

## II

### WHAT IS POETRY?

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**I**N order to discuss anything rationally, we must first have a clear notion of what the thing is which we are discussing. Most misunderstandings, most false opinions, arise from mere confusion; and the heat of debate increases with the vagueness of definition. Even in the sphere of the physical sciences, where perpetual reference back to facts is implied in the nature of the case, and where these facts are visible, tangible, and ponderable, such confusion is not unknown. But the confusion is more apt to arise, and can spread further without detection, in matters where theory cannot be so readily, and has not to be so constantly, brought to the test of experience; where experience itself is fluctuating, and subject to the distorting influence not merely, as in physical science, of tradition and habit, but also of unreasoned instinct and variable emotion. Only by the continuous effort of generations have the physical sciences been brought into the state in which their really scientific pursuit is secured; only by constantly applying them to practical problems can we test the truth of generalisations and the relevance of theories, and be sure that our knowledge is real knowledge, and bears relation—a real and helpful relation—to the actual world in which we find ourselves and with which we have to deal.

In what are called the humane studies—those of art and letters—the same twofold necessity exists: the necessity of a clear definition of terms, and the necessity of testing the value of any study or pursuit by laying it alongside of facts

and seeing what relation it bears to the claims of life. Before considering, as it is my main object to do, the function and task of poetry in the actual modern world, whether as a subject of study, an art in practice, or (more largely) an element in civilisation, it will be proper, and indeed necessary, to clear the ground by saying what poetry is.

In this as in so many other matters the instinctive tendency in many minds is to give to the question, 'What is poetry?' the answer, 'I know, so long as you do not ask me.' And it is no doubt true that most people have some vague and general conception of what is meant by the word 'poetry' floating in their minds. But their conception is so vague and indeterminate as to be of little use. That poetry is a kind of language, differing in its nature alike from the ordinary language of our daily intercourse and from the language used in books of science or philosophy or history, of treatises on politics or economics or religion, of memoirs or essays or narratives, would be generally admitted; but when we go beyond this and ask what is its specific nature, many would be unable to say more than that it is language arranged in lines of a certain arbitrary length, with the words so artificially ordered as to produce an agreeable effect upon the ear, and to excite a certain pleasure, comparable to that produced by music, in the senses of the reader. Beyond that, they would have to fall back on instances: poetry, they would say, is, in ancient literature, Homer and Virgil; in our common English inheritance, Chaucer, Spenser, Milton; in more modern times, Wordsworth, Keats, Tennyson, Browning on one side of the Atlantic, Bryant, Longfellow, Whittier, and a thousand other writers who have succeeded to them, in our own Republic.

But what are we to think of these and other poets, not merely as men, not merely as writers, but as poets? What

is that thing called 'poetry' which they all produced, and what are we to think of it, as an art, as a way of occupying life and affecting the lives of others, as a subject to be studied or a craft to be exercised? When we come to this point we are faced at once with the confusion which arises from the absence of a clear notion of what is meant by poetry, and from the consequent absence of any firm common ground when we try to state and to appraise its function, its value, its relation to the task, the duty, the privilege of actual men and women here in the twentieth century. This confusion affects the eulogists and the detractors of poetry alike. Many wild words are spoken on both sides. It is needless to enlarge on this notorious fact. On the one side are the devotees of poetry, who regard it as something too lofty and sacred for definition, as something that stands outside of and apart from common people and their pursuits. On the other, in much larger numbers, are those who think of it as a rather trifling amusement, suitable for people who have nothing better to do; or even as something vicious and demoralising, something that weakens the mind, destroys industry and accuracy, cultivates fancy and sentiment at the expense of intelligence, and is a stumbling-block in the way of the pursuit of truth. To them poetry is like alcoholic liquor, a dangerous servant and a destructive master. 'One of the Fathers,' says Bacon in his 'Essay of Truth,' 'called Poesy *vinum dæmonum* (devils' wine), because it filleth the imagination with the shadow of a lie.' The churches, and religious people generally, have always, if they did not go as far as St. Augustine, at all events regarded poetry with suspicion, and not been comfortable about it. And here they are, for once, in agreement with the rough common-sense of business men who care for religion as little as they care for poetry. It is easy to laugh at the mathematician who

asked of Milton's 'Paradise Lost,' 'What does it prove?' But it is not so easy to ignore the man in the street who asks of poetry, not 'What does it prove?' but 'What sense is there in it?' It is not so easy to confute, before a careless public, the discontented man of letters who turns against his own art, and says of poetry, in the words of a contemporary of Shakespeare, that it is a thing 'whereof there is no use in a man's whole life but to describe discontented thoughts and youthful desire.' To such minds poetry is either a childish folly or a deliberate misapplication of human powers.

Against such an attitude we may set the many splendid tributes in which, while pretending to give a definition of poetry, the poets themselves have claimed for it qualities so marvellous, a value so great, that nothing else in life is so precious. Wordsworth calls poetry 'the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge.' Shelley calls it 'the record of the best and happiest moments of the happiest and best minds.' Matthew Arnold says that it is not only 'the most perfect speech of man,' but also 'that in which he comes nearest to the truth.' When poets commend poetry, their testimony may be taken by the outer world with some of the suspicion which attaches to people who cry up their own wares. Yet even after making all due allowance for this, the two attitudes of mind towards poetry are clearly inconsistent with each other. We may admit that there is truth in both, as there is truth somewhere at the basis of any widely and sincerely held opinion on matters which affect life. But if both are true, they are clearly not both true of the same thing and in the same sense. In order to reconcile them in any wider and more comprehensive truth, we must try to avoid on the one hand the glitter of rhetoric and sentiment, the 'luminous mist' (in Coleridge's fine phrase) which imaginative artists are apt to wrap round their own art, and on the other hand

the impatience of the practical and unimaginative man with anything that falls beyond the scope of his own daily experience, that uses terms with which he is not familiar and aims at objects which he has not learned to appreciate. And the best way towards arriving at common ground is to define our terms as clearly and simply as possible.

With this object, let us now proceed, not to praise or blame poetry (both are easy, and both are useless), but to explain what poetry is. I will first state the technical definition of poetry; from it, and keeping it in view, we shall be able to frame a substantial or vital definition of it, to define it not merely as a technical term, but as an organic process or function. Like all other arts, poetry has both sides. Like music, painting, or architecture, it is a thing subject to laws which can be taught and learned, historically studied and practically applied. Like them, it is also not merely an art, but a fine art; that is to say, it is a form of creative human activity, bearing an intimate relation with the energies of human nature, and with the outlook of man upon the material and spiritual world.

Poetry is, formally and technically, patterned language. This is its bare and irreducible definition. Its specific quality, its *differentia* from other kinds of artistry exercised on the material of language, is that it works language into patterns and uses it not only for its common and universal purpose of expressing meaning,—not only for its heightened or artistic purpose of expressing meaning in such a way as to express it beautifully and thus satisfy the artistic sense,—but also, and expressly, so as to bring it within the scope, and make it subject to the laws, of that kind of decorative designing which we call pattern.

Some brief further explanation may here be added to make the point quite clear. When we are defining poetry

and separating it formally from other kinds of spoken or written language, it is not enough to say that it is language which possesses design and has decorative value. All beautiful, dignified, and elevated language has that. The quality peculiar to poetry is something different. We may call it, as we choose, a decorative or a structural quality: for what lies at the root of all true art is, that in it structure and decoration are inseparable; each implies the other, and each exists, in any artistic sense, only by virtue of its essential relation to the other. Structure in the abstract, apart from the decorative quality through which it manifests itself to the senses and affects the imagination and the emotions, is matter of science, not of art. Decoration in the abstract, apart from the material in which it is wrought and its relation to the structure which it decorates, is meaningless. The synthesis of the two constitutes beauty; their vital union is the aim of art. Now the specific quality of poetry as distinguished from other kinds of literature is that in construction and decoration (its construction being decorative, and its decoration constructive) it follows the laws of pattern. The essence of pattern, as is well known to all pattern-designers, consists in its having what they term a repeat. Pattern is built up out of, or grows out of, a repeated unit; and the art and skill of the pattern-designer are shewn by his success not merely in making the repeat mechanical, but in so handling it that the whole field over which it extends has a beauty and a unity of its own, rising out of and yet distinct from the quality of the repeated unit. A row of equal dots is a pattern in its crudest and simplest form; these dots may be grouped, and the group repeated; these repeated groups may be themselves regrouped into a larger design, and that repeated; and so on. Not only so, but when the pattern is to be executed by hand and not by a machine, it may be treated

flexibly and varied subtly; it may depart from exact repetition without ceasing to be a pattern so long as the repeat, or its main elements, continue to be felt. All really excellent patterns, patterns which are works of art, have something of this flexibility. It may extend so far that the repeat has to be sought for, is visible only to the trained eye, and affects other eyes with a pleasure which they feel but cannot analyse and do not fully understand.

This is well understood as regards the arts of painting and music. It is less well understood as regards the art of poetry; but it is true of poetry equally with the other arts of pattern. Poetry, according to a definition which in all probability comes to us from no less an authority than Milton, is the kind of language which 'consists of rhythm in verses.' Prose also has rhythm, and its rhythm may be of great and intricate beauty, but it is not 'in verses'; its rhythm is not subject to the law of repeat. It is indeed the essence of prose that it has not a repeat; so much so that when it slips into a repeat it becomes bad prose, and affects us disagreeably. This is what its name means: 'prose'—the Latin *prosa oratio*—means language which moves straight forward without a repeat in its rhythm. Similarly, 'verse' (also a Latin word) simply means repeat.

The distinction then between prose and verse is fundamental. It is not quite the same as the distinction between prose and poetry; for while no prose is poetry (except in a very loose and figurative way of speaking, unhappily not seldom used), all verse is not poetry. All patterned language is verse, but to make it poetry the pattern must be skilfully designed and governed by the sense of beauty. Or, if we like, we may say that poetry and verse are the same, only then we must include bad poetry as well as good. It is simpler to say that bad poetry is not poetry at all. Milton again

here supplies us with an illuminating phrase. In the 'Paradise Lost' he speaks of 'prose or numerous verse.' Verse which is 'numerous,' in which the repeated unit and the way in which the repeat is managed are alike beautiful, is poetry.

The scope of pattern, in language as in all the other materials upon which human craftsmanship is exercised, is very wide. Its development varies from country to country, from age to age, from one school of artists to another; and even the same artist may use it very variously at different times and for different purposes. It suffers alternations of growth and decay: a period of healthy growth is succeeded by one of stagnation and disintegration, out of which again in time fresh growth arises. The condition of decorative art in any nation is, at any time, an index to the state of its civilisation; for art is a function of, or an element in, the whole process of national life. Art in a sense exists for its own sake; but in a more important sense it exists for the sake of the human life in which it is a factor. Just as, amid great varieties and fluctuations of movement, there are traceable certain broad lines of national development, so it is with the decorative arts of a nation, and with poetry among these: there are certain normal or dominant types of pattern; on these each artist varies according to his own imagination and skill; and from the normal and central type extend outwards in all directions other types, continually in process of invention, cultivation, and change. Some of them are experiments which come to nothing; others strike root and become important enough to affect or alter the normal type of pattern. Thus the art of poetry is always renewing itself through fresh invention under the stimulus of individual genius, and always rebalancing itself through a slow but final current of judgment as to the success or failure of the new type. Instances may be found anywhere by even a cursory



glance over contemporary poetry. But we shall be on clearer ground if we put aside living authors and look to the work of an earlier generation, which has already taken its place and can be looked at as a whole and from a distance. Among American poets of the last century we shall find the normal patterns of language, for instance, in the work of Longfellow, perhaps still the greatest, as he is the sweetest-voiced and sanest-minded, of them all. Notable divergences from normal pattern may be seen on the one hand in the lyrics of Poe, with whom curiousness of pattern was almost an obsession; on the other hand, in the singular and hitherto unique work of Walt Whitman, in which the reaction against formalism of pattern went so far that it has been questioned whether any pattern, in the strict sense, is left at all: or in other words, whether the contents of 'Leaves of Grass' are, or are not, poetry.

Poetry, then, according to its formal and technical definition, is patterned language, the material of words wrought by art into patterns; and it gives the pleasure, partly sensuous and partly intellectual, which all pattern gives through, and in proportion to, its decorative fitness and beauty. If we regard it not on its technical side, but in its substance and meaning, it has a corresponding definition: it is the art or process which makes patterns out of the subject-matter of language. That subject-matter is life.

As soon as we have grasped this truth firmly we shall understand the things which the poets have said about poetry. Life, as it presents itself to us as we pass through it, has no pattern, or at least none (except to some people of very simple and fervid religious belief) that is certain and intelligible. It is multiplex and bewildering; its laws are confused; it does not satisfy our hopes or our aspirations: sometimes it seems purposeless, often it seems, as Hamlet

says, 'out of joint.' It makes no pattern; still less does it make a pattern of beauty. The high office, the unique function, of poetry is to compose this disorder into a pattern; to bring out, make visible, lift up as a light in darkness, the particular portion or aspect of life which it touches; and in the hands of the greatest poets, to do this with life as a whole. In the beautiful words of Shelley, which I may now quote with the hope that their significance can be understood, poetry 'makes familiar things be as if they were not familiar.' It shews us the confused, depressing texture of experience in a new and strange light under which we can realise it as part of the divine order. It lets us see life in its inherent beauty and value, and gives us strength to live.

Thus poetry is, in no mere rhetorical or sentimental sense, the highest human achievement. It is the culminating point of that wide combined effort or instinct which is at the base of all education, of all study, of all work; and this is, to realise the potentialities of life, to master the world and enter into our inheritance. To do this is, in the full sense, to live.