet could not say what Petrarch's said. Where Petrarch's sonnet was light and dainty, the English copy was slow and heavy. So the English poets set to work and hammered out a form which was *equivalent* to Petrarch's form. This new form had the same number of lines—fourteen—but was different in some details. It is usually called the Shakespearean sonnet, not because Shakespeare invented it, but because he used it so magnificently.

The cleek was made chiefly for hitting a long low shot against the wind; but men found it an excellent club for "putting". In the century after Shakespeare, Milton found the Petrarchan sonnet (originally intended to express feelings of love), when it was made of English words, a heaven-sent instrument for expressing his deep excitement when the liberty of England was at stake, his deep anger when Protestants were murdered in Piedmont, his resignation to his blindness, and other such solemn, sober feelings. He had to have a form full of massive dignity, and in the Petrarchan sonnet made of English words he had such a form. He wrote five sonnets which were exact copies of Petrarch's form, but in the pattern of the other eighteen he made one alteration. Instead of dividing it into two parts of eight lines and six lines, as Petrarch had done, he let the sense of the eighth line continue on to the ninth line and thus made the pattern one whole piece.

Some hundred and fifty years after, Wordsworth used the sonnet-form to express the feelings caused in him by the overthrow of kingdoms by Napoleon, by the sight of tyranny, and by the danger to England's freedom. He, like Milton, found Petrarch's form, in English words, or Milton's variation on Petrarch's form, best suited to his purpose.

The following is a Shakespearean sonnet, the English *equivalent* of Petrarch's sonnet:

"When, in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes,
I all alone beweep my outcast state,
And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries,
And look upon myself, and curse my fate,
Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,
Featured like him, like him with friends possest,
Desiring this man's art and that man's scope,
With what I most enjoy contented least;

Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising—
Haply I think on thee: and then my state,
Like to the lark at break of day arising
From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven's gate;
For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings
That then I scorn to change my state with kings."

The following is an exact *copy* in English of Petrarch's sonnet:

"Milton! thou shouldst be living at this hour:
England hath need of thee: she is a fen
Of stagnant waters: altar, sword, and pen,
Fireside, the heroic wealth of hall and bower,
Have forfeited their ancient English dower
Of inward happiness. We are selfish men;
Oh! raise us up, return to us again;
And give us manners, virtue, freedom, power.

Thy soul was like a star, and dwelt apart;
Thou hadst a voice whose sound was like the sea:
Pure as the naked heavens, majestic, free,
So didst thou travel on life's common way,

In cheerful godliness; and yet thy heart
The lowliest duties on herself did lay."

(WORDSWORTH.)

And the following is Milton's variation on Petrarch's form:

"When I consider how my light is spent
Ere half my days, in this dark world and wide,
And that one Talent which is death to hide,
Lodg'd with me useless, though my soul more bent
To serve therewith my Maker, and present
My true account, lest he returning chide,
'Doth God exact day-labour, light denied?'
I fondly ask. But Patience, to prevent
That murmur, soon replies, 'God doth not need
Either man's work or his own gifts: who best
Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best. His state
Is kingly; thousands at his bidding speed
And post o'er land and ocean without rest:
They also serve who only stand and wait.'"

The structure of these three forms is described in detail in the Glossary.

CHAPTER X

THE LANGUAGE OF POETRY

§ 1

"Poetic Diction"

You may sometimes come across the notion that certain words and phrases are suitable for poetry but not for prose; that there is a special sort of "poetic language." This notion is wrong. Words in themselves are neither poetic nor unpoetic. Some, it is true, which stand for the ancient, unchanging things which enter into the lives of all humanity —such as "sun," "moon," "stars," "sea," "home," "hills," "death"—have a greater and richer load of associations than other words, and in themselves can do a good deal to loosen one's feelings. I pointed this out in chapter iii. But poetry can take *any* word and use it so that it sends a message to the emotions and the imagination and pleases the ear. The difference between prose and poetry is not in the words, but in the way they are put together.

A great deal of the greatest English poetry is made up entirely of words which people use every day in ordinary speech. And there is, I believe, no word, however scientific and flavourless, which cannot be combined with others to make poetry. "Intrinsicate," as Professor Lowes says, seems at first sight an unlikely word; yet it helps to make unmistakable poetry in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*:

"Come, thou mortal wretch,
With thy sharp teeth this knot *intrinsicate*
Of life at once untie."

And "semi-circles" is an unlikely word too; yet it helps to make poetry in Ledwidge's *Bound to the Mast*:

"When Autumn's crayon tones the green leaves sere,
And breezes honed on icebergs hurry past;
When meadow tides have ebbed and woods grow drear,
And bow before the blast;
When briars make *semi-circles* on the way;
When blackbirds hide their flutes and cower and die;
When swollen rivers lose themselves and stray
Beneath a murky sky . . ."

There are frequently in poetry words which are not usually found in prose; a thing is sometimes called in a good poem by a name hardly ever seen in prose. But this is because a man making a poem is often describing things not as they usually appear to ordinary men at ordinary times, but as he sees them in a moment of intense feeling which throws a light over the commonest things and makes them appear strange and new. "Steed" is not a common word in prose, for example; but it is neither a more nor a less "poetic" word than "horse." Mr. de la Mare used "steed" in *Never-to-be*—

"His hound is mute; his steed at will
Roams pastures deep with asphodel"—

because it was the word which described most accurately the animal he had in mind. He wanted the particular

flavour and *sound* of "steed." Mr. Hardy used "horse" in the lines:

> "Only a man harrowing clods
> In a slow silent walk
> With an old horse that stumbles and nods
> Half asleep as they stalk."

because he wanted the usual word, the word most laden with familiar associations for the usual horse he had in mind. When men are describing unusual things or things seen in an unusual light, they must use unusual words. If, in the light of the particular feeling they are expressing, a spade does not seem an ordinary spade to them, they would not be telling the truth if they called it a spade. But if they mean an ordinary spade, as Hardy meant an ordinary horse in the lines quoted above, and yet use an unusual word to describe it, they are not telling the truth. What they write is false, and falseness is bad in prose and fatal to good poetry.

Now in the eighteenth century poetry was at rather a low ebb in England. There was a lot of verse written, for it was the fashion to write verse, and among it was some excellent satiric poetry. But most of it expressed nothing that could not have been better expressed in prose. Men wrote more verses about common things seen in a commonplace light than at any other time; and they tried to prevent their verses from appearing prosaic by using far-fetched, flowery names for these common things. As Professor Charlton says, "They wrote about birds, *and they meant birds*, but they called them 'the feathered tribe.'" A special language for poets soon grew up (now usually labelled "Poetic Diction") into which it was the convention to translate the words which men actually used in speech, when one set about making a poem. This

is seen at its worst in the verses written about the country. For instance, "fish" became "the finny tribe," "countryman," "rustic swain"; every farm labourer had to be called "Corydon" or "Thyrsis," and every farm lass "Thestylis" or "Amaryllis." The wind became the "trembling zephyr," the sea became the "azure main" or the "sprightly flood." A boot was called "the shining leather that encased the limb"; and a pipe, "the short tube that fumes beneath the nose." Now most of these phrases might well have been the best phrases possible in certain poems, but the eighteenth-century versifiers used them time and time again when there was no reason at all for not using the common, homely word. Things came to such a pass that for a poet to call a spade a spade was like appearing in company without any clothes.

The words and phrases that belonged to this "poetic diction," having no associations but faint bookish ones, since they were never used in the actual speech of men, we now see to have been the most difficult of all words with which to make poetry.

Because everybody was writing in heroic couplets, words like "main," for "ocean," and "train" for "army," which fit in easily in a heroic couplet, lie scattered throughout eighteenth-century verse.

The man who did most to show the folly of this "dead language" was Wordsworth. He thought the whole matter over and discussed it with his friend Coleridge. Then he set down what he held were the rights of it in a preface to the book of poems, *Lyrical Ballads*, which he and Coleridge had written. His own theory was that men should write poetry in "a selection of the language really used by men." And he believed that men who lived in the country had the best kind of speech.

But he did not make it clear what he meant by "lan-

guage." He himself wrote much verse made up of words used in everyday speech, but the order in which he put these words is certainly not the order of everyday speech. He also wrote a good deal of verse—and among it some of his best poetry—which is certainly not in the words—and combination of words—of ordinary speech. However, he showed the flabbiness and falseness of the "poetic diction" of his time.

§ 2

Disadvantages of Dialect Poetry

Some of the best poetry we have has been written in dialect. But when a man writes in dialect he limits his audience; for the number of people who will be able to read his poetry easily will be very small indeed. I suppose that, of all the British dialects, the Scots is the best known. Scotsmen go everywhere and take a pride in talking in their dialect all their lives, so that everybody who does not live on a desert island hears occasionally some form or other of the Scots dialect spoken. Moreover there have been so many books written which are full of it, so few novels which have not at least one Scottish character, so many comic anecdotes about Scotsmen in the magazines, that people have grown used to seeing it represented in print, and writers have agreed upon representing the sounds of the dialect in more or less the same way. So a fairly large number of people can appreciate good poems in the Scots dialect when the dialect, as in Burns's poems, is not too broad. But many people find even Burns's poems not easy to read, and can make nothing of a stanza like the following, which is taken from a modern poem in the Aberdeenshire dialect:

"She that was swippert at the hairst,
And swack about the byre,
Gangs hirplin' ower the pavin' stanes
Wi' feet that stoon wi' tire."

A poem has not a fair chance of making its effect on a man who has to interrupt his reading of it in order to look up a word in a glossary.

People can also appreciate poems in the Irish dialect if that, too, is not too broad. There is not much difficulty in reading such verse as:

"D' ye mind me now, the song at night is mortial hard to raise,
The girls are heavy goin' here, the boys are ill to plase;
When one'st I 'm out this workin' hive, 'tis I 'll be back again—
Ay, Corrymeela, in the same soft rain."

Poems in the Cockney dialect, or rather poems made up of words pronounced in the Cockney way, have been written, and these are easy to appreciate, e.g. the poem called *For to Admire*, by Mr. Rudyard Kipling, supposed to be spoken by a Cockney regular soldier:

" The Injian Ocean sets an' smiles
So sof', so bright, so bloomin' blue;
There aren't a wave for miles an' miles
Excep' the jiggle from the screw.
The ship is swep', the day is done,
The bugle 's gone for smoke and play;
An' black ag'in the settin' sun
The Lascar sings, ' Hum deckty hai ! ' "

(" Hum deckty hai ! " means " I 'm looking out ! ")

And in the slow Dorset dialect, one man, William Barnes, has written poems which most people can appreciate because he has been able to spell his words so that you can tell roughly at once how to pronounce them even if you do not happen to have heard Dorset men talk.

"The primrwose in the shëade do blow,
The cowslip in the zun,
The thyme upon the down do grow,
The clote where streams do run;
An' where do pretty maidens grow
An' blow, but where the tow'r
Do rise among the bricken tuns,
In Blackmwore by the Stour?"

But poems written in dialects other than these have very few readers. The truth is that there is nothing more painful than to puzzle out, first the sound, and then the meaning, of a line of strangely spelled words, with a couple of dots here and there above a letter and a large spattering of apostrophes. The sight of a page or two covered with lines like these:

"Noäks or Thimbleby—toäner 'ed shot 'um as deäd as a naäil.
Noäks wur 'ang'd for it oop at 'soize—but git ma my aäle."—

is too much for most readers.

§ 3

Advantages of Dialect Poetry

If you have been brought up in the country there is little doubt that you will have been struck, some time or

other, by the ability of old unschooled cottagers to say shrewd things in a quaint, pithy way that you never forget.

This is partly due to the dialect in which they speak, and dialect has qualities which make it fine stuff for poetry in the hands of a man who really knows it and can speak it spontaneously. (Nothing is more distressing than the dialect verse written by people to whom dialect does not come natural, particularly the verse which you can see has been written first in ordinary English and then spelled out in a dialect form.)

It has a strong flavour, as it is associated with a definite set of people living in a definite part of the country. It is soaked in the customs, legends, history, and beliefs of this set of people. It is full of their particular kind of humour, and of their attitude to life. One of the saddest things about the world to-day is that people and things seem to be growing more and more like each other. It is, as they say, an age of mass production. But there are still refreshing differences between Yorkshiremen and Devonians, between the men of Aberdeen and the men of Dublin; and dialects show these differences in a delightful way. Compared with the dialects of these four sets of men, Standard English, the language which is common to all of them, which most of them speak in addition to their dialect, and which all of them read and write, is rather colourless.

The dialects of the countrysides are old, and have a gracious atmosphere about them; they remind you of the more permanent, the unchanging or slowly changing things of life; there are no words in them for the temporary, half-baked things, for country people talk of these things, during the short time they last, in the words which the newspapers use. Most dialects are associated with pleasant parts of the land, and when you hear, say, the soft Somerset

speech in London, you remember, consciously or unconsciously, the Somerset lanes and villages.

Dialect words, as Mr. de la Mare says, were "made, used and loved by those who were unlearned in books, but had keen and lively eyes in their heads, quick to see the delight and livingness of a thing, and the wits to give it a name fitting it as close as a skin." They have the freshness of wild flowers, because, like wild flowers, they have grown up naturally, and have not been manufactured out of Greek and Latin words, or forced into artificial shapes as have been many of the words of a language which is used more for writing than for speaking.

As a dialect is above all a language to be spoken, it has no words or phrases which might be good in writing and reading but which will not stand the test of everyday speech. For this reason dialects are invariably pithy, vivid, and full of sap.

The result is that when you hear or read something in a dialect which you have met with before, it puts you vividly in mind of real things, seen at first-hand, and not of things merely read about. A dialect poem makes a particularly deep impression on those who have been brought up among people who speak a dialect and have then gone to live in London or some other place where that dialect is not spoken, because it brings back their earliest days, and the things which impressed them when they were most easily impressed, the things which are closest to their hearts. So much is this so that a saying which would be quite commonplace in Standard English will make a deep impression if made in a dialect.

Another reason for the power of poetry in dialect is, I think, that when hearing or reading a dialect poem you imagine for the moment that you are listening to the kind of man or woman who regularly uses the dialect. Such a

one usually has little book-learning and would not express his or her feelings at all unless they were abnormally deep. A lot of the impression of sincerity and artlessness of the following poem by William Barnes is due to the dialect. A Dorset man who has lost his wife is supposed to be speaking.

The Wife a-lost

"Since I noo mwore do zee your feäce,
Up steäirs or down below,
I 'll zit me in the lwonesome pleäce,
Where flat-bough'd beech do grow;
Below the beeches' bough, my love,
Where you did never come,
An' I don't look to meet ye now,
As I do look at hwome.

Since you noo mwore be at my zide,
In walks in zummer het,
I 'll goo alwone where mist do ride,
Drough trees a-drippèn wet;
Below the raïn-wet bough, my love,
Where you did never come,
An' I don't grieve to miss ye now,
As I do grieve at hwome.

Since now bezide my dinner-bwoard
Your vaïce do never sound,
I 'll eat the bit I can avword
A-vield upon the ground;
Below the darksome bough, my love,
Where you did never dine,

An' I don't grieve to miss ye now,
As I at hwome do pine.

Since I do miss your vaïce an' feäce
In praÿer at eventide,
I 'll praÿ wi' woone sad vaïce vor greäce
To goo where you do bide;
Above the tree an' bough, my love,
Where you be gone avore,
An' be a-waïtèn vor me now,
To come vor evermwore."

Dialect, then, would be in several ways the best medium for poetry, if the people who really know any particular dialect were not so few.

§ 4

Slang

There are slang words in several good poems; and it should be possible to make a poem almost entirely out of slang. For real slang—not the painfully flabby use of certain fashionable words and phrases such as "priceless," "simply too wonderful," "awfully jolly," etc.—is full of life; slang words usually have a sound which expresses their meaning, they startle the mind and often stamp their meaning on it more forcibly than the words of ordinary speech, and they strike the imagination. But the great trouble with slang words is that they change their meaning and value from day to day, almost from hour to hour, and what is more, they have a different

value in different towns and among different classes of people. Slang is a fluid language. It is made up of words which are being tried out. Most of them soon die out; the most useful ones live on, changing their character a good deal in their early life; begin to collect associations; enter the recognized language; become respectable, and appear in the dictionaries. Only a few live on as permanent slang words among a certain small class of people, such as the army, the navy, a public school, doctors, lawyers, or newspaper-men. The result is that the slang of fifty years ago is almost meaningless to-day. Consider the word " bloomin' " in the lines:

> "The Injian Ocean sets an' smiles
> So sof', so bright, so bloomin' blue."

"Blooming" is one of the more permanent slang words; but how is the man living three hundred years hence to know the difference in value between the word in the above lines and the word in—

> "'Tis the last rose of summer,
> Left blooming alone"?

So a man might write stanzas in slang which might be an excellent poem to five hundred readers to-day, and ten years hence would not be a poem to anybody. Slang is not good material for poetry because it is so perishable.

CHAPTER XI

THE "SUBJECT-MATTER OF POETRY," AND CHANGING FORMS AND FASHIONS

§ 1

The "Subject-Matter" of Poetry

There is *nothing* that is not a fit subject for poetry. A gasworks or a Diesel engine may inspire as good a poem as the moon or a nightingale's song. And no matter how ugly and sordid the subject of a poem may be, the poem itself will have beauty; for we have agreed that when a man expresses his deep feeling perfectly, the expression is automatically beautiful. But the fact remains that the moon crops up in far more good poems than gasworks do. This is partly because men have had the moon longer than gasworks, and partly for another reason.

Before a thing can inspire a poem it must first inspire deep feeling.[1] And there is no denying that some things, in the long run, inspire more deep feeling than others. The bulk of English poems express, directly in lyric, indirectly in non-lyric poems, emotions inspired by these few things: love affairs; religion; death; nature (that is, the countryside and the change of seasons); attachment

[1] "The remotest discoveries of the Chemist, the Botanist, or Mineralogist, will be as proper objects of the Poet's art as any upon which it can be employed, if the time should ever come when these things shall be familiar to us . . . manifestly and palpably material to us as enjoying and suffering beings."—WORDSWORTH.

to a particular place (which gives rise to home-sickness, patriotic admiration, etc.). Now these are all things which are as old as Man, and do not change from age to age. They are also things which come into the lives of all men and women; for there is no one who has not at some time been moved to deep feeling by at least one of them. So we can say that the things most likely to inspire poetry are the unchanging and universal things of life.

A scientific theory, such as Einstein's Theory of Relativity, does not touch many people's hearts, and so does not often give rise to poetry. The men who are moved to deep feeling by it are relatively so few that there is not much likelihood of there being a poet among them. But if, as Mr. Aldous Huxley says, Professor Einstein had the poet's gift for speech and instinct for creation, there is no reason why he should not produce intoxicating lyrics about Relativity. And if Mr. Yeats only understood the theory and was moved to ecstasy by it, there is no reason why he too should not produce poems about Relativity. There *have* been men who have been deeply excited by such theories, and who have also been poets. Lucretius was one; John Donne was another. But they are rare.

Poetry works in the same way from age to age without changing its essential nature. But there are fashions in poems. Rhyme is popular in one generation and shunned in another; one form will be used to excess for a time, as the *heroic couplet* was in the eighteenth century, until there is a reaction against it; something in the spirit of the age will bring certain words and images into favour, and these will be repeated, when they are not inevitable and spontaneous, by versifiers of no genius, so that poets in the following age will go out of their way to avoid them; and certain moods will be more prevalent in one age than another. From

time to time, after some great upheaval, when a new religion has been formed, or a new scale of values comes into being and men change their attitude to life, as in the Renaissance, *new* moods may appear. Even the few unchanging themes which have inspired the bulk of great poetry—the proportion of poems inspired by even these may change with the changing conditions of life. For example, if you look through an anthology like the *Golden Treasury* you find in the first half of it a remarkable number of poems about spring, far more in proportion than are written to-day, although the change of seasons still leads to poems and the ancient joke of the "spring poet" is not quite dead. This is because spring does not mean as much as it did in the Middle Ages. Then the bulk of people had to mope through the winter with dim lamps indoors and none out, without coal, meat, or fresh food, with no books to read, and no transport to travel the boggy cart tracks that served for roads. It is little wonder that when the cuckoo sang and spring reappeared they were so delighted that they made poems.

There have been plenty of movements in recent years among poets and critics to attack conventions and to change fashions. There have been Vorticism, Imagism, and Surréalisme. These movements often put forward extreme theories, but they do good in sending poets back to their instincts and preventing them from writing in a certain way because it is the convention. At the beginning of the present century there was some danger of a new "poetic diction," of a second-hand use of such pretty and rather bookish words as *porphyry, floweret, halcyon, languid, satyr, waft,* and the general movement has been to avoid these and following Wordsworth's precept to draw from words commonly used in actual speech, to write such verse as:

"The taxi-lamps and street lights too
grow dim along Fifth Avenue,
And in the doorways of the shops
slumber the dawn-awaiting cops."[1]

Many poets have gone farther than Wordsworth and stick to the natural *order of words*, shunning such inversions as "on the causeway chill," and obsolete expressions like "thou" and "thee," "whene'er," "host on armèd host." New kinds of verse have been tried, and most of these are usually bundled together under the label *Free Verse*.

§ 2

Free Verse (*Vers Libre*)

The first thing to note about free verse is that there are several kinds of it; the second, that according to those who write it, "*free* verse" is not a good name for any of them. For no *vers*, as Mr. Eliot says, is *libre* for the man who wants to do a good job. In one type different metres are mingled; in the other types there is no metre. But all are alike in that they are not constructed on a pattern. Here are three examples:

(1) "Give me the shores and wharves heavy-fringed with black ships!
O such for me! O an intense life, full to repletion and varied!
The life of the theatre, bar-room, huge hotel, for me!
The saloon of the steamer! the crowded excursion for me! the torch-light procession!
The dense brigade bound for the war, with high piled military wagons following;

[1] *Winter-Night Song*, by Ford Madox Ford.

People, endless, streaming, with strong voices, passions, pageants,
Manhattan streets with their powerful throbs, with beating drums as now,
The endless and noisy chorus, the rustle and clank of muskets, (even the sight of the wounded,)
Manhattan crowds, with their turbulent musical chorus!
Manhattan faces and eyes forever for me."

(WALT WHITMAN.)

(2) "Eyes I dare not meet in dreams
In death's dream kingdom
These do not appear:
There, the eyes are
Sunlight on a broken column
There, is a tree swinging
And voices are
In the wind's singing
More distant and more solemn
Than a fading star.

Let me be no nearer
In death's dream kingdom
Let me also wear
Such deliberate disguises
Rat's coat, crowskin, crossed staves
In a field
Behaving as the wind behaves
No nearer—

Not that final meeting
In the twilight kingdom."

(*The Hollow Men*, T. S. ELIOT.)

(3) "The light of her face falls from its flower,
as a hyacinth,
hidden in a far valley,
perishes upon burnt grass."
("H. D." [HILDA DOOLITTLE].)

In the second example you will note that there is rhyme and subtle repetitions of sounds (e.g. "dare," "there," "wear").

There are enough genuine poems in free verse to make it worthy of study. But these genuine poems we find, on examination, to be not very different from poems in regular verse, although printed differently. The effect they produce can be traced to the significant arrangement of associations of words; to groupings of sounds; to alliteration and assonance; to rhymes (coming sometimes irregularly and unobtrusively inside lines, and sometimes, obviously, at the end of them); often to repetition of an image or a phrase as a sort of refrain; and always to a definite rhythm. The second of the examples has most of these things and it makes a more powerful effect on me than the other two, it is more haunting and sticks in my mind longer.

Poems in free verse lie in the borderland between poetry and prose. Those which are unmistakably poetry, it seems to me, are without metre, but in all other respects like other English poetry. And I think that metre, the means by which words are made to influence each other to the greatest possible extent, is, for the most difficult and delicate utterances, as Mr. I. A. Richards says, the all but inevitable means.

A large proportion of poems in free verse are no more than rhythmic prose printed in such a way that their rhythm is obvious. It is possible to match them with passages from the prose of Meredith, Conrad, Pater, and

Maurice Hewlett, and Professor Livingston Lowes has done so.[1] He quotes our third example—

> "The light of her face falls from its flower,
> as a hyacinth,
> hidden in a far valley,
> perishes upon burnt grass."—

side by side with the following lines:

> "Her face was like the after-sunset
> Across a rose-garden,
> With the wings of an eagle
> Poised outspread on the light."

Who can show a difference in nature between these two? Yet the second passage is from Meredith's novel *Sandra Belloni*. This does not mean that the first lines are a fraud. It simply means that their form is not new; and that those people who call them poetry are extending the meaning of the word *poetry* to include what has hitherto been commonly covered by the word *prose*.

Some of those who practise free verse say they have no definite theory about it. They are dissatisfied with the old patterns and when they have strong feeling to express simply trust to their instinct for the *form* of their expression, changing the rhythm as they go on according to their impulse. "It is sufficient to be a poet," says Mr. Herbert Read, "and to be honest with oneself, and the rest follows naturally."

Others seem to think that it is a definite form, with its own peculiar properties, and have enunciated the principles on which it is built. The late Miss Amy Lowell, an

[1] In *Convention and Revolt in Poetry*.

American poet, is the chief spokesman of these. She suggests the term *cadenced verse* as a better label than *free verse*; for writers of free verse are seeking not freedom but a stricter discipline. Cadenced verse, it seems, is built upon the rhythm of the speaking voice with its necessity for breathing (but we have agreed that speech in emotion tends to become regular, and this regular rhythm is the basis of metre and the cause of it). The unit is the *strophe*. It gets its effects "through subtle shades of changing rhythms and through a delicate sense of balance." And others have stressed the necessity of balance and proportion or pointed out that the most effective free-verse poems have these qualities of balance and proportion. There is not space here to examine these principles, beyond pointing out that the element of proportion occurs in most of our regular poetry, particularly in Milton's blank verse, and in much prose, particularly in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century prose, but in modern prose as well. As for *strophic* structure of free verse, it is rather difficult to understand, but I think one can see something like it in the chanting of psalms. The sentences vary in length, but they are all made to rise and fall in the same way. The voice goes out on the same journey; it may go quickly over one part of the way and pause in another, but it goes the whole way and always comes back to where it started from.

Free or cadenced verse is due partly to a distaste for patterned verse; partly to a belief that there is need for new mediums of expression in our rapidly changing world. Its advocates argue that regular verse hinders more than it helps sincere expression. A man who has to find rhymes and make his words fit a uniform metre will often, they hold, be tempted to pad out his lines with what Mr. Graves calls "putty." And they point out the irregularities in much of the finest poetry of Milton and Shakespeare. It

is true that in this poetry the words do not always coincide with the pattern of the metre, but they play about it. The metre, the iambic pentameter, is the *norm* of all the lines, and behind all the variations one can hear the regular fivefold beat. But there is another rhythm, apart from the metre. It is made up of waves larger and more irregular than the lines: the waves which are made by the cadences, the fall of the voice according to the sense of the words. The advocates of free verse would keep these cadences and do away with the metre, printing the passages in lines of uneven length.

Some writers of free verse say that they have new moods to express which cannot be expressed in any of the old forms; others go as far as to say that the " rhythm of daily life " has changed, that the new rhythm is echoed in the modern ballet, and in jazz music, and must become the rhythm of poetry if poetry is to keep in close touch with life. But these are matters for argument.

It is clear that cadenced verse has advantages. It can never have that discord between sound and meaning (between *form* and *content*) which occurs in verse like that of Eliza Cook's quoted in chapter ii. It is free from inversions of the natural order of words; from inevitable rhyme-words ("moon," "June," "soon," etc.), from the stock phrases and images into which a writer of regular verse is likely to fall. One who writes it has no temptation to use any but the exact word which expresses his meaning; he has also no temptation to use an unnecessary word to fill up a line. Moreover cadenced verse focuses more attention on the *content*, the actual meaning of the sentences.

Its chief disadvantages are these. It forgoes the powerful influence of metre, which makes the reader receptive, pleases him, and gives to words a new force and beauty. It gives no indication of how the lines have to be stressed. The

arrangement in lines shows the reader where to pause and drop the pitch of his voice, but *within* the line there is no sign, and there are often four or five different ways of speaking any given line. There is no pattern to guide him as in regular verse.

Cadenced verse is harder to read than regular verse; and calls, though this is not necessarily a disadvantage, for more concentration.

But one of its greatest disadvantages is what at first sight seems to be an advantage. It calls for no struggle between the poet and his medium. When we examine great poetry we find that so far from the pattern (which a poet's instinct chooses or forms) cramping and hindering a poet, it has usually stimulated him to full and perfect expression. For it is wrong to think of a poem as existing complete in a man's mind, ready to be poured or forced into a mould. As I pointed out in chapter viii, it does not really begin to exist until he begins to bring his deep feeling into contact with words and stanza-forms. The form of a poem is not a mould to be filled, but an active partner in the making of the poem, and the finished poem is a fusion of emotion, words, and pattern. The mood and the emotion determine the metre and the pattern; then the pattern does its part in drawing the poem from the poet (see pp. 86-7). In the first draft of his sonnet on *Chapman's Homer*, Keats wrote:

> "Oft of one wide expanse had I been told
> That deep-brow'd Homer ruled as his demesne;
> *Yet could I never judge what men might mean,*
> Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold."

But *mean* would not do as a rhyme for *demesne*, so Keats had to make another line and at the same time make clear what he felt about Homer. And the necessity for that

rhyme stimulated him to make the infinitely more moving, expressive, and beautiful line which is in the final version:

"Oft of one wide expanse had I been told
That deep-brow'd Homer ruled as his demesne:
Yet did I never breathe its pure serene
Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold."

It is unlikely that he would have expressed himself better if he had done it in cadenced verse.

Even a complicated form like the sonnet, as Wordsworth says (himself helped to some of his best poetry by the discipline of the sonnet-form), so far from shackling a man, serves as a key to unlock his heart.

§ 3

Polyphonic Prose

Polyphonic Prose is an attempt at a still more elastic form of expression than cadenced verse. It sets out to do all that verse, regular and free, does, and all that prose does, at the same time. There has not been enough of it written yet for it to be judged; but it seems highly doubtful if it really does a job which either regular verse or prose does not do better already.

It uses alliteration, assonance, rhymes; it has sometimes the rhythm of regular verse, sometimes that of cadenced verse, sometimes the irregular rhythm of prose. It is printed as prose, and this detracts from the effect of the parts in verse, as one does not know what to expect and one is given no guidance in the manner of stressing words. Miss Amy Lowell, who was one of the two first people to use it in English speech, says: "It changes its character . . . with every wave of emotion."

Here are some examples from *Can Grande's Castle*, by Amy Lowell:

"Throb—throb—a dying pulse counts its vibrations. Throb—throb—and each stroke means a gobbet of gold. They tear it down from the walls and doors, they rip it up from ceilings and pry it up from floors. They chip it off altars, they rip it out of panels, they hew it from obelisks, they gouge it from enamels. This is a death dance, a whirligig, a skeleton castle footing a jig, a tarantella quirked to hammer-stroke time; a corpse in motley ogling a crime. Tap—tap—tap—goes the pantomime."

This is almost ordinary regular rhymed verse. Printed like verse this is how it looks:

They chip it off altars, they rip it out of panels,
They hew it from obelisks, they gouge it from enamels.
This is a death dance, a whirligig,
A skeleton castle footing a jig,
A tarantella quirked to hammer-stroke time;
A corpse in motley ogling a crime.
Tap—tap—tap—goes the pantomime.

This is from an account of the Battle of Aboukir Bay:

"Seven hundred and forty guns open fire on the French fleet. The sun sinks into the purple-red water, its low, straight light playing gold on the slaughter. Yellow fire, shot with red, in wheat sheaves from the guns; and a racket and ripping which rips the nerves, then stuns, until another broadside crashes the ears alive again. The men shine with soot and sweat, and slip in the blood which wets the deck.

"The surgeons cut and cut, but men die steadily. It is heady work, this firing into ships not fifty feet distant. Lilac and grey, the heaving bay, slapped and torn by thousands of splashings of shot and spars.

Great red stars peer through the smoke, a mast is broke short off at the lashings and falls overboard, with the rising moon flashing in its top-hamper."

§ 4

Sprung Rhythm

Sixty years or so ago Gerard Manley Hopkins, a Jesuit priest, started writing verse of a kind which Langland and other early poets had written but which dropped out of use in the sixteenth century. Here is an example:

"I caught this morning morning's minion, king-
Dom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon, in his riding
Of the rolling level underneath him steady air, and striding
High there, how he rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing. . . ." (*The Windhover.*)

You will find this verse breathless and awkward to scan, I think, at first. There are five beats in each line, i.e. there are five stressed syllables—and between the beats or stresses there are varying numbers of unstressed syllables. Hopkins called this rhythm "sprung rhythm," the chief principle of it being that each foot or wave should consist of one stressed syllable standing alone or followed by one, two, or three unstressed syllables. Sprung rhythm makes it easy to carry the idioms and rhythm of common speech into verse. Though Father Hopkins died in 1889 his poems were not published until 1918. Since then he has had a great influence, and many modern poets have taken over his rhythms and also his other mannerisms—alliteration, running words together, using only the suggestive words of a sentence, coining words, and assonance. Compare with the above passage these two lines by W. H. Auden:

"Me, March, you do with your movements master and rock
With wing-whirl, whale-wallow, silent budding of cell. . . ."

CHAPTER XII

ON SPEAKING AND READING POETRY

§1

How to Speak Poetry

"It is always a good idea to suppose that, when somebody writes in a certain way, this is the way in which he wants it said."

A. A. MILNE.

It is a good thing that one can hear the sound of poetry in one's mind when one reads it silently. For to hear poetry spoken even reasonably well is a rare experience. Many people get the full effect of poetry when they read it silently, but ruin this effect when they read it aloud, because they cannot make their voices do just what they want. I have several times heard a boy speak or read lines of verse which he had picked out as being more than usually musical when he read them to himself, and seen him sit down disgusted by his failure to bring out their musical quality in his speaking or reading of them. Other people get the full effect of a poem only when they have the luck to hear it spoken properly.

The first rule in the speaking of verse is: Never read aloud a poem with which you are not well acquainted and the *meaning* of which you have not grasped. It cannot be done properly.

Do not speak verse as though it were prose. Some people are at pains *not* to pause at the ends of lines, and

will pass quickly over rhymes as though they were persons they wanted to cut. As so much of the effect of poetry comes from its rhythm, you must keep this at all costs. You can find out what it is, usually, after reading three or four lines, if you read them in the same tone and pronounce every syllable. It is absolutely essential not to slur over words as one does in conversation. Do not say "nd" for "and." As Mr. A. A. Milne puts it, speak verse "on tip-toe"; do not slide and slither. On the other hand do not force words out of their proper pronunciation in order to fit what you think is the rhythm. As we have seen, the rhythm of a poem often varies, and if you do not change as the rhythm changes you are losing some of the effect.

Some poets think that verse should be spoken in a monotone. This is a good way and gives one a chance of hearing the poem undistorted. It also makes the waking mind drowsy, but is apt to grow tedious if the poem is a long one. Others think that verse should be chanted, if possible to the accompaniment of a harp.[1] It seems to me that the best way is to say verse for the most part in a monotone, letting the pitch of the voice rise and fall just a little, here and there, where your instinct tells you it should. But there must be very little of this rise and fall; the less there is the better. (It is hard to explain exactly what I mean on paper. Mr. Drinkwater has made two gramophone records, *The Speaking of Verse*, Columbia, Nos. D40018–9, which illustrate a way of speaking similar to that which I have in mind.)

The great thing to remember is to let the poetry do its own work. Avoid "expression" as you would the plague. Do not slow it up unless the words themselves make you

[1] See "Speaking to the Psaltery" in *Ideas of Good and Evil*, by W. B. Yeats.

say them slowly. Pause at the ends of lines, even when, as often happens in blank verse, there is no mark of punctuation. You will find that you have to speak more slowly than in ordinary conversation.

The worst possible way to speak verse is to declaim it as some "elocutionists" and actors do, stopping in the middle of a line to sob—as I have heard a woman do—or to strike themselves on the chest, shouting certain words, whispering others, and destroying the rhythm and all the suggestive exciting messages that the magically blended sounds of a fine poem send mysteriously to a man's senses. Nothing but the meaning of the words remains, and that is distorted by emphasis and obscured by the antics of the speaker. The trouble is that an "elocutionist" is out to show her talents for acting and mimicking. She wants to give the audience something to *see* as well as to hear; and she wants to make a performance out of herself instead of letting her voice be merely an instrument for passing on to the audience the work of the real performer—the man who made the poem.

A good poem is sufficient in itself. It wants only to be said. By all means let us have someone with a beautiful voice to say it. But we want only that person's voice. We do *not* want gestures and "expression." Gestures were admirable in silent cinema films, where they were the chief means of expression, and in the Russian ballet; they are admirable, and so are inflections of the voice, in plays; but in the speaking of poetry they simply distract attention from the poetry. In short, you spoil a good poem by tampering with its rhythm just as much as you do by tampering with its words.

§ 2

On Reading Poetry

One can get all that the usual magazine story has to give one at the first reading. But most people do not begin to get the effect of a poem until they have read it four or five times, on different occasions. And as poetry is concentrated stuff it is not possible to go on reading it by the hour and really take it in.

Many of the best poems require you to do a lot of hard thinking before they begin to work on you.

Some, like T. S. Eliot's, require you to have read a lot; some require you to have lived a long time and have much experience of life. John Donne's poetry, as Mr. de la Mare says, "is a poetry that awaits the mind as the body grows older."

But, on the other hand, most of the best poems simply require you to know something of life and to know English. You need not be a great scholar to appreciate poetry; and you cannot appreciate poetry properly if you are a scholar and nothing more. The more fully and intensely you live your life the more you will get out of poetry.

§ 3

Collected "Works"

In nearly all collected "Works" you must be prepared to find a good deal of second-rate verse, and some verse that is worthless. For even the best of poets have written poor stuff at one time or another. Poets like Wordsworth (whose good poetry is as good as any one else's) have left behind them as much bad verse as good. Collected

editions are chiefly for the student, who wants to learn, from the bad verse as well as the good, all he can about a particular poet's mind, and the development of his art.

§ 4

Difficulties

Poems are not fool-proof. Some, particularly those written a long time ago, have words and phrases which are often misunderstood. It is not the strangeness of such a word as "mandragora" in

> "Poppy nor mandragora
> Nor all the drowsy syrups of the world"

which is the trouble. For that was a strange word when Shakespeare used it, and Shakespeare was using it partly for its strangeness. The fact that you do not know what it means makes it, in its context, *suggest* more, and so helps the effect of the poetry. So with "mastic" and "terebinth" in

> "We have rose-candy, we have spikenard,
> Mastic and terebinth and oil and spice."

The difficulty comes with those words and phrases which were part of common everyday speech when they were written but which have since passed out of use. For example, the authors of *A New Approach to Poetry*[1] found that American children found some difficulty with the song in *Love's Labour's Lost*:

> "When icicles hang by the wall,
> And Dick the shepherd blows his nail,
> And Tom bears logs into the hall,
> And milk comes frozen home in pail,

[1] Elsa Chapin and Russell Thomas.

When blood is nipp'd, and ways be foul,
Then nightly sings the staring owl,
'Tu-whit, tu-who!' a merry note,
While greasy Joan doth keel the pot.

When all aloud the wind doth blow,
And coughing drowns the parson's saw,
And birds sit brooding in the snow,
And Marian's nose looks red and raw,
When roasted crabs hiss in the bowl,
Then nightly sings the staring owl,
'Tu-whit, tu-who!' a merry note,
While greasy Joan doth keel the pot."

Some of them did not realize that Dick, the shepherd, blew his *finger*-nails in order to warm his hands, as any workman does on a frosty day.

And it is not every English boy who would realize that "When ways be foul" means "When roads are muddy"; and unless he can look it up somewhere, he may have little notion of what "keeling the pot" means. It means "cooling by stirring or skimming." The Americans did not know that "roasted crabs" were "crab-apples." Most English people do; but the line does not make the same effect on them as it did on Elizabethans, because we no longer have the once popular drink of ale with sweet-roasted crab-apples floating in it. It is not every English boy who knows, or remembers, that "saw" means "old proverbial saying."

§ 5

The Time for Poetry

It is easier to read poetry in some places than in others; it is easier to read when you are living one sort of life than

when you are living another. As a rule it does not fail you in times of stress, when most other kinds of writing seem empty and trifling. It is surprising to find how men like Arctic explorers, whom one would perhaps expect to have little use for poetry, take books of it with them when they are on some great adventure or struggle. Mallory reported that the men who attempted to climb Mount Everest found poetry by far the most satisfying kind of literature on their expeditions.

Mr. Arnold Bennett said he read poetry—"classical poetry"—because it put him in the right mood for working on a novel. "I find that if I am writing a novel or story, the finest English verse has the capacity to lift me up out of the rut of composition and set me, and my work, on a higher plane. In other words, it inspires."

CHAPTER XIII

ON WRITING ABOUT POETRY

§ 1

The Two Rules

When you have occasion to write *about* poetry, in an examination or in an essay, obey these two rules:

(1) Be honest.
(2) Be clear.

§ 2

Honesty

If you do not like a poem, after giving it a fair chance to make its effect on you, say so. It is common in schools to find scholars who seem to have the notion that they are expected to admire every part of any "set book" that they have to read, and that the more praise they give, the more marks they will get. It is not always their fault. But in addition to being honest, be fair. Do not condemn a poem if you have not made an effort to take it in and understand it; and do not get the habit of saying that everything of which you mildly disapprove is "utter bilge" or "complete tripe." Boys and girls who really appreciate a poem, for whom it is a thing really alive and interesting, will often find that when they have to write about it they have little to say and will fill up a page or two with

loose talk about "beauty," "imagination," "noble words," "beautiful thoughts," "life," "nature," and so on. This does no good to any one. When you have nothing more to say, stop—however little you have written. And give up once and for all the notion that you can write anything of any value at all about a poem, no matter how much criticism of it you may have read, if you have not read it carefully yourself until you know it through and through. Write down what you have observed yourself. By all means read what other men have written about a poem, but do not take their statements on trust, and do not repeat a statement you do not understand. You would be surprised to realize how much parrot repetition there is in literary criticism; how many people will deliver judgments about Spenser, for instance, without having read fifty lines of his.

§ 3

Clearness

Keep clear of vague abstract words such as "life," "soul," "passion," "imagination," "inspiration." Be sparing in your use of "beauty." Never use "nature" without first explaining just what you mean by it; if you mean simply "woods and fields," then use these words in preference. Do not make up meaningless phrases such as "beautiful thoughts" which old ladies are in the habit of applying to such statements as that dewdrops are the tears of the fairies, or to those quotations that one finds on tear-off calendars. When people talk of a "beautiful thought" they usually mean only the thought of a beautiful thing. Another common and inaccurate phrase is "beautiful

words." Some words are more pleasing to the ear than others, some have pleasanter associations, but the beauty in poetry lies not so much in the separate words as in the way they are put together, in *combinations* of words.

You will meet in books, even in many written by famous men, sentences like this: "*The Witch of Atlas* scarcely seems to me to be written at all, but to be a music caused by the movements which the beat of the wings of the Imagination, in arrowy flight and ceaseless, has made in the ether of Ideal Space." They sound impressive but they have no meaning. At the best they express the emotion caused in the writer by a poem; but they do not give your intellect any message. Avoid them.

Be *exact*. If you are discussing the atmosphere a certain poem has for you — say "the atmosphere of chivalry" in Scott's *Marmion*—quote enough of the poem to show just what you mean by that atmosphere. Find out also what parts seem to cause that atmosphere and name them. Quote constantly so that there will be no doubt what you mean and it will be clear that you have a definite reason for everything you say. Back up every statement with evidence and illustration.

§ 4

Examination Questions

Most of the questions in examinations, particularly examinations like the School Certificate Examinations, are set simply to find out if candidates have read certain poems, have understood them, and remember them. In order to do well one has to be intelligent enough to have

understood at least the plain prose "sense" of the poems and to be able to set down one's knowledge and to argue in a clear, orderly, and, if possible, interesting way. To answer such a question as:

"What light is thrown by the following passages upon the manners and customs of Chaucer's England?

(*a*) 'And carf biforn his fader at the table.'
(*b*) 'She let no morsel from hir lippes falle,
Ne wette hir fyngres in hir sauce depe.'
(*c*) 'Ful looth were hym to cursen for his tithes.'
(*d*) 'Wel koude he stelen corn and tollen thries.'"

you must first know the poem from which these lines are taken (it is Chaucer's *Prologue*) well enough to know that it was the Knight's son who carved before his father at the table; you must have studied Chaucer's language enough to know what all the words in the passages mean; you must be intelligent enough to deduce from the first passage that carving the meat at table was evidently not a job to be done, as with us nowadays, by the head of the table. To deal with (*c*) you must know enough history to know what tithes were. Questions such as this are a test of knowledge and of skill in writing clearly, just like questions in a geography paper or a theoretical chemistry paper.

But in higher examinations you are liable to be asked for some literary criticism. In School Certificate Examinations also, and the like, you are sometimes invited to give a little literary criticism when you have to "comment on" or "write notes on" passages in the "context questions," and when you are asked to name the poem you like best in an anthology and say why you like it. And criticism is not like answering questions like the one above on

Chaucer's *Prologue*, which have really only one correct answer. For criticism is not a matter of knowledge but of *taste*—I can easily imagine two criticisms which disagree with each other and yet are equally good—and to criticize well you must not only have understood the prose sense of the poem but you must have appreciated it fully, you must have received its full effect as poetry.

Criticizing a Poem

§ 5

Criticism

When you have to criticize a poem, to give your reasons for liking one, to write an "appreciation" of one, or to compare two or more poems, set about it in a workmanlike way. Waste no time by talking about how shameful it is to put rose petals in the crucible or how impossible it is to analyse magic. Good poetry is robust stuff; it will bear examination. Even if you cannot find out everything about the way in which it works, there is no harm in trying, and you *can* find out a good deal.

Take the propositions of Euclid as a model for your writing when you criticize; make everything as clear as he does, and as logical. For though you are writing about poetry, *what* you write must be the exact opposite of poetry. When you are examining emotions you must keep emotion out of your examination as much as possible. Argue things out in the cool, level-headed way in which detectives in stories work out who committed the crime. Many people, some of them famous writers, unconsciously try to write poems themselves when they are criticizing. Instead of *describing* the feeling which the poem has caused

in them, they *express* it in words which tend to be another poem, or a thin continuation of the original poem.

This will not do. Express your feeling in writing as much as possible when you are describing a place, writing a story, or trying to make poetry yourself, but do not do it when you are criticizing poetry.

The only two things to be considered in a direct criticism are the poem and yourself. Your only means of judging a poem is the effect it has upon *you*; so if you are to be honest and clear you will have to write about yourself a good deal. Therefore put aside false modesty and say "I" in preference to "we." Speak for yourself and not, as some people do, for the whole English-speaking race. (Critics in newspapers very often have to say "we," because they are speaking on behalf of the paper, they are using "the editorial 'we.'" But you do not have to.)

The first question to answer is: "What effect has the poem on you?" And the answer to this should be the basis of everything else you write. Does it please you? If it does not, it is not, as far as you are concerned, poetry. Make no mistake about this. Things are not beautiful, ugly, delightful, or hateful because of what they are, but because of the effect they have upon men, and that effect varies according to circumstances. A sound which is pleasant for a while may grow unbearable if it continues too long. So at one time it is delightful and at another it is hateful; but it is the same sound, whether it is delightful or hateful to the man who hears it. So if a poem, even though it is one of the famous "classic" poems which everybody calls great, does not give you that particular delight—partly delight, partly the satisfaction of some deep-rooted appetite or set of appetites, for which there is no satisfactory name in English—which poetry gives, it is not to you poetry, or a poem, at all. But if it is a

famous poem you should be ready to admit that it may be you and not the poem that is at fault.

Do not, therefore, write: "*Lycidas* is a good poem, but I do not like it," or "I prefer *Gunga Din* to *Lycidas*, but I think *Lycidas* is the better poem." [1]

The second question, and a hard one to answer—often an impossible one to answer completely—is, "*Why* does the poem produce the effect it does on you?" Why do you like or dislike it? Is it a poem that pleases your ear and stops at that? Do the actual statements in it impress you much, or do you find that you have only the vaguest notion what they are about and yet are deeply affected and pleased by it? Is the poem one of those which do not appeal to the reason at all? Is it the images which impress you most? Or do thought, images, sound, all make their impression together, as they do in much of the best poetry, so that you cannot easily consider one apart from the rest? If you cannot answer these at once, you must examine the poem again and look more closely into yourself. Imagine the poem without certain images, with certain words changed. If you are not sure what is pleasing your ear, alter the sounds as we did in *Requiem* (in chapter i) when I found it was alliteration which was pleasing me. Often

[1] Do not worry too much if you find that you like things like *Gunga Din*, which you hear put down contemptuously as crude and sentimental, more than, say, Shakespeare's sonnets or Shelley's poems. It is what you like in the long run that counts. As you grow older, if you live a full life and go on reading poetry, you will find that you appreciate the "great" poems, and that cheap, sentimental verse loses its appeal for you, except perhaps in your laziest moments. Sentimental verse is rather like popular dance tunes which you like for a short time and then never want to hear again, and rather like the stories which you enjoy when you are very young, but which you cannot bear when you have learned something about the world. But the more experience you have had of living, the more adventures you have had, especially if these include some great distress or hardship, the more meaning, and comfort, and beauty great poetry will have for you.

a new feeling, a new flavour comes into a poem in a particular stanza, as a tinge of melancholy comes into Keats's *Ode to Autumn* in the third stanza. Hunt out the word which has brought this new feeling. In the *Ode to Autumn* the melancholy came from "wailful" and "mourn." Nothing is too small to notice. If anything jars upon you, hunt that out too.

One has often reasons for liking a thing—not only a poem, but a place, a scent, a tune, or the like—which do not belong to the thing itself. You may like a poem because it describes a place which you like; you may like a poem which is about birds more than an equally good one about a street because you have a craze for bird-life and everything connected with it. You may have a bias in favour of a poem because you first came across it when you were supremely happy (just as you find people liking a place because they spent their honeymoon there), or because someone you like and admire very much read it or showed it to you. The book you first read it in, the binding, the printing, the illustrations—all these may have prejudiced you in its favour. On the other hand you may dislike a poem which you would otherwise have liked because you were made to learn it against your will and punished for not knowing it, or because you read it first, when there was nothing else to read, when you were ill and having a painful and weary time in bed, so that you cannot see it afterwards without thinking of the smell of chloroform, and medicine, and a stuffy room.

Try to distinguish between reasons such as these which make you different, as far as the poem is concerned, from the majority of people. Mention them in your criticism—unless they are too private to set down.

It is idle to try to judge a poem from anything else but the effect it makes on you. No matter how much

you may know about rhythm and prosody, no matter how much you may know about theories of poetry, when you come to judge poetry you have to put your trust in your own feelings. There have been people who set about criticizing poems with a sort of foot-rule, a set of the proportions and qualities which they thought every poem ought to have. They have managed to hit the mark sometimes through luck, but have all ended by making themselves ridiculous.

There still are many who set about criticizing poems in the manner of the men who tap the wheels of a train before it sets out on a long journey. They look out for flaws before they have read the poem at all, and will condemn it altogether if they find a false rhyme, such as "bush" rhyming with "thrush," or "blood" with good," although these things may hardly lessen the force of the poetry at all. Like them are the people who have picked up wrong notions from writing Latin verses, and think that the be-all and end-all of poetry is that each line must have a definite number of syllables which must "scan" in accordance with strict rules. These will pounce upon any irregularity in rhythm and set it down as a fault. These are the people who try to find some excuse for Shakespeare when they find eleven syllables instead of ten in his blank verse. Now, we know that an irregularity of rhythm is as likely to be a virtue as a fault. It is very often an important part of a poem and the poet has made it to help to express his feeling and thought. If you find that something in a poem is spoiling the effect of the whole and irritating you and on examining the poem find that it is an irregularity in rhythm, or a false rhyme, as you quite well may, then you must certainly call attention to it. But you cannot possibly put your finger on flaws until you have given the poem a fair chance to work its effect on you by reading it carefully and giving it time to sink in.

Schoolmasters and schoolmistresses often tell their pupils to use Anglo-Saxon words in preference to words derived from the Latin. Some boys I know condemned a poem as bad, although they liked it, because it had too many Latin words in it. They were full of good intentions. They had been told to avoid Latin words themselves; if it was good for them to do so, they seemed to argue, it was good for the poet. What they had not realized was that though their master had decided that their own writing of prose would be improved if they used Saxon words instead of Latin ones, there are times when Latin words are the only possible ones whose sound and flavour and meaning together will express in verse just what a man feels. So, though too many Latin words are, as a matter of fact, a hindrance to good prose, and a definite fault in much eighteenth-century verse, they may just as easily be a virtue in a poem. It all depends on the effect the poem makes on you. So when you approach a poem do not ask, "Does it obey the rules which have been given to me for writing prose?"—for it is quite possible that it may break all these, and even the elementary rules of grammar, and still manage to be an excellent poem.

Again, do not approach a poem with fixed notions, such as, that if it describes it must describe vividly, as you have been taught to describe, for there *are* good poems in which vagueness is an important thing. It all depends, I repeat, on the effect the poem makes on you.

Again, do not trouble about *how* the poem was made, when you are simply asked to criticize. Do not say that the words have been "carefully chosen." It does not matter if they have been put together with care or if they were just slapped down. What does matter is the effect they have when they *are* put together. Do not praise the poet for being clever or skilful or inspired. It is his poem and

not himself that is being judged, and anyhow *cleverness* has not really much to do with the making of great poetry. Do not talk either about the rhythm being good. There are various kinds of rhythms; but they are only good or bad according to the job they are used for. There is nothing wrong in itself, for example, with the rhythm of those lines of Eliza Cook's quoted in chapter ii. What is wrong is that it is not fitted for helping to express what the words actually say. It is out of harmony with the mood which the meanings of the words and the flavour of some of the words express.

Remember that you are judging poems as poetry and not as history, botany, chemistry, or religion. So if you find a poem saying that something took place which you know from your knowledge of history did not take place, do not put it down as a fault unless it really interferes with your enjoyment of the poem as poetry; on the same principle do not say bad verse is good poetry because it puts forward precepts — so often called "beautiful thoughts" — which you as a Christian approve of. Do not say that the *Ancient Mariner* is a bad poem because there is no such creature as the Spirit of the South Pole; or that Keats's *Sonnet on first looking into Chapman's Homer* is a bad poem because it was not Cortez, but Balboa, who first saw the Pacific Ocean.

Remember also that literary history is not criticism. It is quite beside the point to say in a criticism of *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* that the churchyard was that at Stoke Poges or that General Wolfe said he would rather have written this poem than capture Quebec. If Gray had thought that he could not express all his thought and feeling without mentioning the name Stoke Poges, he would have put that name into his poem. It is equally beside the point to say in a criticism of Burns's *Ae fond*

Kiss, and then we Sever, that the Nancy referred to was Mrs. Maclehose, or that the Lucy in some of Wordsworth's poems was perhaps Annette Vallon. Do not say that a certain poem took seven years to write unless there is something in the poem itself which would lead you to think that it had been made over a long time. If there is, you can, after pointing it out, mention that you know the poem actually took seven years to make. These things are interesting very often and always valuable when you are dealing with how poetry comes to be written, or with the development of a man's career as a poet; but when you are criticizing a poem they are quite out of place. Have nothing to do with them.

You may be set an exercise in practical criticism. You may be given the stanzas of a poem printed out of their proper order, and asked to put them into the order you think best and to give reasons for the order you fix upon. To do this, put the reasons out of your mind to begin with. Experiment with the stanzas in different orders when you have read them carefully, until you can decide which order gives you the most satisfactory effect. Then, and then only, look for the reasons which make this order more satisfactory to you than the others and set them down. But read carefully before you do anything else.

When you are asked to analyse the "form" of the poem, count nothing too small for notice. Find the pattern on which each line is based; the pattern on which the stanza is based; note the proportions of the poem, the very number of the lines may be important. Observe the rhymes if there are any. Look for irregularity of rhythm and consider what effect it produces; look for alliteration, and not just the obvious alliteration of sounds at the beginning of words, but the less noticeable but just as powerful alliteration of sounds in the middle and at the

ends of words. Consider the words, their flavour and their separate sounds; note if there is any striking difference between them and normal speech, apart from rhythm and rhyme. Is there a preponderance of short words, of words that have grown obsolete, of slang words, of harsh words, of abstract words, of words derived from Latin, or words derived from Saxon? Consider also the order of the words, if it is the usual prose order or if words are inverted. These and all other such details you must examine and set down.

And when you have to compare two or more poems, begin, of course, with the difference in the effects they have on you, and the most striking differences in their forms, but after that count no detail too small to notice and report.

When you have read and lived with a fair amount of poetry you should have found out many of the little tricks and mannerisms which nearly all poets have in different degrees, as cricketers have their favourite strokes and different ways of taking guard or running up to the wicket to bowl. In examinations above the School Certificate standard you are usually expected to recognize that a strange passage of verse was written in the eighteenth century because it is in heroic couplets, is epigrammatic, and is full of personifications, phrases like "the finny tribe," and words like "swain," "warble," "main" (for sea) and "the fair" (for woman); or to suspect that verse full of alliteration, in an unusual rhythm, is by Swinburne; and verse about British soldiers, made up of rhymed quatrains, containing phrases and words with a biblical flavour together with army slang words, and a refrain at the end of each stanza, is by Kipling. There is no way of preparing for such examinations other than by reading a good deal of poetry, and when you find yourself thinking, "Ah!

this has the usual Byron touch about it," by stopping to consider just what that touch consists of.

To be able to parody a poet well proves that you have noticed and appreciated his mannerisms and general attitude. Such a book of parodies as Sir John Squire's *Tricks of the Trade* is not only amusing: it is valuable criticism.

CHAPTER XIV

GLOSSARY OF TERMS APPLIED TO POETRY

Alexandrine. A line of six beats and twelve (occasionally thirteen) syllables, with the beat tending to fall on every second syllable: or, in technical language, a six-foot iambic line.

The last line in a Spenserian stanza is an Alexandrine. See pp. 97–98, e.g.

(1) "From silken Samarcand to cedar'd Lebanon."
(2) "As though a rose should shut, and be a bud again."
(3) "Along the cliff to fall and pause and fall did seem."

An Alexandrine has an awkward effect when it crops up in heroic couplets. Pope wrote:

"A needless Alexandrine ends the song
That, like a wounded snake, drags its slow length along."

Alliteration. The repetition of consonant sounds in a marked way. See pp. 10–12. The repetition must produce a definite effect before it can be called alliteration, e.g.

(1) "*F*ull *f*athom *f*ive thy *f*ather lies."
(2) "Five *m*iles *m*eandering with a *m*azy *m*otion."
(3) "And I'd sell my tired soul for the *b*ucking *b*eam-sea roll
Of a *b*lack *B*ilbao tramp . . ."

(4) "Others may sing of the *w*ine and the *w*ealth and
the mirth,
The *p*ortly *p*resence of *p*otentates goodly in girth;—
Mine be the *d*irt and the *d*ross, the *d*ust and scum
of the earth!"

(5) "The *b*ar*g*e she sat i*n*, like a *b*ur*n*ish'd th*r*o*n*e,
*B*ur*n*'d o*n* the water: the *p*oo*p* was *b*eate*n* gold;
*P*ur*p*le the sails, and so *p*erfumed that
The wi*n*ds were love-sick with them."

(6) "*P*ale beyond *p*orch and *p*ortal
*C*rowned with *c*alm leaves she stands . . ."

Anapaest. (⏑ ⏑ –) (⏑ ⏑ /) Two short syllables followed by a long (in English verse, two unstressed syllables followed by a stressed). *Interrupt* is an anapaest.

Assonance. The repeating and balancing of *vowel* sounds, e.g. the words " cry " and " side " have the same vowel sound and so are said to be in assonance.

Other examples of assonance are "sweet" and "thee"; "rode" and "groan":

"Therefore all se*a*sons shall be sw*ee*t to th*ee* . . ."

See p. 31.

Ballad. In general, a simple narrative poem in short stanzas. In particular, one of a body of popular poems—The English Ballads—composed in the country about the Scottish Border, roughly between 1350 and 1550. Some of the best known are *Sir Patrick Spens*, *Binnorie*, *Chevy Chace*, *Clerk Saunders*, and *The Wife of Usher's Well*. They are all anonymous and some scholars think that they came into existence, like some of the songs of the troops in the Great War, without any one individual having composed them. Other scholars hold that any

poem, at any rate in the first place, has to be composed by one man. However it be, it is likely that the ballads were the work of a whole tribe, if only in the way that epics, as described in chapter vii, were. As "Q" says, whether they were written *by* the people or not, they were certainly written *for* the people. They were handed down by word of mouth, and that is why it is impossible to fix the exact date at which any one of them was made. They were not thought of as literature until Bishop Percy collected a number of them in 1765. There is no space to examine their nature here. It must suffice to say that they are all impersonal; that they usually tell tragic stories of love and war and magic in a rapid and precise way—

> "She 's laid him on a dressing table
> And stickit him like a swine"

is a typical pair of lines—that the commonest stanza is the quatrain with second and fourth lines rhyming; that the metre is loose and there is usually a refrain; and that the claim of many of them to be called poetry is disputed.

Poets have written poems in later years on the model of the ballads, but these, though many of them are fine poems, are widely different from the authentic ballads. Examples of such poems are Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner*, Keats's *La Belle Dame sans Merci*, Mr. Kipling's *Danny Deever* and *Ballad of East and West*.

Ballade. One of the rigid verse-patterns. It consists of three stanzas of eight lines and one (called L'Envoi or the Envoy) of four. The lines of the first three stanzas rhyme a–b–a–b–b–c–b–c, and of the last stanza b–c–b–c. All four stanzas have the same rhymes, but no rhyme-word may be repeated. Each stanza ends

with the same refrain. The Envoy is usually addressed to an imaginary prince. The form was invented in France; I do not know any ballade in English which is a great poem.

Blank Verse. Unrhymed verse, not divided into stanzas.

What is usually understood by "blank verse," in English, is verse with each of its lines based on the pattern of ten syllables with every second syllable stressed. The technical name for this is Iambic Pentameter, e.g.

˘ / ˘ / ˘ / ˘ / ˘ /
" Was this the face that launch'd a thousand ships
˘ / ˘ / ˘ / ˘ / ˘ /
And burnt the top-less tow'rs of Ilium? "

" Night's candles are burnt out, and jocund day
Stands tiptoe on the misty mountain tops."

" Nor ever yet had Arthur fought a fight
Like this last, dim, weird battle of the west."

See pp. 91–93.

It is one of the commonest forms for long poems; the only verse in which men have written English poems in the authentic epic manner; and because it is elastic, the best verse for plays. See pp. 68–70.

Burden. Refrain.

Cadence. The fall of the voice in reading or speaking, as at the end of a sentence.

Cæsura. The point in a line of verse at which one involuntarily pauses in reading, e.g.:

"The barge she sat in, || like a burnish'd throne,

Burn'd on the water; || the poop was beaten gold."

In Latin verse a cæsura is a break within a " foot."

Consonance. Sometimes the meaning of the term *alliteration* is confined to the repetition of consonants at the beginning of syllables, and the repetition of other consonants is called *consonance*, e.g. the repetition of the italicized consonants in the following lines would be called *consonance* by those who use the term.

"It seemed that out of the battle I es*c*a*p*ed
Down some profound dull tunnel, long since s*c*oo*p*ed
Through granites which titanic wars had gro*i*n*e*d
Yet also there encumbered sleepers gro*a*n*e*d,
Too fast in thought or death to be bestirred."
(WILFRED OWEN.)

Content. Were the words of an English poem translated accurately into French prose with no attempt at re-creating poetry, the *content* of the poem would be present. It is often called loosely the " substance."

Couplet. Two lines of verse that rhyme. Most couplets are made up of lines of similar metre and length, e.g.

"A Robin Redbreast in a cage
Puts all heaven in a rage;
A dove-house filled with doves and pigeons
Shudders hell through all its regions."

"Behold the child, by Nature's kindly law,
Pleased with a rattle, tickled with a straw:

Some livelier plaything gives his youth delight,
A little louder, but as empty quite."

Dactyl (–⏑⏑) (/⏑⏑). A long syllable followed by two short ones (in English verse, a stressed syllable followed by two unstressed).

Merriment, sleepily, are dactyls, e.g.

/ /
"He hĕld cŏm/munĭŏn
/ /
With thĕ shĕ/pelĭcăn"

Didactic. Didactic verse is that which a man writes in order to instruct or to give information. Didactic verse which is good poetry is rare.

Distich. Couplet.

Elegiacs. A Greek and Latin verse-pattern consisting of alternate *hexameters* and *pentameters*.

In English verse, a stanza of four iambic pentameters, rhyming alternately, is sometimes called an *Elegiac Stanza*, e.g.

"The curfew tolls the knell of parting day,
The lowing herd wind slowly o'er the lea,
The plowman homeward plods his weary way,
And leaves the world to darkness and to me."
(*Elegy*, GRAY.)

Elegy. See pp. 66–67. A poem which expresses grief for someone's death; a lament.

Some poems which do not primarily express grief are

still called elegies because the death of someone moved their authors to write them, e.g. Shelley's *Adonais*, Arnold's *Thyrsis*.

Envoy. The concluding words of a poem, in particular the last stanza of a ballade. The envoy of a ballade is a stanza of four lines, forms the peroration or climax of the preceding stanzas, and usually begins with the title—e.g. Prince—of the person to whom it is addressed.

Epic. See pp. 67–68. A long poem telling the story of some struggle or adventure which affects a whole tribe or nation. Real epics are made in the youth of a nation when it is fighting for some great cause; and they are shaped by the nation as a whole in the way shown on p. 67. They are written in verse that is not intricate and are dignified, simple, and massive, e.g. *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, *Beowulf*, *Nibelungenlied*, *Chanson de Roland*.

Many people call poems like Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* epics. But these are the work of one man expressing himself and not primarily his nation and his age. Mr. Herbert Read uses "epic" to denote a poem in the epic manner which is "intimately related to the aspirations of the age." He calls Wordsworth's *Prelude* the last English epic.

Epigram. (1) Any short and pointed saying, not necessarily in verse. (2) A short poem with a sting in it, e.g.

> "Here lies our sovereign Lord and King,
> Whose word no man relies on,
> Who never said a foolish thing
> Nor ever did a wise one."
>
> (ROCHESTER.)

Epithalamium. Marriage song.

Foot. A certain number of syllables which form a wave

or unit in a line of verse. A line of blank verse, which has five beats—

"Was this/ the face/ that launch'd/ a thou/sand ships"

is said to have five *feet*.

Latin and Greek verse, which is based on *quantity* (length of syllables), can easily be divided into feet; but English verse, which is chiefly based on stress, is not so tractable. In Latin and Greek verse there are about thirty different combinations of long and short syllables. Long syllables are represented by the symbol –, and short by ⏑. But when English verse is divided up into feet, it is better to take – as a symbol for a stressed syllable and ⏑ for an unstressed syllable. The five chief feet to be found in English verse are the Iambus, the Trochee, the Dactyl, the Anapæst, and the Spondee.

Form. Usually, the way in which the words of a poem are put together, the pattern and structure of a poem, the metre, rhyme-scheme, stanza, etc.

Sometimes the word is used to mean the whole poem as it stands on the page, not only the pattern and structure, but the actual words. People who use the word in this way think of a poem as existing in the mind of a poet before it is given its form.

Free Verse. See **Vers Libre.**

Gnomic (=Didactic). Gnomic verse is that which a man writes in order to instruct or to give information.

Heroic Couplet. See pages 93–6.

Iambus (⏑–) (⏑/). A short syllable followed by a long (in English verse, an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed one). Words like *support, reply, attract,* are each an iambic foot.

Shakespeare's blank verse is based on the pattern of

a line of five iambic feet. The iambus is the commonest foot in English verse, e.g.:

/ / / / /
"Aňd still thěy gazed and still thě wonděr grew."

/ / / / ` /
"Thě curfěw tolls thě knell ŏf parting day."

Image. An *image* in a poem is the mention of a thing in such a way that one at once sees it (and apprehends it through the other senses too) in the imagination.

Imagery. The *images* in a poem (see above).

Inversion. A change in the natural order of words, e.g.

"And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made."

The natural order of these words would be:

"And build there a small cabin, made of clay and wattles."

Poets use inversion sometimes to emphasize certain words; sometimes to force their words to fit the metre or the rhyme-pattern. Other things being equal, words in their natural order make better poetry than inversions.

Kenning. In Old English poetry (sometimes known as Anglo-Saxon poetry) a thing is called by different names from line to line. These names are invariably compound nouns. For example, a ship is called " the sea-wood," " the foamy-necked," " the wave-floater," " the ocean-steed," " the wave-horse."

Limerick. A verse-pattern popular ever since the publication, in 1846, of Edward Lear's *Book of Nonsense*, e.g.

"There was an Old Man who said, 'Hush!
I perceive a young bird in this bush!'

When they said, 'Is it small?'
He replied, 'Not at all;
It is four times as big as the bush!'"

Lyric. Lyric poetry is that which a man makes when he turns his feeling or mood at a moment of deep excitement straight into poetry.

A Lyric is a short poem usually divided into stanzas.

For examples, detailed analysis, and distinction between lyric and non-lyric poetry, see chapter vi.

Metaphysical Poetry. Poetry which springs from the emotion caused by abstract thought, from delight in the triumph of the reason, e.g. Donne's *An Anatomie of the World* and parts of Wordsworth's *Recluse.*

Metre. Regular rhythm in speech.

The pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables (and in a much less degree, in English verse, of *long* and *short* syllables) in which words are put together to form verse. Some verse follows the pattern exactly; other verse, such as Shakespeare's later blank verse, is based on the pattern but has many variations.

The metre of the following lines is:

⏑ ⏑ / ⏑ ⏑ / ⏑ ⏑ / ⏑ ⏑ / ⏑ ⏑ / ⏑ ⏑ /

(/ =accented syllable; ⏑=unaccented syllable.)

⏑ ⏑ / ⏑ ⏑ / ⏑ ⏑ / ⏑ ⏑ /
"But we sleep by the ropes of the camp, and we rise
⏑ ⏑ / ⏑ ⏑ /
with a shout and we tramp
⏑ ⏑ / ⏑ ⏑ / ⏑ ⏑ / ⏑ ⏑ /
With the sun and the moon for a lamp and the spray
⏑ ⏑ / ⏑ ⏑ /
of the wind in our hair."

In Latin and Greek verse, metre is a pattern not of accented and unaccented syllables but of long and short syllables.

Objective. An adjective used to describe poems or other writings in which things and events are described as they appear to people as a whole, without attention being drawn to the author's emotions, reflections, and personality. No poem made by any one man is quite free from some trace of his personality; but such poems as the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and the old English Ballads (made at a time when, as Mr. G. K. Chesterton says, a man might almost leave a poem to his son to finish) are termed *objective.*

Octave (also called *Octet*). A group of eight lines of verse, particularly the first eight lines of a sonnet.

Ode. This term is used loosely. The Ancient Greeks meant, by an ode, a poem which a number of people chanted in public on some great occasion. The poem expressed the feelings of a whole nation or tribe. Mr. Kipling's *Recessional* and Mr. Laurence Binyon's *For the Fallen* are odes in this sense. But the word is now used for any serious poem which is addressed to some person or thing, e.g. Shelley's *Ode to a Skylark*; Keats's *Ode to a Grecian Urn* and *Ode to a Nightingale.* See pp. 65–66.

Onomatopœia. Applied to verse this means the combining of words in such a way that their sound imitates what they describe, e.g.

" The mumbling, grumbling, humble bees."

See p. 16.

Ottava Rima. A stanza of eight lines, of ten syllables each, rhyming a–b–a–b–a–b–c–c, e.g.

"Cold-blooded, smooth-faced, placid miscreant!
Dabbling its sleek young hands in Erin's gore,
And thus for wider carnage taught to pant,
Transferr'd to gorge upon a sister shore,
The vulgarest tool that Tyranny could want,
With just enough of talent and no more,
To lengthen fetters by another fix'd
And offer poison long already mix'd."

(*Don Juan*, LORD BYRON.)

This form was invented in Italy, by Boccaccio, and Italian poets used it for the same purposes as English poets used blank verse. Lord Byron found it a good form for long satirical poems, using it in *Don Juan* and *The Vision of Judgment.*

Parody. A comic imitation of a serious poem or of a poet's manner. Good parody, such as that of Sir John Squire and Mr. Max Beerbohm, is criticism.

Pindaric Ode. In English verse, an ode in stanzas of uneven length, irregular metre, with rhymes irregularly disposed.

Poetaster. A petty poet.

Polyphonic Prose. See pp. 131–133.

Quantity. The time taken in pronouncing one syllable compared with that taken in pronouncing another.

The sign for long quantity is –; for short ⏑; e.g. rĕfūsed.

Quatrain. A stanza of four lines.

Quintain (also called *Cinquain* and *Quintet*). A stanza of five lines of verse.

Resolution. The substitution in Greek or Latin verse of two short syllables for a long in a metrical foot.

Rhyme (Rime). The identity of sound between syllables having the same vowel sound and the same final consonant sound, e.g. "sound" rhymes with "ground," "dwelling" rhymes with "swelling."

Rhyme Royal. A verse-pattern consisting of stanzas of seven lines of five beats each (*iambic pentameters*) rhyming a–b–a–b–b–c–c, e.g.

"Four bells were struck, the watch was called on deck,
All work aboard was over for the hour,
And some men sang and others played at check,
Or mended clothes or watched the sunset glower.
The bursting west was like an opening flower,
And one man watched it till the light was dim,
But no one went across to talk to him."

(*Dauber*, JOHN MASEFIELD.)

Rhythm. See pp. 3–11.

"That property of a sequence of events in time which produces on the mind of the observer the impression of proportion between the durations of the several events or groups of events of which the sequence is composed." E. A. SONNENSCHEIN in *What is Rhythm?* (Oxford, 1925).

When you can discern a series of waves or beats in a passage of speech, that speech has rhythm.

"The sound of words comes to its full power only through rhythm."—I. A. RICHARDS in *Principles of Literary Criticism.*

When rhythm in speech becomes quite regular it is called Metre.

Rondeau, Rondel, Roundel. These are rigid verse-patterns which all end with the same word or words with which they begin.

Rondeau. This is a development of the rondel and comes from France. It consists of thirteen lines, not counting the refrain, with two rhymes running throughout, e.g.

"In after days when grasses high
O'er-top the stone where I shall lie,
Though ill or well the world adjust
My slender claim to honour'd dust,
I shall not question or reply.

I shall not see the morning sky;
I shall not hear the night-wind sigh;
I shall be mute, as all men must
In after days.

But yet, now living, fain were I
That some one then should testify,
Saying—'He held his pen in trust
To Art, not serving shame or lust.'
Will none?—Then let my memory die
In after days."

(AUSTIN DOBSON.)

Rondel. Invented in France in the fourteenth century. It has several variations but the most popular type is that printed below. Sometimes the first *two* lines are repeated at the end.

"Love comes back to his vacant dwelling,—
The old, old Love that we knew of yore!
We see him stand by the open door,
With his great eyes sad and his bosom swelling.

He makes as though in our arms repelling,
  He fain would lie as he lay before;—
Love comes back to his vacant dwelling,—
  The old, old Love that we knew of yore!

Ah, who shall help us from over-spelling
  That sweet, forgotten, forbidden lore!
  E'en as we doubt in our hearts once more,
With a rush of tears to our eyelids welling,
Love comes back to his vacant dwelling."

(AUSTIN DOBSON.)

Roundel. This is a variation of the rondeau invented by Swinburne in the later nineteenth century. See any of the roundels in Swinburne's *A Century of Roundels.*

Scan. (1) Read verse with emphasis on rhythm in order to show its metre. (2) Examine a line by counting the feet or syllables in it. (3) A line is said *to scan* if it conforms to the metrical pattern.

(It is often impossible to *scan* [first sense] a line of English verse without distorting the pronunciation of the words, because English verse is based on metre but does not always follow it exactly.)

Septet. A stanza of seven lines of verse.

Sestet (also called *Sextet* and *Sextain*). A stanza of six lines of verse, particularly the last six lines of a sonnet.

Sestina. An intricate verse-pattern in vogue in Italy and France in the Middle Ages. It consists of six stanzas of six lines and one of three lines. All the lines rhyme, but there are only two rhymes throughout. The line-endings of the first stanza are repeated, in different order, in the other six-line stanzas. In the final three-line

stanza three of these endings occur at the ends of the lines and three in the middle. For examples see *I saw my Soul at Rest upon a Day*, by A. C. Swinburne, and *Sestina of the Tramp-Royal*, by Rudyard Kipling.

Sonnet. See pp. 104–108. A short verse-form of fourteen lines. Many of our English sonnets are great poems. There are three varieties: the Petrarchan, the Shakespearean, and the Miltonic.

The *Petrarchan* has a break in the sense between the first eight lines (called the Octave) and the last six (called the Sestet), two rhymes only in the octave, two, or three, in the sestet, arranged in different ways, but never so that the last two lines rhyme with each other. A typical Petrarchan rhyme-scheme is a–b–b–a–a–b–b–a c–d–c–d–c–d (four or five rhymes). For example see Wordsworth's sonnet on p. 107.

The *Shakespearean* has not such a marked division between octave and sestet although it has a pause there. It consists of three quatrains and a final rhymed couplet. Its rhyme-scheme is a–b–a–b c–d–c–d e–f–e–f g–g (seven rhymes). For example see p. 107.

The *Miltonic* has no break between octave and sestet. Its rhyme-scheme is a–b–b–a–a–b–b–a–c–d–e–c–d–e (five rhymes). For example see p. 108.

Spenserian Stanza. A stanza of eight lines of five beats (*iambic pentameters*) and a ninth line of six beats called an *Alexandrine*. See pp. 97–98.

Spondee (– –) (/ /). Two long syllables (in English verse, two stressed syllables), e.g. *seaside*, *sweetheart*, are spondees.

Sprung Rhythm. See p. 133.

Stanza (often called *Verse*). Many poems consist of a number of groups of lines, all following the same pattern

(i.e. having the same number of lines and the same metre and rhyme-scheme). These groups are called *stanzas*. The commonest English stanza is the quatrain.

Subjective. An adjective used to describe poems or other writings in which the personality and individuality of the author are prominent. The poems of Byron and Shelley, and lyric poetry as a whole, are *subjective*. (The opposite is *objective*.)

Tercet. A stanza of three lines of verse. When all three lines rhyme together the group is called a *triplet*.

Terza Rima (Third Rhyme). Verse which is made up of lines of eleven syllables (based on the pattern of five iambic feet plus an extra syllable) arranged in groups of three (*tercets*) with every rhyme occurring three times, in alternate lines. The rhymes of the first and last lines of a canto occur only twice:

a–b–a b–c–b c–d–c d–e–d e–f–e f–g–f g–h–g–h

There can be any number of tercets; but the last tercet in a canto is turned into a quartet. Dante used, but did not invent, this type of verse in the *Divina Commedia*. English poets who have imitated it have usually made the lines only ten syllables long, e.g.

"Behold, they shall not fail. The shouts ascend
Above the shrieks, in Naples, and prevail.
Rows of shot corpses, waiting for the end
Of burial, seem to smile up straight and pale
Into the azure air and apprehend
That final gun-flash from Palermo's coast
Which lightens their apocalypse of death.
So let them die! The world shows nothing lost;
Therefore, not blood. Above or underneath,
What matter, brothers, if ye keep your post

On duty's side? As sword returns to sheath,
So dust to grave, but souls find place in Heaven.
Heroic daring is the true success,
The eucharistic bread requires no leaven;
And though your ends were hopeless, we should bless
Your cause as holy. Strive—and having striven,
Take, for God's recompense, that righteousness."
(*Casa Guidi Windows*, E. B. BROWNING.)

Shelley's *Ode to the West Wind* is in a form of *terza rima*.

Triolet. A rigid form invented in France. It consists of a single stanza of eight lines, with two rhymes throughout, the first line being repeated twice and the second once, e.g.

"I intended an Ode,
And it turned out a Sonnet,
It began *à la mode*,
I intended an Ode;
But Rose crossed the road
In her latest new bonnet.
I intended an Ode,
And it turned out a Sonnet."
(AUSTIN DOBSON.)

Triplet. A group of three lines of verse rhyming together, e.g.

"Since moons decay and suns decline,
How else should end this life of mine?
Water and saltness are not wine.

But in the darkest hour of night
When even the foxes peer for sight,
The byre-cock crows; he feels the light."
(*The Passing Strange*, JOHN MASEFIELD.)

Trochee (–⏑) (/⏑). A long syllable followed by a short one (in English verse, a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed).

Cradle, laughter, stable, are each trochees, e.g.

/ ⏑ / ⏑ / ⏑ / ⏑
"Why so | pale and | wan, fond | lover?" |

/ ⏑ / ⏑ / ⏑ /
"Comes a | youth with | flaunting | feathers, |

/ ⏑ / ⏑ / ⏑ / ⏑
With a | flute of | reeds, a | stranger |
Wanders piping through the village,
Beckons to the fairest maiden,
And she follows where he leads her,
Leaving all things for the stranger."

Verse. Speech with a regular rhythm; metrical speech. (Verse is not always poetry. In the opinion of many critics, however, poetry is always in verse. Those who disagree usually stretch the term *poetry* to include parts of the Bible and confine the term *verse* to speech with an absolutely regular rhythm.)

A Verse=a metrical line, but the word is commonly used as a synonym for *a stanza.*

Vers Libre (Free Verse). A term loosely applied to verse in which different metres are mixed, or to any kind of verse in which traditional metre and form are discarded. *Cadenced Verse* is a more accurate term. See pp. 124–130.

Villanelle. A rigid pattern of French origin. It has five three-line stanzas and one final stanza of four lines. It has two refrains and only two rhymes throughout:

a–b–a a–b–a a–b–a a–b–a a–b–a a–b–a–a.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