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**VARIOUS**

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EDITORS FOR THE CLASS OF '62.

GEORGE M. BEARD,            WILLIAM LAMPSON,

EGERTON HEMENWAY,        RICHARD SKINNER,

JOHN P. TAYLOR.

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*The Poetry of our Prose.*

THE debt which the world owes her great Poets, receives its fullest acknowledgment in the veneration with which we cherish their memories. From the earliest history until our own times, they have been faithful in representing the impulses, the feelings, and the spirit of the age in which they have lived, and, in so doing, have formed a bond which has joined in close union the different stages of our civilization. It is no wonder, then, that mankind have regarded poetry with uncommon reverence, and have added increased blessings for every new service it has rendered them. It is, perhaps, because we feel the burden of our obligation so heavily, that we are wont to look with a passionate admiration upon the great Poets of antiquity. It may be, moreover, that our worship of the past arises from the fact, that in comparing modern poetry with the ancient, we see so plainly our own littleness. At least, amid the boastfulness and vanity of our age, we long to turn aside from its countless issues and unfeeling practicality, to contemplate the humility which characterizes the old master Poets of the world. It has been said, therefore, "that he who aspires to be a great Poet, must first become a little child." In advocating an opinion like this, however, one seems, after all, to reap but a barren reward for his pains. For we are wont, in these times, to look upon the great works done among us, as the peculiar fruits of that universal genius, which so bountifully marks our age. There are, however,

those who see in the simplicity and unity, which is manifested in the lives of some men, a more spiritual and fervent nature, a higher type of character than can exist under the incompleteness and specious show with which reputed greatness sometimes mocks us. They would have us learn to see in our great Poets but silent, earnest, simple men. We might fail in attempting to establish the claim that genius was theirs, in the present significance of the term, for their lives, neither brilliant nor wonderful, have not excited our amazement, and, certainly, cannot so speedily pass from our memory. Their place is not in the common temple which we build to our great men, but, separate and distinct, the world worships her true Poets around an altar not made by human hands.

When Lord Macaulay first made known to the public his opinion, that with the progress of civilization, there had been a corresponding decline in poetry, he was censured for advocating what seemed to be a literary heresy in this age, when poetry has shown so much life and gives such rich promise. Let us consider, if we mistake in adopting this article of literary faith, not in full, perhaps, but in so far as to maintain that poetry, in the later ages, has changed its direction.

In all Grecian character, nothing excites as much our sympathy and reverence, as that strong, unguided faith, which reconciled them to a destiny of which they were wholly ignorant. Unconscious whether this pure, deep trust would lead them, unable even to solve the mysteries of their own lives, they seem almost forced to rest their worship upon a more tangible divinity than the philosophy of that age even could sanction. Their Religion was drawn from their own imagination; their God was of their own making. The faith of the people was, indeed, a gross superstition, but the lives of those in whom the world even yet recognizes her teachers, speak to us in a tone far above the cry of the multitude. Their spiritual vision, led by imagination, extended even unto the throne of the true Deity. No revelation had yet set limits to it; no knowledge of the law restrained it; but, free and restless, it became the very soul, the living fire of their faith. This they sought to increase, to enliven, and to deepen, while we are but striving to remain steadfast in that which we already have. Their poetry was inspired by the self-same spirit, and has come to us as the expression of their dreams, as the fruit of their earnest faith. It was not simply a beautiful creation, which ministered only to the fancy, and then passed away like an illusion, but it was a grand work, which embodied their religion, and removed the veil that blinded them. It was a necessity of the age, subserving, then, a great pur-

pose, but now, it seems only to amuse and charm men. Imagination, formerly, was even more infallible than reason, but in this age, possessed of full and perfect knowledge, we trust it not, and seek to turn our poetry into a new and more common channel, from whence flows that only which satisfies a capricious fancy. Instead of that poetry which comes down to us through the ages, with swelling volume, like the grand tones of music, we have only its faintest semblance, and much, beside, that is light and trifling. What the imagination was to the Ancients, the fancy is to us. "The function and gift of the one, are the getting at the root; its nature and dignity depend on its holding things always by the heart. Take its hand from off the beating of that, and it will prophesy no longer; it looks not in the eyes, it judges not by the voice, it describes not by the outward features; all that it affirms, judges, and describes, it affirms from within." While, on the other hand, "the fancy sees only the outside, and is able to give a portrait of the outside, clear, brilliant, and full of detail," We may delight in our Ballads and Lyric Poetry, and call them excellent, if we choose, but the age which could produce a great Epic, has long since passed away.

But it may be inquired, however, does not Christianity, among the blessings which it has brought to mankind, also exalt and ennoble the spirit of poetry? Cannot our Poets see clearer through the mists which obscure their sight, than they could in an age, when they looked out on the darkness of night, without a single friendly light to lead them on? It is just here that we find the substantial reason for the decline of poetry. In the excess of our knowledge, we find a limit to our invention. The outstretched hand, which says to us, "thus far only," has illumined the darkness alike for us all. Beyond, the imagination is forbidden and refuses to penetrate, and we are left to solace ourselves in the unhidden mysteries of creation. Formerly, poetry, drawing its life from an imagination which knew no bounds, shone like a star in the night, but now, in the full dawn of the day of our civilization, its old luster has passed away. Religion itself has not enlarged or deepened this spiritual part of our nature. Time and society have failed to impair or improve it, but the power of the imagination has continued the same undefined, divine thing, in every age. It does not prophesy to us more truly, nor does it unfold for us more wonders than it did years ago. To the Ancients it imaged the Deity himself, and told them of their immortality; for us it can but reflect the light which has already come.

In this age, unromantic and full of its conceits, our search for the elements of real poetry must be a vain one. We are practical enough



to delight in satires, and oftentimes sentimental enough to poison the earnestness and passion of genuine poetic feeling. Pope wrought only in obedience to the spirit of his age, when he wrote that aimless, soulless, sounding philosophy of life, which we see in the *Essay on Man*. Had he reasoned less, and felt more, he would have given us a far better poem. So every age may bear testimony to the fact, that in abstracting from poetry its simplicity and singleness of thought, we deaden also its vitality. Analysis is, in truth, not the business of poetry. But it seems to thrive most in vagueness and in the doubt of inquiry. The spirit of this age, stern and uncompromising, eager for knowledge, and ever in search of wonders, demands the substance, and not the shadow,—the reality, and not the dream. Hence, we are engaged in the philosophy of things, and not in their creation. It is no wonder, then, that our poetry, obeying the call of the age for pleasure, should serve its changing tastes and varying fancy, instead of seeking to invigorate and develop the deeper impulses of the human heart.

The rule, however, which we have endeavored to establish, is not so absolute, and, consequently, cannot be so false as to admit of no variation. For believing that exceptions can but confirm and strengthen the general theory, we willingly adopt whatever additional evidence of this kind we may have. In an age, moreover, in which poetry has been struggling with all these difficulties, when that man has risen up among us, whose genius surmounts all opposition, he should be doubly honored for his triumph. In the great Poet of this century, we find such a man. Let us accord to England's Poet Laureate, if his own countrymen do not, the full measure of his deserving.

If civilization has not been attended by a decline in poetry, it has, certainly, caused it to take to itself another form. It comes to us in our times, at least, in a new department of our Prose. That species of fiction, which has sprung up within the last century, seems to be but the out-growth of a poetic element, which had slumbered and well nigh died out, during many ages which had preceded our own. But now revived by such men as Hawthorne, Ruskin, Dickens and Kingsley, if it speaks to the world in a different voice, at least, it has not lost, in the change, all of its earnestness, sincerity, and meaning. While the old germ of poetry, which we might once believe was extinguished forever, but from whence has issued this new life, has not imparted to us its whole spirit, it has, indeed, given us that which seems like unto it. In the Romance and Fiction of this age, we cannot believe, perhaps, that the imagination has found a field wherein it can

perform a perfect work ; for here it has no theme equal to itself, but we shall realize, in time, that it breathes in part the spirit of ancient poetry, and embodies, too, nearly all of our own. Indeed, we could hardly expect that our poetry, under whatever form it might appear, with a purpose entirely different from that of the dark ages, should inherit all of its old qualities. Formerly the imagination was wont to divine the unknown future, ministering even to the soul of man ; but, now, in our complete knowledge, the true poet finds, in our daily life, with its varying phases, but an indifferent subject, one which burdens, rather than exalts his spirit. The direction, therefore, which this branch of our literature has taken, seems to be almost an absolute necessity, for there can be no question but that the characteristic features of our times demand it. Perhaps, to this fact, more than any other, fiction owes the controlling influence which it now holds. Sir Walter Scott seems to have labored in conformity to this very idea, and, turning his poetry into a more popular channel, has thereby achieved his greatest success. To the teachings of our literature, heretofore, we have ever been wont to give but a dubious assent ; but this new power has risen up among us, which, without slighting our peculiarities, tells us wherein we lack, and finds a sympathetic chord in every heart. The old poetic spirit is not wholly dead, its fire has not yet altogether gone out, but a part still remains, which brightens for us even in the present. Lord North, searching through the poetry of modern times, was forced to conclude that there was but a single great Poem in the English tongue. Even though this judgment were a just one, and could apply to our own times, yet this age seems willing to confide its Poetry to those who have been called our Prose Poets.

To the Ancients their imagination furnished a religion, which told them of a God dwelling in the very heavens. They worshiped, indeed, about an ideal altar, but theirs, we well know, was no unmeaning service, no mocking show. Greece, rich in her philosophy and poetry, was also earnest in her faith and feeling. We would not call their wisdom worthless, for to them it was the spring of a new life ; nor can we believe that their imagination created for them deceiving, bitter hopes, for it illumined before them a new path, which, until then, was altogether hidden in the darkness. We do well, it is true, to imitate them, but let us also remember, that what we take from others, must be born again within ourselves.

W. L.

## TOWNSEND PRIZE ESSAY.

## Faith in Moral Truth essential to the highest achievements of Genius.

BY EDWARD ROWLAND SILL, CUYAHOGA FALLS, O.

STRANGE amphibious creature, this Man! A spirit of the upper heavens, masked in a pigmy body, bound apprentice to a life-time which is insignificant, even in comparison with that of the insignificant planet, its dwelling-place. Marvellous creature! Filling, when he stands erectest, only a matter of six feet of God's boundless spaces, up towards heaven, yet to the majesty of whose diviner nature, only the blue, fathomless deep of midnight, moted with stars as with dust of the silent chambers of eternity, can stand as symbol. Made of such strange materials, man constantly is inhabitant of two worlds, not separate merely by any distance of space, but utterly outside one another's sphere and reach; so that the brain, built up out of earth, never can conceive of spirit, and no particle of the soul, born out of spirit, can have touch or contact with aught that is earthly, save only in the mystery of life. One, a world of matter; appealing to him through appetites, and senses, and all visible forms. The other, a moral world; reaching him with its unseen influences, through thought and feeling, and all the wonderful life of the soul.

When we consider the character of these worlds, how all that is perishable and contemptible belongs to the one, while in the other are all things which have any real value to man, we cannot but wonder to find him living his whole life through, with sole reference to objects merely earthly,—straining brain and arm for purposes which must come utterly to naught when he lies dying.

Looking for the reason of this strange thing under the sun, we find that the mass of men are under a delusion. In some wonderful way, earthly matters look to them of the largest importance; the little years of a life-time stretch to an endless length, and life's foolish griefs and joys make to the man the whole difference of happiness or wretchedness. Thus humanity trudges its way from birth-day to death-day, doing its small work in what peace it can, satisfied if it have to bear no great pain and may sleep soundly at the end. To them, earth's common laborers, the truths of *this* world—say rather the hollow untruths of this world—seem sufficient.