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POETRY AND DEMOCRACY

THE suspicion or dislike with which poetry is regarded by practical people, however unjust or exaggerated, has its reasons, and has existed in all ages and under all organisations of society. But in a democracy poetry lies under another special charge, which if made good against it would be fatal. It is regarded as the amusement of a leisured class, as something savouring of an aristocratic society. Art and letters as a whole share in this charge, but it falls on poetry with special force. Some kinds of literature have an obvious popular interest and make an obvious appeal to the mass of the nation. Some of the fine arts are applied directly, like architecture, to the public service, or directly affect, like music, the sensibility of massed audiences. Others are excused, rather than approved, because they employ labour, encourage special industries, and produce tangible material products. This is not the case with poetry. It stands or falls on its own merits, in its own inherent virtue.

But poetry is a function of life; and where life is organised under democratic standards poetry is, or should be, a function of the democratised nation. Much of the poetry of the past has been produced by and for a small cultured class. In aristocratic societies such a class was the pivot and guiding force of the nation; in it the imaginative ideals and the creative instincts of the whole people were concentrated, or, so far as they existed elsewhere, were used by it for its own purposes. The rest of the nation was but the soil out of

which that flower grew, or the fuel consumed to give the ruling class sustenance, ease, and material force ready to its hand. The public conscience now demands that there shall be no ruling class, but that all shall be fitted to rule. The aristocracy of intellect is subject to the same vices, and falls under the same condemnation, as the old aristocracy of birth, or the cruder modern aristocracy of riches. The ideal of democracy—far, indeed, yet from being realised, but felt everywhere, alike by its opponents and its followers, as a pressure steadily moving mankind in a particular direction—is that culture, like wealth and leisure, should be diffused through the whole nation. It abolishes the distinction between active and passive citizens, between a governing caste and a governed people. That is its political aspect. But its larger and nobler ideal is that of a community in which not only the task and responsibility of setting its own house in order and swaying its own destinies, but the whole conduct and development of its own culture, shall be universally shared; in which not only government, but life in its full compass, shall be conducted by the people for the people; in which the human race shall be joint inheritors of the fruits of the human spirit.

Only once, and among a single people, has this ideal been partially realised in the past. The democracy of Athens set no less an aim before itself, and for a brilliant moment seemed to have attained it. Poetry and art reached their climax there together with democratic government. It was the boast of Athens that culture no less than political power was shared by all her citizens. Poets and artists drew from that national atmosphere the creative and imaginative power which they embodied in their work, and returned to the nation in visible and immortal shapes the patterns of life with which the nation had inspired them. But the Athenian

democracy rested on insecure foundations. Like so many bright things, it came quickly to confusion, leaving behind it only a memory and an ideal to inspire all future ages. Many centuries had to elapse before the ideal of a civilised democracy was again raised as a standard before mankind by the founders of the American Republic.

The crimes and follies of the Middle Ages, it has been well said, were those of a complex bureaucracy in a half-civilised state. It is towards the end of the Middle Ages that we find the beginnings of national self-consciousness, and, with it, of democratic poetry, embodying patterns of national life. Nor was this all. As the inchoate or embryonic democracy began to be conscious of itself, it began also to be conscious of art, even when that art was the art produced among and for a limited class. As it began to be civilised, it began to have sympathy with the products of civilisation, and to take, if not yet to assert, some share in them. The ideal world of romance and chivalry opened out before it as something in which it could find patterns of life for itself. A common and universal religion, which in theory at least recognised no distinction between classes, between riches and poverty, between prince and people, gave a wide popular basis to all the arts which were employed in its service. Education began to leaven the community. Poetry sought and found a wider audience. Shakespeare produced his plays not for a literary class nor for a court circle, but for the populace of London who flocked to see and hear them. His own sympathies with the people have been doubted or denied; he seems, in the mouths of his characters, to speak of them with something like contempt. But he gave them a national drama. Even the epic, that stately form of poetry which has thriven in the courts of princes and deals with the high actions and passions of the

great, became in a wider sense national. The verses of Ariosto and Tasso, court poetry written for a highly-educated aristocratic circle, were sung by Venetian gondoliers and Lombard vine-dressers, as those of Pindar had been sung in ancient Greece by fishermen, and as those of Virgil are found scrawled on street walls in Pompeii. In England, Milton, a poet of profound learning and extraordinary technical skill, was read and appreciated not only by scholars or artists, but widely among a people whose study of the Bible had introduced them to literature and taught them in some measure to appreciate poetry. His genius penetrated and inspired the Puritan democracy; and though his own republicanism was of a severely aristocratic type, he may be called in some sense the source of republican poetry. For, once poetry had taken to do with the fate and destiny of mankind itself, it had to concern itself with the life and labour of the people as the main factor in human affairs. It found the reflection of the kingdom of God in the commonwealth of mankind. The freedom of God's ransomed drew with it as its consequence a freedom which was of this world. The equality of men before God bore with it their equality of rights and dignity here. The brotherhood of all God's children led on to the doctrine of a true fraternity, not only religious but political and social likewise, linking together all members of the human race.

The eighteenth century, that great germinal age of the human spirit, the age in which not only the American Commonwealth but the modern world was created, was one in which poetry held itself back. It was waiting for the shaping of the new structure of life: the task lay before it of fashioning that structure into new imaginative patterns, and giving it thereby organic form and vital interpretation. Towards the end of the century this preliminary work was well

on foot: the new world was taking substance, and lay ready for the transforming touch of the poets. The American Revolution had created the Republic. The French Revolution had shattered the old régime and its tradition in Europe. The Industrial Revolution was transforming the whole mechanism and texture of civilised life. In both continents a new world had begun. It was the world of the Rights of Man, of the *carrière ouverte*, of the sovereignty of the People; and into this world poetry let itself loose, to create, to interpret, to vivify. The idea of democracy had arisen among the thinkers and been translated into action by the statesmen; the patterns of a democratic world began to be wrought out by the poets.

Among the great English poets of that age, the greatest, in the combined mass and excellence of his work, is generally accounted to be Wordsworth. He divined the new age, but did not enter into it. His early democratic enthusiasm, chilled by the terrors of the French Revolution, became converted first into despair, and then into a search, in the recesses of his own mind, for ideals of life independent of external things. Yet he was the first, after Burns,—and Burns was then still only the poet of a small nation, not of the English-speaking race,—to link poetry with the requirements of nascent democracy. In his 'Lyrical Ballads,' as in the poems which succeeded them during his greatest period, he set himself expressly and deliberately to write poetry in the language of the people, and to seek the material out of which poetry was to be shaped in the common thoughts and passions and experiences of mankind.

Hardly less was the share borne in the democratisation of poetry by other great poets of that great period. Byron, himself an aristocrat by birth, believed in democracy; by his appeal to the elemental human passions he brought the im-

pect of poetry on the larger world which was prepared to receive it. Shelley reared before the eyes of that larger world the glittering fabric of an imaginatively reconstructed universe in which, freed from tyranny and superstition, from selfishness and apathy, the human race might develop its noblest qualities, and life be one long ecstasy of joy. Even those who regard Byron as a beautiful fiend, and Shelley as an ineffectual angel, must admit the truth of the striking words used of them by Tennyson, that these two poets, 'however mistaken they may be, did yet give the world another heart and new pulses.'

Even more striking and significant is the attitude towards an anticipated democracy, and the part to be played in it by poetry, which was taken by Keats. He was the youngest of that great group of revolutionary poets, the most gifted and the most splendid in his wonderful promise and unfinished achievement. Beyond all those others, with a width and foresight of vision all his own, he pointed and urged poetry forward. The horizon to which he saw is still distant and unreachd. That 'joy in widest commonalty spread,' of which Wordsworth had profound glimpses, and which Shelley saw, as it were, through an iridescent burning mist, lay before the eyes of Keats, clearly, definitely, attainably. The world to which he looked forward was one in which, as he says, 'every human being might become great, and humanity, instead of being a wide heath of furze and briars, with here and there a remote oak or pine, would become a grand democracy of forest trees.' In that image he embodies for us the ideal of democracy in the highest and amplest form. And of this democratic ideal, poetry, because coextensive with human life, will be the informing spirit.

Democracy, we are often told, is on its trial. The brilliant promises of its youth have not been realised. It has

not transformed human nature. It has not done away with the vices of older civilisations, and it has developed new faults of its own. It is, among many of those who do not expressly reject it, accepted wearily as a necessity rather than embraced eagerly as a faith. Citizenship has with them become a burden, not an inspiration. Freedom and equality have sunk into mere formulary names, giving neither light nor heat, having little to do with the actual conduct and motives of life. Material progress goes on mechanically; the higher progress, the fuller self-realisation of mankind, is doubted or denied. Once more, as Wordsworth complained a century ago, false gods have been enthroned in the temple of the human spirit.

*The wealthiest man among us is the best;
No grandeur now in nature or in book
Delights us: rapine, avarice, expense,—
This is idolatry, and these we adore:
Plain living and high thinking are no more.*

So Wordsworth wrote then; and we must remember, if we are inclined to be despondent over the present case of democracy, that our dissatisfaction is no new thing, and that the mere fact of our being dissatisfied shews that we have not lost sight of higher ideals, and have the impulse in us, if we can direct and sustain it, to resume our progress towards them.

Poetry is also on its trial. The patterns of life it offers to us, the interpretation of life with which it presents us, seem to many unreal and remote. It speaks a strange language, thin and ghostly to the ears that are not attuned to it; it often holds itself aloof from, or mingles but passingly with,

the main current and texture of occupations and endeavours, of private pursuits or public interests.

Each alike suffers from the divorce that is between them. A democracy which excludes or ignores poetry cuts itself off from one of the main sources of vital strength and national greatness. A poetry which is out of sympathy with democracy is thereby out of touch with actual life. But the future that lies before both is splendid, if both will work in harmony, if national life is inspired and sustained by poetry, and poetry takes nothing less than that life for its province, gives it a heightened meaning, brings out from it the latent patterns of beauty after which it blindly but unceasingly aspires. Poetry, as Dryden said of it, is articulate music: the music to which life moves, and in which it finds its discords resolved.

Such is the task and function of the poets. But the study of poetry is not for poets alone, any more than the study of colour and form is confined to painters, or the study of music to composers. The appeal of art is universal. The inheritance of the present age is not merely the present, but the whole past as well. Of that inheritance, the great poetry of the world, from Homer downwards, is the most precious portion. It preserves for us, still alive and still having power to move and kindle, the best of what mankind has thought and felt, the most perfect forms into which it has cast its vision and reflection, its emotion and aspiration. And thus the study of poetry is part of democratic education; and the poetry of democracy, kindled by that study and appealing to a nation educated in it, will be the articulate music of national life.

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