

PART III: METRE.

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INTRODUCTION.

POETRY belongs with music and dancing, and is opposed to the arts of painting, sculpture, and architecture. The latter class is concerned with relations of *space*; we see and touch and measure its products. But the former class has for main principle the idea of motion, of succession, and therefore deals with relations of *time*. In fact, the three arts—poetry, music, dancing—were once united as a single art. Little by little, their paths diverged; but for the oldest times they were inseparable. The principle governing this single early art was *harmony*. Harmony consists really in repetition, just as two or more parallel lines agree or harmonize because one repeats the conditions of the other. So in poetry, or music, or dancing, a certain succession of accents, or notes, or steps is repeated, thus establishing the relation of harmony. To be sure, this harmony of recurrence is found to some extent in all speech; in poetry, however, it is carried to a system, and under the name *rhythm* or *metre* is the distinguishing and necessary mark of poetry. Aristotle and his school maintained that “invention” was the soul of poetry. The substance, say they, is the main thing. But later criticism asserts that in poetry the form (*metre*) is the principal requisite. A late writer has declared that “*metre* is the first and only condition absolutely demanded by poetry.”

Not only, however, was harmony carried further in poetry than in common speech (prose); the element of *Adornment*, the so-called *figurative* tendency of language, grew into a system, and became a secondary mark of poetry. Hence Poetics must treat not only Metre, but also *Style*.

Further, it is hardly necessary to add, the metre and the style must be used in setting forth some worthy *Subject*. Hence the three divisions of Poetics: Subject-Matter, Style, Metre.

The *origin* and the *nature* of poetry are subjects on which it is easy to say a great deal, but hard to say anything definite or satisfactory. Poetry had its beginning in religious rites; it was a ceremony in which voice and foot kept time,—a wild sort of hymn. This rude germ grew, became an art, and went through the process of “differentiation”; till, with maturing time, Epic was developed and yielded certain territory to Lyric; both, finally, ceded ground to Drama; and from these three as centres went out a variety of minor divisions.

We may be quite sure of the early origin of poetry. It is about as old as language itself; and it invariably precedes prose. The domain of prose includes the relations of things in themselves and among themselves. Poetry submits all objects to an imaginative process, and asks how they concern not real, but ideal, interests. The popular use of the words “poetic” and “prosaic”—as applied to a landscape, or the like—shows this difference. Perception, imagination, are found in vigorous development among primitive races; whereas the reasoning powers, the faculty of abstraction, are at their feeblest. Hence we can easily understand that a

splendid poem could arise among a people utterly unable to follow the simplest processes in algebra or geometry,—sciences which deal with the relations of things among themselves. Undeveloped races, like the North American Indians, in common with ordinary children, speak a “poetic” language,—*i.e.*, one based on fancy and not on reason. Every known literature asserts this precedence of verse. Homer came before Herodotus,—and turn to what language we will, its oldest monuments are song. Fables and traditions all point to the great age of poetry. The Greeks said that poetry was invented by the gods. In the Norse myth, Sagá was Odin’s daughter: “like the Muse, Zeus’ daughter, she instructs men in the art of song.” “The old poetry,” says J. Grimm, “was a sacred matter, immediately related to the gods, and bound up with prophecy and magic.” The Gallic druids taught their sacred lore in verse; and many ancient laws (*e.g.*, of the Cretans) were in poetic form. Indeed, Macaulay went so far (*Essay on Milton*) as to assume that the older poetry is, the better,—that it degenerates as civilization advances.

The nature of poetry,—what is poetry? No comprehensive, positive answer can be given. Many have essayed a definition of poetry. “It is a criticism of life,” says one. “It is the beautiful representation of the beautiful, given in words,” says another. “It is imitation by words,” says Aristotle. “Poetry,” defines Carriere, “speaks out the thought that lies in things.” Ruskin (in his *Modern Painters*, corrected in his *English Prosody*) calls poetry “the presentment, in musical form, to the imagination, of noble grounds for the noble

emotions." For a longer and spirited definition, *cf.* Carlyle, *On Heroes*, Chap. III. It is easy to see that no one of these definitions is scientific; they are all æsthetic and vague. Or else they simply predicate certain qualities of poetry, — as that it is "simple, sensuous, and impassioned." Only a negative definition of poetry can be given in precise terms; so all agree in calling many characteristics of language unpoetical. But there is really no established standard by which we can try true poetry, as a chemist tries gold. Practical tests fail. Thus, Mr. Swinburne (with other critics) condemns Byron and lauds Coleridge; Mr. Matthew Arnold praises Byron, and so does the best German criticism; while Mr. Ruskin lays violent hands on *Christabel* (*Eng. Prosody*, pp. 31, 32). Again, as we have seen, modern criticism is inclined to test poetry by its *form*; but so sound a critic as Dryden declared *invention* to be the true criterion of the "maker's" work.¹

The reason of this is plain. Poetry, so far as the higher criticism goes, cannot be an exact science; for we saw that it differs radically from prose in that it deals with fancy, and is foreign to abstractions and the rational consideration of objects in themselves. The qualities of a triangle appeal to the rational judgment, and admit of absolute precision in the verdict passed upon them by the mind. Poetry makes no such appeal; we look upon poetry in the shifting lights of the imagination. In order to be precise, therefore, we must abandon the higher criticism, — give up all inquiry as

¹ Sidney, too, regarded verse as "an ornament [but] no cause to Poetry," and says: "One may be a poet without versing, and a versifier without poetry."

to the inmost nature of poetry, and the tests by which we try the highest forms of poetic expression, — and, accepting poetry as an element of human life, simply regard those facts in the different phases of poetry about which most men agree. Ben Jonson distinguishes "the thing fain'd, the faining, and the fainer: so the *Poeme*, the *Poesy*, and the *Poet*." All study of the first and last of these, the poem and the poet, whether it is in the domain of criticism, or in the school-room, should be based on a knowledge of "the faining," of Poetry itself, its principles and divisions. It is the object of this little treatise to lay down those principles in as simple a way as possible. Great care should be taken to distinguish this science of poetry from the art of verse-making. Thus, there were Old-Norse schools of poetry; and the same sort of instruction was given among the "Meistersänger" of Germany. The science, on the other hand, aims to formulate, as far as it can, the principles of poetic expression. It has received special attention in modern times from the Germans; but it is as old as Plato and Aristotle. Among the modern writers who have brought to its discussion a wealth of critical insight are Lessing (especially in his *Laocoon*, 1766), Kant, Goethe, the brothers Schlegel, Schiller, Hegel, and Vischer.