

the composition of poetry, can impart it to others. Hence the ancients revered the poet as a special favorite of the gods, and attributed his art to celestial inspiration.

744. The study of poetry **may be abused** in two ways :

1. By **excessive fondness** of the art, allowing the pleasure found in its pursuit to interfere with the performance of important duties. Many persons, by too great a love of fiction, have become unprofitable members of society.

2. By **perversion of poetic talent**: the poet is, as it were, the priest of nature, the interpreter to the common mind of its more hidden teachings, the guide of mankind to a higher sphere of happiness. But many poets, like Ovid of old in his *Amores*, and Swinburne to-day, have made themselves the priests of Venus instead, or, like Byron and Shelley, they have taught the creature to rise in rebellion against the Creator.

CHAPTER I.

THE NATURE OF POETRY.

745. **Poetry is the antithesis of prose.** Some consider this opposition to consist in the outward form only, calling poetry whatever is in verse, and prose whatever is not in verse. Others consider the thought only, and call a piece, whether in verse or not, poetry when the thoughts have a peculiar charm or elevation different from the thoughts of common life. The peculiarity of this charm lies in a plastic or creative power which the mind exhibits in the conception of such thoughts. Hence the name poetry, from *ποιέω*, to make or create. Most critics, however, understand by poetry such literary productions as express poetic thoughts in verse.

746. Hence **poetry may be thus defined**: A composition in metrical language, produced by a creative imagination, and affording intellectual pleasure by exciting elevated, agreeable, and pathetic emotions. Poetry, then, contains three elements.

747. 1. **Metrical language.** Many a passage of glowing pathos in oratory, of graphic description or tender narrative in real or fictitious histories, etc., have all the conditions of poetry except versification. We do not call these poetry. The valuable work of Macpherson called *Ossian's Poems* does not pretend to be a collection but a translation of poems which were metrical in their original Gaelic; the translation has all the qualities of poetry except verse.

748. 2. **A creative imagination.** To *create* means to

make things out of nothing. This no man can do. He cannot even conceive any new object except by combining in his mind images formerly admitted there. For instance, having seen a 'horse' and 'wings,' he can combine these notions and imagine a 'winged horse.' This combination is poetic creation, which Shakspeare describes in a poetic strain :

"The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven ;
And, as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name."

749. 3. **Intellectual pleasure.** Pleasure is the immediate end of poetry, as of all the fine arts. This pleasure results from the excellence of the thoughts and the language ; for, as Coleridge says, "Poetry is the flower of all human knowledge, thought, human passions, emotions, and language." Still, pleasure is not its ultimate end ; war-songs, didactic pieces, sacred odes, and, in fact, all kinds of poetical compositions, can and should be referred to a further end, more worthy of man than mere transient pleasure.

750. The power within man which retains and recalls images formerly conceived is his **memory** ; the power which combines them anew, producing, as it were, new creations, is the fancy or imagination. These last two terms are often used as perfect synonyms ; but it is more correct to make a distinction between their meanings. What this distinction is critics are not agreed ; many state it as follows : **Fancy** moves on lighter wings ; its comparisons are founded rather on accidental qualities and relations, on associations more remote—hence the term *fanciful* ; it supposes a less serious frame of mind. Poe's "Bells" is one of its productions. **Imagination** traces comparisons founded on more

inherent qualities or on real effects ; it supposes more earnestness ; its images are more select, delightful, grand, or terrible ; its passion is genuine. Campbell's "Exile of Erin," for example, is one of its creations.

751. The whole process of poetic creation is excellently described by Akenside in his "Pleasures of the Imagination." We shall here briefly examine what are the various classes of objects which poetry creates.

Poetry is creative :

752. 1. Of an entire **plot** or story—*e.g.*, Parnell's "Hermit," Virgil's "Æneid," Shakspeare's tragedies, Newman's "Dream of Gerontius," Scott's "Lady of the Lake," Longfellow's "Evangeline."

753. 2. Of particular **characters**—*e.g.*, Macbeth, Lady Macbeth, Hamlet, Falstaff, Hiawatha. Shakspeare is remarkable for the variety and distinctness of his characters ; but Homer excels all other poets in this respect : mortals and immortals alike are so painted by his unrivalled brush that their forms and characters become as distinct to us as those of our familiar friends.

754. 3. Of peculiar **kinds of beings**—*e.g.*, of nymphs, satyrs, sirens, witches, ghosts ; or of personified moral qualities, as of 'Envy' in Ovid, or of 'Death' and 'Sin' in Milton.

755. 4. Of peculiar **scenes**—*e.g.*, 'The Gates of Hell' in Milton ; the 'Hell' of Virgil and Dante ; the interview between 'Hector and Andromache' in Homer ; Thomson's "Castle of Indolence," the 'dagger-scene' in "Macbeth," 'Jupiter and Thetis' in Homer.

756. 5. Of numberless **images**, bolder, more pleasing, more significant, more elevated than prose usually employs, and more copiously accumulated—*e.g.*, "The care that sat on the faded cheek of Satan" ; "The sound that tore Hell's concave" ; "Thoughts that wander through eternity" ;

the curses of Lear that "stamped wrinkles on the brow of youth"; Hamlet "benetted round with villainies"; "The power winged with red lightning and impetuous rage."

It presents the moon as a "Vestal," night as "clothed in a starry train," the sun as "a giant rejoicing in his strength." It dictates such lines as the following:

"So when the last and dreadful hour
This crumbling pageant shall devour,
The trumpet shall be heard on high,
And music shall untune the sky."—*Dryden.*

757. 6. Of special **phraseology**—*e.g.*:

"By them stood
Orcus and Hades, and the dreadful name
Of Demonorgan" (=Demonorgan of dreadful name).

"Notes that wing their heavenly ways."

"But the day-star attracted his eye's sad devotion."

758. 7. Of a happy **utterance of thoughts and feelings**:

"Nature to advantage dressed
What oft was thought but ne'er so well expressed."

Example of *feeling*: Burns' "To a Mountain Daisy."

Example of *thought*: Pope's "Essay on Man."

See a combination of creations in Thomson's "Hymn on a Review of the Seasons" and in Collins' "Ode on the Passions."

759. A poem **need not be a creation throughout**: its creation is the essence of the drink, the gold of the coin; but a drink need not be all essence, nor currency pure gold. The most imaginative writers are not always the most pleasant to read. Poetic phraseology, in particular, is often absent; as when King Lear exclaims: "Pray do not mock me."

760. Since poetry deals so extensively with creation and

imagination, it may be asked whether **poetry is truthful**. We answer that poetry does not express the literal truth, but suggests it. Its original conceptions are not to be judged by the ordinary rules of logic. It combines something with the reality; it sees into the core and secret relations of things, and is suggestive—*like the breath of an oracle*, says Barry Cornwall, thus exemplifying his meaning; prose would have said, like the *words* of an oracle. "Darkness visible," "In the lowest deep, another deep," etc., are expressions which logic may quarrel with, but poetry delights in them.