

THE OLD CASE OF POETRY IN A NEW COURT.

ALTHOUGH hailed as queen of the arts and hedged about by a kind of divinity, Poetry seems to sit on an always tottering throne. In nearly every age known to human records, some one has chronicled his forebodings that the days of Poetry were numbered; and again the critic, or the poet himself, has plucked up his courage and uttered a fairly hopeful defense. Yet even this hope has been absent from periods which now seem poetic in the highest degree. Michael Drayton could find scant consolation for his art, dedicating certain poems to gentlemen who "in these declining times . . . love and cherish neglected poesy." The enemies of poetry are always alert, and often come disguised as friends. When, at the end of the Middle Ages, moralists ceased to attack the poets, there appeared the man of science, a far more formidable person; and under cover of the dust and smoke in a long battle waged between these open foes, poetry has been spoiled of one cherished possession after another at the hands of a professedly ardent ally. Horace Walpole's alternative neatly implied the whole question under debate: "Poetry," he complained, "is gone to bed, or into our prose," — an odd speech for one who helped to ring the romantic rising-bell. Bulwer, writing ponderously *On Certain Principles of Art in Works of the Imagination*, was sure that Prose had come to be the only medium of artistic narrative. Malicious people point even now to a language which never had any prose, and yet has lost its splendid heritage of verse; barring Grillparzer, silent long before his death, Germany has not seen a poet for the past fifty years. But, answers the optimist, who knows what *ambulando* argument for poetry is not now preparing somewhere in the fatherland? And as for Bulwer, his ink was hardly dry when

Tennyson began those charming and mis-called *Idylls of the King*. If epic poetry seems dead just now, it seemed quite as dead four hundred years ago in France. So this harmless war is waged. Scientific gentlemen point in triumph at the literary map; it is in order for defenders to name some Goodman Puff of Barson, Arcadia, as destined to win back the ceded ground, and for debating societies and other citadels of the Muse to send out fresh proclamations about poetic genius and its deathless mission on earth. What comes of it all? What has been done? What progress? Other causes come up, find a hearing on the evidence, get a verdict more or less in agreement with facts, and go upon record; this case lies hopeless in chancery. Why must it wait there, along with all the old metaphysical questions, for a decision that never can be handed down? If one may do nothing else, one may at least take the case to a different court, demand fresh evidence, and appeal to another code of laws.

Before all things, it behooves both parties to this argument to come at the facts in the case. Barring a threat or so of historical treatment, as in Peacock's pessimistic story of the four poetic ages, and in Macaulay's famous essay on Milton, writers who handle this matter of the decline of poetry invariably pass either into critical discussion of more or less value in itself, or else into amiable hysterics. To speak brutal truth, hysterics are preferred, and little else is recognized. It is all very well to point at Mr. Posnett and M. Letourneau and Professor Grosse, and to say that the study of poetry has been put on a scientific basis; the mass of readers who are interested in poetry, the mass of reviewers, — and one finds this true in quite unexpected quarters, — neither know these authori-

ties nor care for any scientific basis at all. The poetry of Professor Grosse's seeking, say critic and reviewer, is not our poetry, — is not poetry in any case, save by a wanton stretching of the term. In other words, they exclude from their study of poetry a good half of the facts of poetry. In any living science one begins by finding and grouping all the facts, high and low alike; and one then proceeds to establish the relations of these facts on lines of record and comparison. The facts of poetry should be conterminous with the whole range of poetic material; and when one faces this material, one has to do with an element in human life, although the ordinary writer seems to think that he degrades his subject by taking such an attitude. He searches for the cause and fact of poetry in a sphere outside of human life, removed from ordinary human conditions, and touching only an infinitesimal part of the sum of poetic material. True, there is nothing nobler than the effort to reckon with great poetry, and competent critics who succeed in this must always hold a conspicuous place in letters; but great poetry and the great critic are not all. Poetry, high or low, as product of a human impulse and as a constant element in the life of man, belongs to that history which has been defined of late as "concrete sociology;" and it is on this ground, and not in criticism, that the question of the decline of poetry must be asked and answered. The task of poetics, as yet almost untried, is to make clear the relations between higher and lower forms. Like war, marriage, worship, magic, personal adornment, and a dozen other institutions of the sort, poetry is an element in human life which seems to go back to the beginnings of society. Trustworthy writers even say it was one of the more conspicuous factors in the making of society; and when one is asked whether poetry, that is, emotional rhythmic utterance, must be regarded as a decreasing factor in contemporary social

progress, one faces a question of sociological as well as of literary interest, and one must answer it on broader ground than biographical criticism, in clearer terms than can be furnished by those old hysterics about genius. To treat the question as it is almost invariably treated, to make it an ingenious speculation whether any more great poets can arise under our modern conditions, whether Goethe, if he were born now, would not be simply a great naturalist, and whether Robert Browning or Huxley better solved the riddle of the painful earth, — all this is to keep up an unwholesome separation of poetics from vital and moving sciences, and to make the discussion itself mere chatter about a *question d'été*. Question d'été may not be good French, though I think it is sanctioned by M. Melchior de Vogüé; nevertheless, it ought to be good, for it expresses the nugatory character of studies which differ from useful investigation as the "summer girl" differs from that permanent she who is destined to warn, to comfort, and — in America — to command.

The advantage in this sociological study of poetry is that it can keep abreast of other sciences. The oars dip into actual water, the boat moves, whether with the current of opinion or against it, and the landscape changes for one's pains; anything is better than the old rowing-machines, or rather than the theatrical imitation of a boat, with the sliding scenery and the spectators that pay to be fooled. Moreover, it is wide scientific work, not laboratory methods, so called, like countings of words, curves of expression, and all such pleasant devices that rarely mount above the mechanical in method and the wholly external in results; in sociological poetics one is dealing with the life of the race and with the heart of man. F. Schlegel's famous word about art in general holds firm here; the science of poetry is the history of poetry, history in its widest and deepest sense. The futile character of poetic

studies springs from that fatal ease with which a powerful thinker sets down thoughts about poetry, and from the reluctance to undertake such hard work as confronts even our powerful thinker when he is minded to know the facts. To get the wide outlook, one must climb ; to get the deep insight, one must analyze and order and compare. Now the pity of it is that this outlook and this insight, this appreciation of a masterpiece and this knowledge of the vast material of which it is part, are not only rarely achieved in themselves, but are seldom if ever united. The great poems are studied apart ; and as a group, more or less stable, they form what is known as poetry. Detached from the mass of verse, and so from the social medium where all poetry begins and grows, they are referred to those conditions of genius which can tell at best but half the tale ; while that very mass of verse which one concedes to the social group, that unregarded rhythmic utterance of field and festival in which communal emotion found and still finds vent, is left as a fad of ethnologists and folk-lore societies. But the material thus divided belongs together ; each half should explain the other half ; and such an unscientific rejection of material must take poetics hopelessly out of the running.

This plea for a more comprehensive range of material holds good not only in the discussion of poetry in general, its origins, history, future, but in the study of the great poem itself. Take something that every one reads, and even Macaulay's schoolboy studies, — the *Lycidas* of Milton. Reader, critic, biographer, have long since come to terms with the poem ; it stirs heart and mind, it belongs to the masterpieces, it voices the genius of Milton, it echoes Puritan England. Here one usually stops ; but here one should not stop. *Lycidas*, as a poem, is the outcome of human emotion in long reaches of social progress ; it is primarily a poem of grief for the dead, a link in

that chain of evolution in rhythmic utterance which leads from wild gestures and inarticulate cries up to the stately march of Milton's verse and the higher mood of his thought. So far from degrading one's conception of great poetry, the comparison of rough communal verse should throw into strongest relief the dignity and the majesty of a poet's art. One has taken this poet from his parochial limits, and set him, strongly lighted, at the front of a great stage, with its dim background full of half-seen, strangely moving figures ; his song is now detached from a vast chorus of human lamentation, and now sinks back into it as into its source. In certain great elegies, as also in the hymeneal, this chorus actually lingers as a refrain. True, the individuals of the chorus are seldom interesting in themselves. The black fellow of Australia shall not soothe our grief with his howlings for his dead, nor even the Corsican widow with her *vocero*. But the chorus as chorus is impressive enough ; it is a part of the piece ; heard or unheard, it belongs with the triumphs of individual art. Somewhere in every great poem lurks this legacy of communal song. It may better be called the silent partner, without whose capital, at the least, no poet can now trade in Parnassian ware ; and as for lyric verse, there the partner is not even silent. All amorous lyric, whether of German Walther or of Roman Catullus, holds an echo of festal throngs singing and dancing at the May. The troubadours come down to us with proud names, yet they are only spokesmen of an aristocratic guild ; and this again was but a sifting and a refinement of the throngs which danced about their *regine Avrillouse* a thousand years ago. It was once lad and lass in the crowd ; it comes to be lover and high-born dame at daybreak, with a warning from the watcher on the castle walls ; then that vogue passes, with all its songs that seem to sing themselves ; the situation has grown deplorably unconventional, and the note is

false. Amorous lyric waxes more grave, taking on a new privacy of utterance, and a new individuality of tone. It is now the subtle turn of thought, and not the cadence of festal passion, which sets off Lovelace's one perfect song from all its kind; yet, without that throb of passion, that rhythm as of harmonious steps, one of them a piece of human nature, and the other a legacy from the throng, Lovelace had never made his verses and there would be no lyric in the world.

Poetry is thus a genesis in the throng, then an exodus with the solitary poet, then — though this is too often forgotten — a return to the throng. At least it is so with the great poets. Minor poets are by no means that *gente moutonnaire* which Sainte-Beuve declared them to be. Not the poet, but the verse-smith, the poetaster, is anxious to deny his parentage in communal song, and to set forth his excellent differences. He will daze the editor and force his way into the magazine by tricks of expression, a new adjective, a shock of strange collocations. In a steamboat on the Baltic I once met a confidential soul who told me of his baffled designs upon the vogue of modern fiction. He had written, it seemed, a novel without a woman in it; and he had printed this novel in red ink. "And I am not famous yet," he sighed. So with one kind of minor poet. He works through eccentricities and red ink. He is like Jean Paul's army chaplain Schmelzle, who, when a boy in church, was so often tempted to rise and cry aloud, "Here am I, too, Mr. Parson!" It is not so with the great poets, not so even with those poets whom one may not call great, but who know how to touch the popular heart. All the masters, Homer, Shakespeare, Goethe, even Dante, win their greatest triumphs by coming back to simplicity in form and diction as to the source of all poetic expression. Or, to put it more scientifically, in any masterpiece one will find the union of individual genius with that harmony of voices

and sympathy of hearts achieved by long ages of poetic evolution working in the social mass.

If such a range of poetic material is needed even in criticism, how strictly must it be demanded in any question about the art as a whole! One may turn from history to prophecy; but poetry must still be studied even more rigidly in its full range, and with regard to all human elements in the case. Because the communal elements, once so plain and insistent, now elude all but the most searching gaze, that is no reason for leaving them out of the account. Hennequin saw that simply for critical purposes one must reckon not only with the maker of poetry, but with the consumer as well; and the student of poetry at large must go still farther. It is after all only a remnant who choose and enjoy great poetry, just as it is only a remnant who follow righteousness in private life and probity in civic standards. But what of the cakes and ale? What of the uncritical folk? What stands now, since people have come indoors, for the old ring of dancers, the old songs of May and Harvest Home? Does the lapse of these mean a lapse in poetry at large? Or what has taken their place? How shall one dispose of the room over a village store, the hot stove, the folk in Sunday dress, and the young woman who draws tears down the very grocer's cheek as she "renders" *Curfew Shall Not Ring To-Night*? What of the never-ending crop of songs in street and concert-hall, and on the football field, verses that still time the movements of labor, and the steps of a marching crowd? What of homely, comfortable poetry, too, commonplace perhaps, but dear to declaiming youth? Only a staff cut from Sophoclean timber will support your lonely dreamer as he makes his way over the marl; but the common citizen, who does most of the world's work, and who has more to do with the future of poetry than a critic will concede, finds his account in certain smooth, didactic, and mainly

cheerful verses which appear in the syndicate newspapers, and will never attain a magazine or an anthology. If singing throngs keep rhythm alive, it is this sort of poets that must both make and mend the paths of genius. Commonplace is a poor word. Horace gives one nothing else; but a legion of critics shall not keep us from Horace, and even Matthew Arnold, critic as he was, fell back for his favorite poem on that seventh ode of the fourth book, — as arrant commonplace as Gray's *Elegy* itself. Members of a Browning society have been known to descend earthward by reading *Longfellow*. If minor poets and obvious, popular poems ever disappear, and if crowds ever go dumb, then better and best poetry itself will be dead as *King Pandion*. No *Absent-Minded Beggar*, no *Recessional*.

Whoever, then, will tell the truth about poetry's part in the world of to-day and to-morrow must not only know the course of all poetry through all the yesterdays, but must keep all its present manifestations, all its elements, sources, and allies at his command. Not only the lords of verse are to advise him; he shall take counsel with scullions and potboys. It is that poet in every man, about whom *Sainte-Beuve* discoursed, who can best tell of the future of poetry. The enormous heed paid to the great and solitary poets, as if there could be a poet without audience or reader, has distorted our vision until we think of poetry as a quite solitary performance, a refuge from the world. Is not poetry really a flight from self and solitude to at least a conven-

tional, imaginative society? Poetry by its very form is a convention, an echo of social consent; with its aid one may forget personal debit and credit in the great account of humanity. Now, as in the beginning, poetry is essentially social; its future is largely a social problem. How far, then, has man ceased to sing in crowds, and taken to thinking by himself? What is the shrinkage, quality as well as quantity, in the proportion of verse to prose since the invention of printing? Is Professor *Bücher* right in assuming that rhythm has declined as a social factor? Is the loss of so much communal song in daily toil, in daily merriment, like the cutting away of those forests which hold the rains and supply the great rivers?

Waiting for complete and trustworthy sociological studies which shall answer some of these queries, one may venture an opinion on the general case. Just as one feels that forests may vanish, and yet in some way the mighty watercourses must be fed, so with poetry. Nothing has yet been found to take the place of rhythm as sign of social consent, the union of steps and voices in common action; and whatever intellectual or spiritual consolations may reach the lonely thinker, emotion still drives him back upon the sympathy of man with man. Human sympathy is thus at the heart of every poetic utterance, whether humble or great; rhythm is its outward and visible, once audible sign; and poetry, from this sociological point of view, would therefore seem to be an enduring element in our life.

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AUBREY DE VERE.

MY acquaintance with Aubrey De Vere began twenty years ago. It was brought about through the kindly offices of Mrs. William Wordsworth of the Stepping Stones, Ambleside, while I was spending my first summer by the English Lakes at work upon an edition of Wordsworth's *Prelude*. He took great delight in my devotion to the poet of his youth, and also in the thought that this great poem was to be used, not in every school in our land, as Professor Corson insists it should be, but in at least one. The suggestions which I received from him were invaluable to me, and the acquaintance thus auspiciously begun ripened into a friendship which I count the chief honor of my life. So unflinching was his courtesy, so true his appreciation, and so generous his recognition of even the simplest efforts to make literature and life more beautiful, that on receiving the works which I had edited he responded with volume after volume of his own great works, and those of his father and brother, until I became the proud and happy possessor of them all. Accompanying these gifts were the letters so full of wisdom and truth, so warm with interest in all the questions relating to the condition of literature and education in America, and so tender in personal allusions, that they are volumes in themselves, like his own gracious presence full of sunshine and happiness. Of *The Legends of Ireland's Heroic Age* he wrote: "There is a paganism in literature much more dangerous than that of these early days. It belongs to that corrupted civilization which uses against Christianity those intellectual and imaginative gifts, as well as social and scientific progress, which have been the gift of Christianity itself. Human nature, even in periods usually branded as barbaric, has qualities that reveal sympathy with the divine; it

has ardent affections, simple refinement, singleness of aim, a noble self-sacrifice, and the unblunted sensibilities of love and reverence, without which the highest revealed truths cease to have a meaning. The heroic in its loftiest manifestations stretches forth its hands to the spiritual; its very deficiencies are a confession that it must needs be supplemented by a something higher than itself."

Aubrey De Vere's works are full of that spiritual passion which anticipated Christianity through the early ages, and has emanated from it in the succeeding ages. Only such calm and equable natures as his are able to forego the minute distractions, petty details, and external interests of life, to cultivate those energies of mind and heart which ripen into noble spiritual insight. It is because of the possession of such a faculty that De Vere has been able to re-create for us so much of the essential life of the ancient and mediæval world, and to reveal its vital relation to that of our own time.

De Vere's many-sided power of historical sympathy which made him familiar with dissimilar ages of the past was early revealed in *The Masque of Classical Greece*, and in *The Search after Proserpine*. His knowledge of nature and human life in Greece gives this work a coherency, grace, and dignity which remind one of Landor, while his felicity of epithet, richness of imagery, and warmth of emotion suggest Shelley. In it there is more abandon, more spontaneity and lightness of lyrical movement than in those later poems intended to reveal the processes by which a human soul becomes regenerate. Here Imagination lays aside her philosophic garb, and wanders with a light and graceful step through the forest and by the sounding sea with unhappy Ceres in search of her child Proserpine: —