

**THE SCIENCE OF
ENGLISH VERSE.
[NEW YORK-1909]**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649698950

The Science of English Verse. [New York-1909] by Sidney Lanier

Except for use in any review, the reproduction or utilisation of this work in whole or in part in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including xerography, photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, is forbidden without the permission of the publisher, Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd, PO Box 1576 Collingwood, Victoria 3066 Australia.

All rights reserved.

Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form or binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

www.triestepublishing.com

SIDNEY LANIER

**THE SCIENCE OF
ENGLISH VERSE.
[NEW YORK-1909]**

THE SCIENCE
OF
ENGLISH VERSE

BY
SIDNEY LANIER

So preye I God that non myswrite the,
Ne the mysmetere for defaute of tonge.

CHAUCER: *Troilus and Criseyde*.

If . . . some perfect platform or Prosodia of versifying were . . . ratified and
sette downe. — WEBBE: *Discourse of Eng. Poetrie*.

A Poet, no industrie can make, if his owne Genius bee not carried unto
it. . . . Yet . . . must the highest flying wit have a *Dedalus* to guide him. —
SIR PHILIP SIDNEY: *Apol. for Poetrie*.

. . . Gif Nature be nocht the cheif worker in this airt, Reulis wilbe bot a
band to Nature . . . ; quhair as, gif Nature be cheif, and bent to it, reulis
will be ane help and staff. . . . — KING JAMES I.: *Reulis and Cautelis, &c.*

Poesie therefore may be an Art in our vulgar, and that verie methodicall
and commendable. — PUTTENHAM (?): *Arte of Eng. Poesie*.

But the best conceptions cannot be, save where science and genius are. —
Trans. from DANTE: De Vul. Elog.

NEW YORK
CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS
1909

COPYRIGHT, 1880,

By SIDNEY LANIER.

COPYRIGHT, 1908,

By MARY DAY LANIER.

PREFACE.

IF Puttenham in the sixteenth century could wish to make the art of poetry "vulgar for all Englishmen's use," such a desire in the nineteenth must needs become a religious aspiration. For under our new dispensation the preacher must soon be a poet, as were the preachers before him under the old. To reach an audience of a variety so prodigious as to range from the agnostic to the devotee, no forms of less subtlety than those of tone can be effective. A certain wholly unconscious step already made in this direction by society gives a confirmation of fact to this view which perhaps no argument can strengthen: I mean the now common use of music as a religious art. Music already occupies one end of the church: the same inward need will call poetry to the other. How the path of spiritual development which has arrived at the former phenomenon must presently reach the latter will appear more clearly in the course of the demonstration to follow, which gives an account of the true relations between music and verse. It may be, indeed, that there

are more persons nowadays who retain the "elegant" ideal of poetry which was prevalent a century ago than would willingly face an explicit statement of that ideal. But it must be said that the world, as world, has abandoned it. The tepid dilution in which Prior thought it necessary to feed to his time the marrowy English of the old Nut-Brown Maid ballad; the laborious apologies with which Bishop Percy introduced his *Reliques* to the eighteenth century, as if he had brought a corse betwixt the wind and its nobility; the painful undertone which we hear in dearest Keats's preface to *Endymion*, as if he were not free from a sense of intrusion in challenging the world's attention to forms of pure beauty which did not directly concern either trade or politics; the amateurish trifling which crops out in such expressions as "polite literature" used even by Poe in a quotation presently given, and which is still to be traced here and there in current talk: are things of the past. That all worthy poets belong substantially to the school of David, that it is the poet's business to keep the line of men touching shoulders with each other, that the poet is in charge of all learning to convert it into wisdom, and that therefore a treatise on the poet's method is in its last result a sort of disciplinary preparation and *magister choralis* for the congregation as well as for the preacher of the future, — these will not be regarded merely visionary propositions, and perhaps will be here

accepted at least as giving a final unity to the principles now to be set forth.

The following historical details will be found to add force to these general views.

It is now about twelve hundred years since Aldhelm's *Epistola Ad Acircium*, the first essay on verse by an Englishman, was written; and Beda's treatise *De Arte Metrica* followed Aldhelm's dialogue closely enough to be fairly called contemporary with it: so that we find the thoughts of the fathers¹ stirring upon the subject of poetic science quite at the historic beginning of our literature. But notwithstanding this early start of English research into the nature of verse, and the host of subsequent speculations ranging from the modest *Certayne Notes of Instruction concerning the Making of Verse . . . in English*, which George Gascoigne printed along with his *Posies* in 1575, — through the learned absurdities of the "Areopagus" in which Sir Philip Sidney and Fulk Greville and Gabriel Harvey and Spenser proposed a scheme for reducing

¹ It seems highly probable that Aldhelm — surely the most fascinating figure in our literature before Chaucer — must have written vernacular verse earlier than Cædmon, and that he is therefore entitled to be called the Father of English Poetry. See William of Malmesbury's *Life of him*, here and there, and scraps in Asser's *Life of Alfred*. Of course, in this location of Aldhelm, as hinted in the term "historic beginning" of our literature, one bears in mind the possible sixth-century date of Widsith's *Traveller's Song*, of *Deor's Lament*, and of other poems.

the English language into subjection to the classic laws of quantity, — through the treatises of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries hereinafter mentioned, — down to Mitford's decorous *Inquiry into the Harmony of Language* in the beginning of the present century, the fancied discovery of Coleridge in his Preface to *Christabel*, the defiant metrical outburst of Poe in his *Rationale of Verse*, and the keen though professedly disconnected glimpses of Professor Sylvester in his *Laws of Verse*; notwithstanding this variety of investigation it still cannot be said that we possess a theory, or even a working-hypothesis, of the technic of English verse.

Conclusive testimony as to the general feeling upon this point is to be found in the circumstance that among the later treatises each begins by remarking the wholly unsatisfactory nature of all previous ones; while, among the essays of Elizabeth's time, the same discontent usually takes the form of a somewhat timid argument that a science of English poetry is possible — an argument not only addressed to a large class of Englishmen who evidently believed otherwise, but generally advanced with a certain tone of low spirits and deprecation which is unusual even for the queasy modesty of sixteenth-century dedications. As, for example, Webbe, writing in 1586, with a wistfulness which seems genuine enough desires to have this matter "thoroughly taken in hande, and laboured by some

other of greater abilitie . . . who, bothe for learning and leysure, may handle this Argument far more pythilie then myselfe."

If these facts be put together in their proper relations, they reveal an anomaly which I cannot but believe to be without parallel in the history of human thought. Remembering that the science of any art can be nothing but the body of large facts which presents itself upon assembling all the observed small facts of that art and classing together such as are substantially alike, let any one consider that in the last quarter of the sixteenth century the gravest critics were debating the possibility, not only of a science, but of an art, of English verse, after that art had been illustrated during a thousand years by Aldhelm, Cædmon, Cynewulf, the authors of *The Death of Byrhtnoth* and *The Wanderer*, Ormin, Lydgate, the author of *The Vision Concerning Piers Plowman*, Chaucer, the Scotch poets of the fifteenth century, Wyatt, Surrey, Sackville, and a host of less known or unknown singers. The state of men's minds upon this question at that remarkable period of our spiritual history just mentioned—the last quarter of the sixteenth century—forces upon us a corollary of such importance to my present purpose that, before proceeding to show how matters stand at the present day, I think it necessary to illustrate the attitude of Elizabethan thought towards verse with one or two brief citations from contemporary works.