THE TRUE FUNCTION OF POETRY

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TO explain the true function of poetry is rather a sizable task for one who is entirely unversed in Aristotle, and yet it must be remembered by even the most pedantic member of a learned circle that Aristotle was no poet. Those who are poets can do little more than write poetry, and I believe it were easier to set down an epic than to explain how a single lyric stanza comes into being. Those who can write poetry, leave it unexplained: those who cannot, explain it; and they are at least to be thanked deeply for a commentative interest in that which they are unable to create. To pursue the invisible, to attempt an analysis of a glory whose best part is born purely of the spirit, is to invite mental disaster.

In his death, even as in his life, Alfred Lord Tennyson was of great service to mankind, for upon that illustrious and dramatic decease, Sir William Watson wrote an "Ode for the Last Great Bard" wherein there crept certain lines not germane to the world-shaking event:

> Who shall expound the mystery of the lyre?
> In far retreats of elemental mind
> Obscurely comes and goes
> The imperative breath of song, that as the wind
> Is trackless, and oblivious whence it blows.
> Demand of lilies wherefore they are white,
> Extort her crimson secret from the rose,
> But ask not of the Muse that she disclose
> The meaning of the riddle of her might:
> Somewhat of all things sealed and recondite,
> Save the enigma of herself, she knows.

Whence comes poetry, I have not the least idea. It is born, like all genuinely great art, of some immortal impulse in a mortal heart, of a strange unfathomable desire to create beauty of nothingness, or to frame some transient glory in imperishable language. In its creation, the imagination, that inward Holy Spirit moving soundlessly in mortal nature, plays a great part, touching a fleeting thought or sight with the wand of impelling fire. Reason and the use of intellect have but little to do with the matter, beyond refining

away those half-formed impurities which might otherwise detract from perfect expression. Reason is the hand to the heart of imagination, moving words into their proper form; but when the heart beats inaudibly, the hand turns to fascinating jig-saw puzzles in words and patterns after the manner of that sparkling verbalist, Alexander Pope.

Should poetry teach us something? I would say "yes", but that teaching must be done with an almost invisible grace, with an unseen and unapproachable power of suggestion. Man, I believe, is prone to be suspicious, at least to wear an uneasiness, in the presence of any who are obviously acting upon his mind with a fixed and deliberate intent. The teaching idea of poetry began, I imagine, with Aristotle and travelled down through the ages until Sir Philip Sidney added an illuminating phrase: "Poetry should be delightful teaching". It should suggest a nobler and more beautiful conception of existence, without insisting upon the acceptance of it, yet making that acceptance and realisation an instinctive adoption in the mind of the reader. The most fanciful of symbolists—Verlaine, Mallarmé, or W. B. Yeats in as ethereal and elusive a poem as the "Lake Isle of Innisfree"—perpetuate in the listener's mind a moment of yearning for a beauty whose fragility is almost beyond the embracing power of language. The true poet is more than teacher, pedagogue, or didactic hortatory moralist. He reveals ancient truth clothed in a new and shimmering robe of wonder, in the veils of a half-imagined beauty dormant in our own minds, which is given life, appeal, expression and glory by his words. He unshrouds an indescribable marvel of which we have always been half-aware, which we have long dreamed might some day be, and which is now made eternal by the magic of his conception, and the power of his expression, "by an imperial faculty whose throne is curtained within the invisible nature of man". The greatest poet writes not for his friends, for an immediate circle of admirers or critics, for the people of one country or for one age, but for all people and for all time. He participates in the eternal, the infinite, and the one. Thus dowered, under this immortal impulse, even a poet's single word may be a spark of everlasting thought. His true jury must be composed of his peers who shall live until the very end of time. He must be of no school, confined by no particular devitalising trend of the moment in philosophy or expression, and under no immediate and petty desire to emulate or please the artists of his own era. To be truly great, he must lift the veil from the hidden beauty of the world and make the familiar wonderful and glowing with the passionate ardour of his own spirit. The very

greatest of poetry must rest its best hopes of immortality upon the almost-perfect result of an inspired man's passionate thought upon the sublime mysteries of life, love, beauty, truth and death, and this result, if equal to the poet's original intention, must necessarily contribute to the happiness and possible perfection of man, and the ultimate glory of his destiny.

Poetry is the spiritual manna of all ages. The man who can truly appreciate it in his best moments approaches the god-like state, the man who cannot is merely an existent unawakened being. Bentham and other crassly-rational thinkers have condemned poetry as mere exaggeration and flight from the facts of life, but it must be remembered that the best of poetry does not represent life as it is *not*, but as it might and should gloriously be. The poet, in failing to make his lines run out to the end of the page, is thereby clothing himself in a robe of fancy agleam with the sheen of imaginative power and preparing himself to speak in a language which has expressed the noblest feelings aspirations and beliefs of the noblest men of all time. That language is apt to differ and move in a sort of cyclic conception: the dignity and sonority of classical poetry, the courtly fancy of Petrarch, the sombre majesty of Dante, the decorative sentiment of the early French poets, the subtle and delicate measures of Chaucer, the rich inventive grandeur of the Elizabethans, and the deliberate paradox of the metaphysicals which was refined away into the mere verbal dignity of Dryden and Pope. With the Romantics came a rebirth of that Elizabethan force and a passionate outburst of lyric ardour until then unimagined. Feeling in the ascendant was worn away by the more self-contained thoughtful beauty or grotesqueries of the Victorians, and died with an imperial or classic afflatus beyond the weirdly-carven, closed doors of the decadents of the nineties. Then came a sound of band instruments, breaking glass, and vigour, as Kipling opened the window and poetry marched into the daylight again. The Georgians under Masefield, Flecker, Grenfell, and Brooke called themselves "New Elizabethans" and did their vital best to shock, awaken, and interest mankind. The War came and with it a glow of idealism in poetry that naturally perished after four overwhelming years in realism, terror, and a sudden retreat behind the brooding wings of Hardyesque realism, whose only consolations seem that, although grief is eternal, it is not decreed that we endure it forever. As to the future, all is mere conjecture; in England fancy speaks again in de la Mare and Davies, the industrial slave has his prophets in Masefield and Gibson, and the Irish poets have left this world to translate for us the beauty of another world of the spirit. The

Americans, under the shadow of concrete and the thunder of machinery, have gathered in cults of imagists, expressionists and impressionists, their habitats, Greenwich Village, the Stockyards, or Middle West Cemeteries. The Canadians are still strolling about under the maple-tree, in voiceless forests, or pleasant tea-rooms. *Sic transit gloria poeticae.*

Let us turn for a moment to examine the place of morals in poetry. They have none; the morality of any deed, thought, or attitude is entirely dependent for judgement upon its consequence; if that deed or thought results in a devastating outcome, it is obvious that its pleasant primary aspects had something delusive about them. The preachment of absolute virtue has no place in poetry, nor has that of absolute vice, for it is only by a steadfast knowledge and realisation of both that we come to know the value and final meaning of both, and only with that knowledge is one able to put the true stuff of existence into poetry. Works of so-called immoral poets, Ovid, Burns, Byron, Poe, Baudelaire, Wilde, and the early Swinburne, are only pathetic tombstones of passionate remorse above the honoured graves of unfortunate men of genius who were unable to regulate their lives. No man or poet is ever deliberately immoral, but the broad highway has very often seemed an easy path to happiness. Only after some travel is it found to be otherwise by those who set off with the most idealistic of hopes. The poet who says: "Evil be thou my Good" says that only because Good in its other forms has constantly eluded him. When Swinburne writes:

> From the languors and lilies of virtue
> To the roses and raptures of vice.

he is merely exulting over four glasses of brandy, and he writes the aftermath in:

> From too much love of living,
> From hope and fear set free,
> We thank with brief thanksgiving
> Whatever gods may be
> That no life lives for ever,
> That dead men rise up never,
> That even the weariest river
> Winds somewhere safe to sea.

Baudelaire in unstoppering the flask of life's quenching miasmas only suffocated his best self; and he died a devout Catholic, as did Aubrey Beardsley. Oscar Wilde's "De Profundis" is an epitaph above the grave of the prose-master who wrote "The Happy Prince". No one has ever preached immorality or riot in poetry successfully,

for there are too many happy mortals in love with life to heed him. As to the moral preachment in poetry, it is ridiculous because it is entirely unnecessary. The pulpit is the place for that sort of thing. Pope, Watts, Tennyson, and the post-Tennysonians had their little day as moral prophets because they euphoniously set down what all men already knew to be true.

Beauty is a prime essential of poetry, morality an often tiresome encumbrance. Very little of the best poetry is born without love, and equally little in a monastery. Poets in their mode of living are apt to be harshly viewed by pedants and moralists. The poet asks much of life that he may give much in return; he demands the privilege of living, with an intensity avoided or censured by most easy-going mortals. He sings his sweetest songs and voices the deepest truths from the dazzling peaks of ecstasy or the uttermost depths of anguish. Passionate joy and passionate sorrow might be likened in his case to islands of experience, upon whose shores he is washed by the troubled seas of time, to contemplate for one moment the glorious possibility of existence, the transience of its most ardent joy, the immortality of its sincerest sorrow, and to hear the winds of destiny that wail across the strings of his spirit. That moment of calm is his moment of existence, the infinite instant wherein he may lift up his voice, in the praise of all that he has known, even as one who dares now to be his presumptuous spokesman:

> The year is dead, for Death slays even Time
> And was it not a proud and foolish thing
> To cry: "We love forever?"—'Twas sublime;
> For there's no heart that may forever sing.
> One sweet tremendous transient hour of love
> Is worth a thousand unawakened years,
> One perfect memory shall eternal prove
> Whatever be the price we pay in tears.
> Life is an envious miser, and he guards
> The wonder-stone of Love with jealous pride,
> And only the courageous pass his wards
> To wear the jewel for which great kings have died.
> Thus having known the best that he affords,
> We have done more than make the seas divide.