

MATTHEW  
ARNOLD

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ENGLISH  
LITERATURE AND  
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learned to care for all these together, and to go on unto perfection or true civilisation, then at last they will be professing and practising the true and noble science of politics and the true and noble science of economics, instead of, as now, semblances only of these sciences, or at best fragments of them. And then will come at last the extinction or the conversion of the Tories, the restitution of all things, the reign of the Liberal saints. But meanwhile, so long as the Liberals do only as they have done hitherto, they will not permanently satisfy the community; but the Tories will again, from time to time, be tried,—tried and found wanting. And we, who study to be quiet, and to keep our temper and our tongue under control, shall continue to speak of the principles of our two great political parties much as we do now; while clear-headed, but rough, impatient, and angry men, like Cobbett, will call them *the principles of Pratt, the principles of Yorke*.

## The Study of Poetry<sup>1</sup>

'The future of poetry is immense, because in poetry, where it is worthy of its high destinies, our race, as time goes on, will find an ever surer and surer stay. There is not a creed which is not shaken, not an accredited dogma which is not shown to be questionable, not a received tradition which does not threaten to dissolve. Our religion has materialised itself in the fact, in the supposed fact; it has attached its emotion to the fact, and now the fact is failing it. But for poetry the idea is everything; the rest is a world of illusion, of divine illusion. Poetry attaches its emotion to the idea; the idea *is* the fact. The strongest part of our religion to-day is its unconscious poetry.'

Let me be permitted to quote these words of my own, as uttering the thought which should, in my opinion, go with us and govern us in all our study of poetry. In the present work it is the course of one great contributory stream to the world-river of poetry that we are invited to follow. We are here invited to trace the stream of English poetry. But whether we set ourselves, as here, to follow only one of the several streams that make the mighty river of poetry, or whether we seek to know them all, our governing thought should be the same. We should conceive of poetry worthily, and more highly than it has been the custom to conceive of it. We should conceive of it as capable of higher uses, and called to higher destinies, than those which in general men have assigned to it hitherto. More and more mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us. Without poetry, our science will appear incomplete; and most of what

<sup>1</sup> Published in 1880 as the General Introduction to *The English Poets*, edited by T. H. Ward.

now passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry. Science, I say, will appear incomplete without it. For finely and truly does Wordsworth call poetry 'the impassioned expression which is in the countenance of all science'; and what is a countenance without its expression? Again, Wordsworth finely and truly calls poetry 'the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge': our religion, parading evidences such as those on which the popular mind relies now; our philosophy, pluming itself on its reasonings about causation and finite and infinite being; what are they but the shadows and dreams and false shows of knowledge? The day will come when we shall wonder at ourselves for having trusted to them, for having taken them seriously; and the more we perceive their hollowness, the more we shall prize 'the breath and finer spirit of knowledge' offered to us by poetry.

But if we conceive thus highly of the destinies of poetry, we must also set our standard for poetry high, since poetry, to be capable of fulfilling such high destinies, must be poetry of a high order of excellence. We must accustom ourselves to a high standard and to a strict judgment. Sainte-Beuve relates that Napoleon one day said, when somebody was spoken of in his presence as a charlatan: 'Charlatan as much as you please; but where is there *not* charlatanism?'—'Yes,' answers Sainte-Beuve, 'in politics, in the art of governing mankind, that is perhaps true. But in the order of thought, in art, the glory, the eternal honour is that charlatanism shall find no entrance; herein lies the inviolableness of that noble portion of man's being.' It is admirably said, and let us hold fast to it. In poetry, which is thought and art in one, it is the glory, the eternal honour, that charlatanism shall find no entrance; that this noble sphere be kept inviolate and inviolable. Charlatanism is for confusing or obliterating the distinctions between excellent and inferior, sound and unsound or only half-sound, true and untrue or only half-true. It is charlatanism, conscious or unconscious, whenever we confuse or obliterate these. And in poetry, more than anywhere else, it is unpermissible to confuse or obliterate them. For in poetry the distinction between excellent and inferior, sound and unsound or only half-sound, true and untrue or only

half-true, is of paramount importance. It is of paramount importance because of the high destinies of poetry. In poetry, as a criticism of life under the conditions fixed for such a criticism by the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty, the spirit of our race will find, we have said, as time goes on and as other helps fail, its consolation and stay. But the consolation and stay will be of power in proportion to the power of the criticism of life. And the criticism of life will be of power in proportion as the poetry conveying it is excellent rather than inferior, sound rather than unsound or half-sound, true rather than untrue or half-true.

The best poetry is what we want; the best poetry will be found to have a power of forming, sustaining, and delighting us, as nothing else can. A clearer, deeper sense of the best in poetry, and of the strength and joy to be drawn from it, is the most precious benefit which we can gather from a poetical collection such as the present. And yet in the very nature and conduct of such a collection there is inevitably something which tends to obscure in us the consciousness of what our benefit should be, and to distract us from the pursuit of it. We should therefore steadily set it before our minds at the outset, and should compel ourselves to revert constantly to the thought of it as we proceed.

Yes; constantly, in reading poetry, a sense for the best, the really excellent, and of the strength and joy to be drawn from it, should be present in our minds and should govern our estimate of what we read. But this real estimate, the only true one, is liable to be superseded, if we are not watchful, by two other kinds of estimate, the historic estimate and the personal estimate, both of which are fallacious. A poet or a poem may count to us historically, they may count to us on grounds personal to ourselves, and they may count to us really. They may count to us historically. The course of development of a nation's language, thought, and poetry, is profoundly interesting; and by regarding a poet's work as a stage in this course of development we may easily bring ourselves to make it of more importance as poetry than in itself it really is, we may come to use a language of quite exaggerated praise in criticising it;

in short, to over-rate it. So arises in our poetic judgments the fallacy caused by the estimate which we may call historic. Then, again, a poet or a poem may count to us on grounds personal to ourselves. Our personal affinities, likings, and circumstances, have great power to sway our estimate of this or that poet's work, and to make us attach more importance to it as poetry than in itself it really possesses, because to us it is, or has been, of high importance. Here also we over-rate the object of our interest, and apply to it a language of praise which is quite exaggerated. And thus we get the source of a second fallacy in our poetic judgments—the fallacy caused by an estimate which we may call personal.

Both fallacies are natural. It is evident how naturally the study of the history and development of a poetry may incline a man to pause over reputations and works once conspicuous but now obscure, and to quarrel with a careless public for skipping, in obedience to mere tradition and habit, from one famous name or work in its national poetry to another, ignorant of what it misses, and of the reason for keeping what it keeps, and of the whole process of growth in its poetry. The French have become diligent students of their own early poetry, which they long neglected; the study makes many of them dissatisfied with their so-called classical poetry, the court-tragedy of the seventeenth century, a poetry which Pellisson long ago reproached with its want of the true poetic stamp, with its *politesses stérile et rampante*, but which nevertheless has reigned in France as absolutely as if it had been the perfection of classical poetry indeed. The dissatisfaction is natural; yet a lively and accomplished critic, M. Charles d'Héricault, the editor of Clément Marot, goes too far when he says that 'the cloud of glory playing round a classic is a mist as dangerous to the future of a literature as it is intolerable for the purposes of history.' 'It hinders,' he goes on, 'it hinders us from seeing more than one single point, the culminating and exceptional point; the summary, fictitious and arbitrary, of a thought and of a work. It substitutes a halo for a physiognomy, it puts a statue where there was once a man, and hiding from us all trace of the labour, the attempts, the weaknesses, the failures, it claims not study but veneration; it does not show us how the thing is done, it

imposes upon us a model. Above all, for the historian this creation of classic personages is inadmissible; for it withdraws the poet from his time, from his proper life, it breaks historical relationships, it blinds criticism by conventional admiration, and renders the investigation of literary origins unacceptable. It gives us a human personage no longer, but a God seated immovable amidst His perfect work, like Jupiter on Olympus; and hardly will it be possible for the young student, to whom such work is exhibited at such a distance from him, to believe that it did not issue ready made from that divine head.'

All this is brilliantly and tellingly said, but we must plead for a distinction. Everything depends on the reality of a poet's classic character. If he is a dubious classic, let us sift him; if he is a false classic, let us explode him. But if he is a real classic, if his work belongs to the class of the very best (for this is the true and right meaning of the word *classic, classical*), then the great thing for us is to feel and enjoy his work as deeply as ever we can, and to appreciate the wide difference between it and all work which has not the same high character. This is what is salutary, this is what is formative; this is the great benefit to be got from the study of poetry. Everything which interferes with it, which hinders it, is injurious. True, we must read our classic with open eyes, and not with eyes blinded with superstition; we must perceive when his work comes short, when it drops out of the class of the very best, and we must rate it, in such cases, at its proper value. But the use of this negative criticism is not in itself, it is entirely in its enabling us to have a clearer sense and a deeper enjoyment of what is truly excellent. To trace the labour, the attempts, the weaknesses, the failures of a genuine classic, to acquaint oneself with his time and his life and his historical relationships, is mere literary dilettantism unless it has that clear sense and deeper enjoyment for its end. It may be said that the more we know about a classic the better we shall enjoy him; and, if we lived as long as Methuselah and had all of us heads of perfect clearness and wills of perfect steadfastness, this might be true in fact as it is plausible in theory. But the case here is much the same as the case with the Greek and Latin studies of our schoolboys. The elaborate philological groundwork which we require them

to lay is in theory an admirable preparation for appreciating the Greek and Latin authors worthily. The more thoroughly we lay the groundwork, the better we shall be able, it may be said, to enjoy the authors. True, if time were not so short, and schoolboys' wits not so soon tired and their power of attention exhausted; only, as it is, the elaborate philological preparation goes on, but the authors are little known and less enjoyed. So with the investigator of 'historic origins' in poetry. He ought to enjoy the true classic all the better for his investigations; he often is distracted from the enjoyment of the best, and with the less good he overbusies himself, and is prone to over-rate it in proportion to the trouble which it has cost him.

The idea of tracing historic origins and historical relationships cannot be absent from a compilation like the present. And naturally the poets to be exhibited in it will be assigned to those persons for exhibition who are known to prize them highly, rather than to those who have no special inclination towards them. Moreover the very occupation with an author, and the business of exhibiting him, disposes us to affirm and amplify his importance. In the present work, therefore, we are sure of frequent temptation to adopt the historic estimate, or the personal estimate, and to forget the real estimate; which latter, nevertheless, we must employ if we are to make poetry yield us its full benefit. So high is that benefit, the benefit of clearly feeling and of deeply enjoying the really excellent, the truly classic in poetry, that we do well, I say, to set it fixedly before our minds as our object in studying poets and poetry, and to make the desire of attaining it the one principle to which, as the *Imitation* says, whatever we may read or come to know, we always return. *Cum multa legeris et cognoveris, ad unum semper oportet redire principium.*

The historic estimate is likely in especial to affect our judgment and our language when we are dealing with ancient poets; the personal estimate when we are dealing with poets our contemporaries, or at any rate modern. The exaggerations due to the historic estimate are not in themselves, perhaps, of very much gravity. Their report hardly enters the general ear; probably they do not always impose even on the literary men who

adopt them. But they lead to a dangerous abuse of language. So we hear Cædmon, amongst our own poets, compared to Milton. I have already noticed the enthusiasm of one accomplished French critic for 'historic origins.' Another eminent French critic, M. Vitet, comments upon that famous document of the early poetry of his nation, the *Chanson de Roland*. It is indeed a most interesting document. The *joculator* or *jongleur* Taillefer, who was with William the Conqueror's army at Hastings, marched before the Norman troops, so said the tradition, singing 'of Charlemagne and of Roland and of Oliver, and of the vassals who died at Roncevaux'; and it is suggested that in the *Chanson de Roland* by one Turolodus or Théroulde, a poem preserved in a manuscript of the twelfth century in the Bodleian Library at Oxford, we have certainly the matter, perhaps even some of the words, of the chaunt which Taillefer sang. The poem has vigour and freshness; it is not without pathos. But M. Vitet is not satisfied with seeing in it a document of some poetic value, and of very high historic and linguistic value; he sees in it a grand and beautiful work, a monument of epic genius. In its general design he finds the grandiose conception, in its details he finds the constant union of simplicity with greatness, which are the marks, he truly says, of the genuine epic, and distinguish it from the artificial epic of literary ages. One thinks of Homer; this is the sort of praise which is given to Homer, and justly given. Higher praise there cannot well be, and it is the praise due to epic poetry of the highest order only, and to no other. Let us try, then, the *Chanson de Roland* at its best. Roland, mortally wounded, lays himself down under a pine-tree, with his face turned towards Spain and the enemy—

'De plusurs choses à remembrer li prist,  
De tantes teres cume li bers cunquist,  
De dulce France, des humes de sun lign,  
De Carlemagne sun seignor ki l'nurrit.'<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Then began he to call many things to remembrance,—all the lands which his valour conquered, and pleasant France, and the men of his lineage, and Charlemagne his liege lord who nourished him.—*Chanson de Roland*, iii. 939–942.

That is primitive work, I repeat, with an undeniable poetic quality of its own. It deserves such praise, and such praise is sufficient for it. But now turn to Homer—

5 Ὡς φάτο· τοὺς δ' ἤδη κάτεχεν φινίξοος αἶα  
ἐν Λακεδαίμονι αὐθι, φίλην ἐν πατρίδι γαίῃ.<sup>1</sup>

We are here in another world, another order of poetry altogether; here is rightly due such supreme praise as that which M. Vitet gives to the *Chanson de Roland*. If our words are to have any meaning, if our judgments are to have any solidity, we  
10 must not heap that supreme praise upon poetry of an order immeasurably inferior.

Indeed there can be no more useful help for discovering what poetry belongs to the class of the truly excellent, and can therefore do us most good, than to have always in one's mind  
15 lines and expressions of the great masters, and to apply them as a touchstone to other poetry. Of course we are not to require this other poetry to resemble them; it may be very dissimilar. But if we have any tact we shall find them, when we have lodged them well in our minds, an infallible touchstone  
20 for detecting the presence or absence of high poetic quality, and also the degree of this quality, in all other poetry which we may place beside them. Short passages, even single lines, will serve our turn quite sufficiently. Take the two lines which I have just quoted from Homer, the poet's comment on Helen's  
25 mention of her brothers;—or take his

Ἄ δειλώ, τί σφῶϊ δόμεν Πηληϊ ἄνακτι  
θητηῶ; ἡμεῖς δ' ἐστὸν ἀγήρω τ' ἀθανάτω τε.  
ἦ ἵνα δυστήνοισι μετ' ἀνδράσιν ἄλγε' ἔχρητον ;<sup>2</sup>

30 <sup>1</sup> So said she; they long since in Earth's soft arms were reposing,  
There, in their own dear land, their fatherland, Lacedæmon.'  
*Iliad*, iii. 243, 244 (translated by Dr. Hawtrey).

<sup>2</sup> 'Ah, unhappy pair, why gave we you to King Peleus, to a mortal? but ye are without old age, and immortal. Was it that with men born to misery ye might have sorrow?'—*Iliad*, xvii. 443–445.

the address of Zeus to the horses of Peleus;—or take finally his

Καὶ σέ, γέρον, τὸ πρὶν μὲν ἀκούομεν ὄλβιον εἶναι.<sup>1</sup>

the words of Achilles to Priam, a suppliant before him. Take that incomparable line and a half of Dante, Ugolino's tremendous words—

'Io non piangeva; sì dentro impietrai.  
Piangevan elli . . .'<sup>2</sup>

take the lovely words of Beatrice to Virgil—

'Io son fatta da Dio, sua mercè, tale,  
Che la vostra miseria non mi tange,  
Nè fiamma d'esto incendio non m'assale . . .'<sup>3</sup>

take the simple, but perfect, single line—

'In la sua volontade è nostra pace.'<sup>4</sup>

Take of Shakespeare a line or two of Henry the Fourth's expostulation with sleep—

'Wilt thou upon the high and giddy mast  
Seal up the ship-boy's eyes, and rock his brains  
In cradle of the rude imperious surge . . .'

and take, as well, Hamlet's dying request to Horatio—

'If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,  
Absent thee from felicity awhile,

<sup>1</sup> 'Nay, and thou too, old man, in former days wast, as we hear, happy.'  
—*Iliad*, xxiv. 543.

<sup>2</sup> 'I wailed not, so of stone grew I within;—they wailed.'—*Inferno*,  
xxxiii. 49, 50.

<sup>3</sup> 'Of such sort hath God, thanked be His mercy, made me, that your misery toucheth me not, neither doth the flame of this fire strike me.'—*Inferno*, ii. 91–93.

<sup>4</sup> 'In His will is our peace.'—*Paradiso*, iii. 85.

And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain  
To tell my story . . .'

Take of Milton that Miltonic passage—

5                   'Darken'd so, yet shone  
Above them all the archangel; but his face  
Deep scars of thunder had intrench'd, and care  
Sat on his faded cheek . . .'

add two such lines as—

10                   'And courage never to submit or yield  
And what is else not to be overcome . . .'

and finish with the exquisite close to the loss of Proserpine, the loss

                  '. . . which cost Ceres all that pain  
To seek her through the world.'

15 These few lines, if we have tact and can use them, are enough even of themselves to keep clear and sound our judgments about poetry, to save us from fallacious estimates of it, to conduct us to a real estimate.

20 The specimens I have quoted differ widely from one another, but they have in common this: the possession of the very highest poetical quality. If we are thoroughly penetrated by their power, we shall find that we have acquired a sense enabling us, whatever poetry may be laid before us, to feel the degree in which a high poetical quality is present or wanting there. Critics  
25 give themselves great labour to draw out what in the abstract constitutes the characters of a high quality of poetry. It is much better simply to have recourse to concrete examples;—to take specimens of poetry of the high, the very highest quality, and to say: The characters of a high quality of poetry are what is  
30 expressed *there*. They are far better recognised by being felt in the verse of the master, than by being perused in the prose

of the critic. Nevertheless if we are urgently pressed to give some critical account of them, we may safely, perhaps, venture on laying down, not indeed how and why the characters arise, but where and in what they arise. They are in the matter and substance of the poetry, and they are in its manner and style. 5 Both of these, the substance and matter on the one hand, the style and manner on the other, have a mark, an accent, of high beauty, worth, and power. But if we are asked to define this mark and accent in the abstract, our answer must be: No, for we should thereby be darkening the question, not clearing it. 10 The mark and accent are as given by the substance and matter of that poetry, by the style and manner of that poetry, and of all other poetry which is akin to it in quality.

Only one thing we may add as to the substance and matter of poetry, guiding ourselves by Aristotle's profound observa- 15 tion that the superiority of poetry over history consists in its possessing a higher truth and a higher seriousness (*φιλοσοφώτερον καὶ σπουδαιότερον*). Let us add, therefore, to what we have said, this: that the substance and matter of the best poetry acquire their special character from possessing, in an eminent 20 degree, truth and seriousness. We may add yet further, what is in itself evident, that to the style and manner of the best poetry their special character, their accent, is given by their diction, and, even yet more, by their movement. And though we distinguish between the two characters, the two accents, of 25 superiority, yet they are nevertheless vitally connected one with the other. The superior character of truth and seriousness, in the matter and substance of the best poetry, is inseparable from the superiority of diction and movement marking its style and manner. The two superiorities are closely related, and are 30 in steadfast proportion one to the other. So far as high poetic truth and seriousness are wanting to a poet's matter and substance, so far also, we may be sure, will a high poetic stamp of diction and movement be wanting to his style and manner. In proportion as this high stamp of diction and movement, again, 35 is absent from a poet's style and manner, we shall find, also, that high poetic truth and seriousness are absent from his substance and matter.

So stated, these are but dry generalities; their whole force lies in their application. And I could wish every student of poetry to make the application of them for himself. Made by himself, the application would impress itself upon his mind far more deeply than made by me. Neither will my limits allow me to make any full application of the generalities above propounded; but in the hope of bringing out, at any rate, some significance in them, and of establishing an important principle more firmly by their means, I will, in the space which remains to me, follow rapidly from the commencement the course of our English poetry with them in my view.

Once more I return to the early poetry of France, with which our own poetry, in its origins, is indissolubly connected. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, that seed-time of all modern language and literature, the poetry of France had a clear predominance in Europe. Of the two divisions of that poetry, its productions in the *langue d'oïl* and its productions in the *langue d'oc*, the poetry of the *langue d'oc*, of southern France, of the troubadours, is of importance because of its effect on Italian literature;—the first literature of modern Europe to strike the true and grand note, and to bring forth, as in Dante and Petrarch it brought forth, classics. But the predominance of French poetry in Europe, during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, is due to its poetry of the *langue d'oïl*, the poetry of northern France and of the tongue which is now the French language. In the twelfth century the bloom of this romance-poetry was earlier and stronger in England, at the court of our Anglo-Norman kings, than in France itself. But it was a bloom of French poetry; and as our native poetry formed itself, it formed itself out of this. The romance-poems which took possession of the heart and imagination of Europe in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries are French; 'they are,' as Southey justly says, 'the pride of French literature, nor have we anything which can be placed in competition with them.' Themes were supplied from all quarters; but the romance-setting which was common to them all, and which gained the ear of Europe, was French. This constituted for the French poetry, literature, and language, at the height of the Middle

Age, an unchallenged predominance. The Italian Brunetto Latini, the master of Dante, wrote his *Treasure* in French because, he says, 'la paroleure en est plus délitabile et plus commune à toutes gens.' In the same century, the thirteenth, the French romance-writer, Christian of Troyes, formulates the claims, in chivalry and letters, of France, his native country, as follows:—

'Or vous ert par ce livre apris,  
Que Gresse ot de chevalerie  
Le premier los et de clergie;  
Puis vint chevalerie à Rome,  
Et de la clergie la some,  
Qui ore est en France venue.  
Diex doinst qu'ele i soit retenue,  
Et que li lius li abelisse  
Tant que ja meis de France n'isse  
L'onor qui s'i est arestée!'

'Now by this book you will learn that first Greece had the renown for chivalry and letters; then chivalry and the primacy in letters passed to Rome, and now it is come to France. God grant it may be kept there; and that the place may please it so well, that the honour which has come to make stay in France may never depart thence!'

Yet it is now all gone, this French romance-poetry, of which the weight of substance and the power of style are not unfairly represented by this extract from Christian of Troyes. Only by means of the historic estimate can we persuade ourselves now to think that any of it is of poetical importance.

But in the fourteenth century there comes an Englishman nourished on this poetry, taught his trade by this poetry, getting words, rhyme, metre from this poetry; for even of that stanza which the Italians used, and which Chaucer derived immediately from the Italians, the basis and suggestion was probably given in France. Chaucer (I have already named him) fascinated his contemporaries, but so too did Christian of Troyes and Wolfram of Eschenbach. Chaucer's power of fascination, however, is enduring; his poetical importance does not need



the assistance of the historic estimate; it is real. He is a genuine source of joy and strength, which is flowing still for us and will flow always. He will be read, as times goes on, far more generally than he is read now. His language is a cause of difficulty for us; but so also, and I think in quite as great a degree, is the language of Burns. In Chaucer's case, as in that of Burns, it is a difficulty to be unhesitatingly accepted and overcome.

If we ask ourselves wherein consists the immense superiority of Chaucer's poetry over the romance-poetry—why it is that in passing from this to Chaucer we suddenly feel ourselves to be in another world, we shall find that his superiority is both in the substance of his poetry and in the style of his poetry. His superiority in substance is given by his large, free, simple, clear yet kindly view of human life,—so unlike the total want, in the romance-poets, of all intelligent command of it. Chaucer has not their helplessness; he has gained the power to survey the world from a central, a truly human point of view. We have only to call to mind the Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*. The right comment upon it is Dryden's: 'It is sufficient to say, according to the proverb, that *here is God's plenty*.' And again: 'He is a perpetual fountain of good sense.' It is by a large, free, sound representation of things, that poetry, this high criticism of life, has truth of substance; and Chaucer's poetry has truth of substance.

Of his style and manner, if we think first of the romance-poetry and then of Chaucer's divine liquidness of diction, his divine fluidity of movement, it is difficult to speak temperately. They are irresistible, and justify all the rapture with which his successors speak of his 'gold dew-drops of speech.' Johnson misses the point entirely when he finds fault with Dryden for ascribing to Chaucer the first refinement of our numbers, and says that Gower also can show smooth numbers and easy rhymes. The refinement of our numbers means something far more than this. A nation may have versifiers with smooth numbers and easy rhymes, and yet may have no real poetry at all. Chaucer is the father of our splendid English poetry; he is our 'well of English undefiled,' because by the lovely charm of his diction, the lovely charm of his movement, he makes an epoch

and founds a tradition. In Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, Keats, we can follow the tradition of the liquid diction, the fluid movement, of Chaucer; at one time it is his liquid diction of which in these poets we feel the virtue, and at another time it is his fluid movement. And the virtue is irresistible.

Bounded as is my space, I must yet find room for an example of Chaucer's virtue, as I have given examples to show the virtue of the great classics. I feel disposed to say that a single line is enough to show the charm of Chaucer's verse; that merely one line like this—

'O martyr souted<sup>1</sup> to virginitee!'

has a virtue of manner and movement such as we shall not find in all the verse of romance-poetry;—but this is saying nothing. The virtue is such as we shall not find, perhaps, in all English poetry, outside the poets whom I have named as the special inheritors of Chaucer's tradition. A single line, however, is too little if we have not the strain of Chaucer's verse well in our memory; let us take a stanza. It is from *The Prioress's Tale*, the story of the Christian child murdered in a Jewry—

'My throte is cut unto my nekke-bone  
Saidè this child, and as by way of kinde  
I should have deyde, yea, longè time agone;  
But Jesu Christ, as ye in bookès finde,  
Will that his glory last and be in minde,  
And for the worship of his mother dere  
Yet may I sing O *Alma* loud and clere.'

Wordsworth has modernised this Tale, and to feel how delicate and evanescent is the charm of verse, we have only to read Wordsworth's first three lines of this stanza after Chaucer's—

'My throat is cut unto the bone, I trow,  
Said this young child, and by the law of kind  
I should have died, yea, many hours ago.'

<sup>1</sup> The French *soudé*; soldered, fixed fast.

The charm is departed. It is often said that the power of liquidness and fluidity in Chaucer's verse was dependent upon a free, a licentious dealing with language, such as is now impossible; upon a liberty, such as Burns too enjoyed, of making words like  
 5 *neck, bird*, into a dissyllable by adding to them, and words like  
*cause, rhyme*, into a dissyllable by sounding the *e* mute. It is true that Chaucer's fluidity is conjoined with this liberty, and is admirably served by it; but we ought not to say that it was dependent upon it. It was dependent upon his talent. Other  
 10 poets with a like liberty do not attain to the fluidity of Chaucer; Burns himself does not attain to it. Poets, again, who have a talent akin to Chaucer's, such as Shakespeare or Keats, have known how to attain to his fluidity without the like liberty.

And yet Chaucer is not one of the great classics. His poetry  
 15 transcends and effaces, easily and without effort, all the romance-poetry of Catholic Christendom; it transcends and effaces all the English poetry contemporary with it, it transcends and effaces all the English poetry subsequent to it down to the age of Elizabeth. Of such avail is poetic truth of substance, in  
 20 its natural and necessary union with poetic truth of style. And yet, I say, Chaucer is not one of the great classics. He has not their accent. What is wanting to him is suggested by the mere mention of the name of the first great classic of Christendom, the immortal poet who died eighty years before Chaucer,—  
 25 Dante. The accent of such verse as

'In la sua volontade è nostra pace . . .'

is altogether beyond Chaucer's reach; we praise him, but we feel that this accent is out of the question for him. It may be said that it was necessarily out of the reach of any poet in the  
 30 England of that stage of growth. Possibly; but we are to adopt a real, not a historic, estimate of poetry. However we may account for its absence, something is wanting, then, to the poetry of Chaucer, which poetry must have before it can be placed in the glorious class of the best. And there is no doubt what  
 35 that something is. It is the *σπουδαιότης*, the high and excellent seriousness, which Aristotle assigns as one of the grand virtues of poetry. The substance of Chaucer's poetry, his view of

things and his criticism of life, has largeness, freedom, shrewdness, benignity; but it has not this high seriousness. Homer's criticism of life has it, Dante's has it, Shakespeare's has it. It is this chiefly which gives to our spirits what they can rest  
 5 upon; and with the increasing demands of our modern ages upon poetry, this virtue of giving us what we can rest upon will be more and more highly esteemed. A voice from the slums of Paris, fifty or sixty years after Chaucer, the voice of poor Villon out of his life of riot and crime, has at its happy  
 10 moments (as, for instance, in the last stanza of *La Belle Heaulmière*<sup>1</sup>) more of this important poetic virtue of seriousness than all the productions of Chaucer. But its apparition in Villon, and in men like Villon, is fitful; the greatness of the great poets, the power of their criticism of life, is that their virtue is sus-  
 15 tained.

To our praise, therefore, of Chaucer as a poet there must be this limitation; he lacks the high seriousness of the great classics, and therewith an important part of their virtue. Still, the main fact for us to bear in mind about Chaucer is his sterling  
 20 value according to that real estimate which we firmly adopt for all poets. He has poetic truth of substance, though he has not high poetic seriousness, and corresponding to his truth of substance he has an exquisite virtue of style and manner. With him is born our real poetry.

<sup>1</sup> The name *Heaulmière* is said to be derived from a head-dress (helm)  
 25 worn as a mark by courtesans. In Villon's ballad, a poor old creature of this class laments her days of youth and beauty. The last stanza of the ballad runs thus—

'Ainsi le bon temps regretons  
 Entre nous, pauvres vieilles sottes,  
 Assises bas, à croppetons,  
 Tout en ung tas comme pelottes;  
 A petit feu de chenevottes  
 Tost allumées, tost estaintes.  
 Et jadis fusmes si mignottes!  
 35 Ainsi en prend à maintz et maintes.'

'Thus amongst ourselves we regret the good time, poor silly old things, low-seated on our heels, all in a heap like so many balls; by a little fire of hemp-stalks, soon lighted, soon spent. And once we were such darlings! So fares it with many and many a one.'

For my present purpose I need not dwell on our Elizabethan poetry, or on the continuation and close of this poetry in Milton. We all of us profess to be agreed in the estimate of this poetry; we all of us recognise it as great poetry, our greatest, and Shakespeare and Milton as our poetical classics. The real estimate, here, has universal currency. With the next age of our poetry divergency and difficulty begin. An historic estimate of that poetry has established itself; and the question is, whether it will be found to coincide with the real estimate.

The age of Dryden, together with our whole eighteenth century which followed it, sincerely believed itself to have produced poetical classics of its own, and even to have made advance, in poetry, beyond all its predecessors. Dryden regards as not seriously disputable the opinion 'that the sweetness of English verse was never understood or practised by our fathers.' Cowley could see nothing at all in Chaucer's poetry. Dryden heartily admired it, and, as we have seen, praised its matter admirably; but of its exquisite manner and movement all he can find to say is that 'there is the rude sweetness of a Scotch tune in it, which is natural and pleasing, though not perfect.' Addison, wishing to praise Chaucer's numbers, compares them with Dryden's own. And all through the eighteenth century, and down even into our own times, the stereotyped phrase of approbation for good verse found in our early poetry has been, that it even approached the verse of Dryden, Addison, Pope, and Johnson.

Are Dryden and Pope poetical classics? Is the historic estimate, which represents them as such, and which has been so long established that it cannot easily give way, the real estimate? Wordsworth and Coleridge, as is well known, denied it; but the authority of Wordsworth and Coleridge does not weigh much with the young generation, and there are many signs to show that the eighteenth century and its judgments are coming into favour again. Are the favourite poets of the eighteenth century classics?

It is impossible within my present limits to discuss the question fully. And what man of letters would not shrink from seeming to dispose dictatorially of the claims of two men who are, at any rate, such masters in letters as Dryden and Pope;

two men of such admirable talent, both of them, and one of them, Dryden, a man, on all sides, of such energetic and genial power? And yet, if we are to gain the full benefit from poetry, we must have the real estimate of it. I cast about for some mode of arriving, in the present case, at such an estimate without offence. And perhaps the best way is to begin, as it is easy to begin, with cordial praise.

When we find Chapman, the Elizabethan translator of Homer, expressing himself in his preface thus: 'Though truth in her very nakedness sits in so deep a pit, that from Gades to Aurora and Ganges few eyes can sound her, I hope yet those few here will so discover and confirm her that, the date being out of her darkness in this morning of our poet, he shall now gird his temples with the sun,'—we pronounce that such a prose is intolerable. When we find Milton writing: 'And long it was not after, when I was confirmed in this opinion, that he, who would not be frustrate of his hope to write well hereafter in laudable things, ought himself to be a true poem,'—we pronounce that such a prose has its own grandeur, but that it is obsolete and inconvenient. But when we find Dryden telling us: 'What Virgil wrote in the vigour of his age, in plenty and at ease, I have undertaken to translate in my declining years; struggling with wants, oppressed with sickness, curbed in my genius, liable to be misconstrued in all I write,'—then we exclaim that here at last we have the true English prose, a prose such as we would all gladly use if we only knew how. Yet Dryden was Milton's contemporary.

But after the Restoration the time had come when our nation felt the imperious need of a fit prose. So, too, the time had likewise come when our nation felt the imperious need of freeing itself from the absorbing preoccupation which religion in the Puritan age had exercised. It was impossible that this freedom should be brought about without some negative excess, without some neglect and impairment of the religious life of the soul; and the spiritual history of the eighteenth century shows us that the freedom was not achieved without them. Still, the freedom was achieved; the preoccupation, an undoubtedly baneful and retarding one if it had continued, was got rid of. And as with religion amongst us at that period, so

it was also with letters. A fit prose was a necessity; but it was impossible that a fit prose should establish itself amongst us without some touch of frost to the imaginative life of the soul. The needful qualities for a fit prose are regularity, uniformity, precision, balance. The men of letters, whose destiny it may be to bring their nation to the attainment of a fit prose, must of necessity, whether they work in prose or in verse, give a pre-  
 5 dominating, an almost exclusive attention to the qualities of regularity, uniformity, precision, balance. But an almost ex-  
 10 clusive attention to these qualities involves some repression and silencing of poetry.

We are to regard Dryden as the puissant and glorious founder, Pope as the splendid high priest, of our age of prose and reason, of our excellent and indispensable eighteenth cen-  
 15 tury. For the purposes of their mission and destiny their poetry, like their prose, is admirable. Do you ask me whether Dryden's verse, take it almost where you will, is not good?

'A milk-white Hind, immortal and unchanged,  
 Fed on the lawns and in the forest ranged.'

20 I answer: Admirable for the purposes of the inaugurator of an age of prose and reason. Do you ask me whether Pope's verse, take it almost where you will, is not good?

'To Hounslow Heath I point, and Banstead Down;  
 Thence comes your mutton, and these chicks my own.'

25 I answer: Admirable for the purposes of the high priest of an age of prose and reason. But do you ask me whether such verse proceeds from men with an adequate poetic criticism of life, from men whose criticism of life has a high seriousness, or even, without that high seriousness, has poetic largeness, freedom,  
 30 insight, benignity? Do you ask me whether the application of ideas to life in the verse of these men, often a powerful applica-  
 35 tion, no doubt, is a powerful *poetic* application? Do you ask me whether the poetry of these men has either the matter or the inseparable manner of such an adequate poetic criticism; whether it has the accent of

'Absent thee from felicity awhile . . .'

or of

'And what is else not to be overcome . . .'

or of

'O martyr soulded to viginitee!'

I answer: It has not and cannot have them; it is the poetry of  
 5 the builders of an age of prose and reason. Though they may write in verse, though they may in a certain sense be masters of the art of versification, Dryden and Pope are not classics of our poetry, they are classics of our prose.

Gray is our poetical classic of that literature and age; the  
 10 position of Gray is singular, and demands a word of notice here. He has not the volume or the power of poets who, coming in times more favourable, have attained to an independent criticism of life. But he lived with the great poets, he lived, above  
 15 all, with the Greeks, through perpetually studying and enjoy-  
 20 ing them; and he caught their poetic point of view for regard-  
 25 ing life, caught their poetic manner. The point of view and the manner are not self-sprung in him, he caught them of others; and he had not the free and abundant use of them. But whereas Addison and Pope never had the use of them, Gray  
 30 had the use of them at times. He is the scantiest and frailest of classics in our poetry, but he is a classic.

And now, after Gray, we are met, as we draw towards the end of the eighteenth century, we are met by the great name  
 25 of Burns. We enter now on times where the personal estimate  
 30 of poets begins to be rife, and where the real estimate of them is not reached without difficulty. But in spite of the disturbing pressures of personal partiality, of national partiality, let us try to reach a real estimate of the poetry of Burns.

By his English poetry Burns in general belongs to the eigh-  
 30 teenth century, and has little importance for us.

'Mark ruffian Violence, distain'd with crimes,  
 Rousing elate in these degenerate times;  
 View unsuspecting Innocence a prey,  
 35 As guileful Fraud points out the erring way;

While subtle Litigation's pliant tongue  
The life-blood equal sucks of Right and Wrong!

Evidently this is not the real Burns, or his name and fame would have disappeared long ago. Nor is Clarinda's love-poet, Sylvander, the real Burns either. But he tells us himself: 'These English songs gravel me to death. I have not the command of the language that I have of my native tongue. In fact, I think that my ideas are more barren in English than in Scotch. I have been at *Duncan Gray* to dress it in English, but all I can do is desperately stupid.' We English turn naturally, in Burns, to the poems in our own language, because we can read them easily; but in those poems we have not the real Burns.

The real Burns is of course in his Scotch poems. Let us boldly say that of much of this poetry, a poetry dealing perpetually with Scotch drink, Scotch religion, and Scotch manners, a Scotchman's estimate is apt to be personal. A Scotchman is used to this world of Scotch drink, Scotch religion, and Scotch manners; he has a tenderness for it; he meets its poet half way. In this tender mood he reads pieces like the *Holy Fair* or *Hal-loween*. But this world of Scotch drink, Scotch religion, and Scotch manners is against a poet, not for him, when it is not a partial countryman who reads him; for in itself it is not a beautiful world, and no one can deny that it is of advantage to a poet to deal with a beautiful world. Burns's world of Scotch drink, Scotch religion, and Scotch manners, is often a harsh, a sordid, a repulsive world; even the world of his *Cotter's Saturday Night* is not a beautiful world. No doubt a poet's criticism of life may have such truth and power that it triumphs over its world and delights us. Burns may triumph over his world, often he does triumph over his world, but let us observe how and where. Burns is the first case we have had where the bias of the personal estimate tends to mislead; let us look at him closely, he can bear it.

Many of his admirers will tell us that we have Burns, convivial, genuine, delightful, here—

'Leeze me on drink! it gies us mair  
Than either school or college;

It kindles wit, it waukens lair,  
It pangs us fou o' knowledge.  
Be't whisky gill or penny wheep  
Or ony stronger potion,  
It never fails, on drinking deep,  
To kittle up our notion  
By night or day.'

There is a great deal of that sort of thing in Burns, and it is unsatisfactory, not because it is bacchanalian poetry, but because it has not that accent of sincerity which bacchanalian poetry, to do it justice, very often has. There is something in it of bravado, something which makes us feel that we have not the man speaking to us with his real voice; something, therefore, poetically unsound.

With still more confidence will his admirers tell us that we have the genuine Burns, the great poet, when his strain asserts the independence, equality, dignity, of men, as in the famous song *For a' that and a' that*—

'A prince can mak' a belted knight,  
A marquis, duke, and a' that;  
But an honest man's aboon his might,  
Guid faith he mauna fa' that!  
For a' that, and a' that,  
Their dignities, and a' that,  
The pith o' sense, and pride o' worth,  
Are higher rank than a' that.'

Here they find his grand, genuine touches; and still more, when this puissant genius, who so often set morality at defiance, falls moralising—

'The sacred lowe o' weel-placed love  
Luxuriantly indulge it;  
But never tempt th' illicit rove,  
Tho' naething should divulge it.  
I waive the quantum o' the sin,  
The hazard o' concealing,

But och! it hardens a' within,  
And petrifies the feeling.'

Or in a higher strain—

5 'Who made the heart, 'tis He alone  
Decidedly can try us;  
He knows each chord, its various tone;  
Each spring, its various bias.  
Then at the balance let's be mute,  
10 We never can adjust it;  
What's *done* we partly may compute,  
But know not what's resisted.'

Or in a better strain yet, a strain, his admirers will say, unsurpassable—

15 'To make a happy fire-side clime  
To weans and wife,  
That's the true pathos and sublime  
Of human life.'

20 There is criticism of life for you, the admirers of Burns will say to us; there is the application of ideas to life! There is, undoubtedly. The doctrine of the last-quoted lines coincides almost exactly with what was the aim and end, Xenophon tells us, of all the teaching of Socrates. And the application is a powerful one; made by a man of vigorous understanding, and (need I say?) a master of language.

25 But for supreme poetical success more is required than the powerful application of ideas to life; it must be an application under the conditions fixed by the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty. Those laws fix as an essential condition, in the poet's treatment of such matters as are here in question, high  
30 seriousness;—the high seriousness which comes from absolute sincerity. The accent of high seriousness, born of absolute sincerity, is what gives to such verse as

'In la sua volontade è nostra pace . . .'

to such criticism of life as Dante's, its power. Is this accent felt in the passages which I have been quoting from Burns? Surely not; surely, if our sense is quick, we must perceive that we have not in those passages a voice from the very inmost soul of the genuine Burns; he is not speaking to us from these depths, he is more or less preaching. And the compensation for admiring such passages less, from missing the perfect poetic accent in them, will be that we shall admire more the poetry where that accent is found. 5

No; Burns, like Chaucer, comes short of the high seriousness of the great classics, and the virtue of matter and manner which goes with that high seriousness is wanting to his work. At moments he touches it in a profound and passionate melancholy, as in those four immortal lines taken by Byron as a motto for *The Bride of Abydos*, but which have in them a depth of poetic quality such as resides in no verse of Byron's own— 10 15

'Had we never loved sae kindly,  
Had we never loved sae blindly,  
Never met, or never parted,  
20 We had ne'er been broken-hearted.'

But a whole poem of that quality Burns cannot make; the rest, in the *Farewell to Nancy*, is verbiage.

We arrive best at the real estimate of Burns, I think, by conceiving his work as having truth of matter and truth of manner, but not the accent or the poetic virtue of the highest masters. His genuine criticism of life, when the sheer poet in him speaks, is ironic; it is not— 25

'Thou Power Supreme, whose mighty scheme  
These woes of mine fulfil,  
Here firm I rest, they must be best  
30 Because they are Thy will!'

It is far rather: *Whistle owre the lave o't!* Yet we may say of him as of Chaucer, that of life and the world, as they come before him, his view is large, free, shrewd, benignant,—truly poetic, therefore; and his manner of rendering what he sees is 35

to match. But we must note, at the same time, his great difference from Chaucer. The freedom of Chaucer is heightened, in Burns, by a fiery, reckless energy; the benignity of Chaucer deepens, in Burns, into an overwhelming sense of the pathos of things;—of the pathos of human nature, the pathos, also, of non-human nature. Instead of the fluidity of Chaucer's manner, the manner of Burns has spring, bounding swiftness. Burns is by far the greater force, though he has perhaps less charm. The world of Chaucer is fairer, richer, more significant than that of Burns; but when the largeness and freedom of Burns get full sweep, as in *Tam o' Shanter*, or still more in that puissant and splendid production, *The Jolly Beggars*, his world may be what it will, his poetic genius triumphs over it. In the world of *The Jolly Beggars* there is more than hideousness and squalor, there is bestiality; yet the piece is a superb poetic success. It has a breadth, truth, and power which make the famous scene in Auerbach's Cellar, of Goethe's *Faust*, seem artificial and tame beside it, and which are only matched by Shakespeare and Aristophanes.

Here, where his largeness and freedom serve him so admirably, and also in those poems and songs where to shrewdness he adds infinite archness and wit, and to benignity infinite pathos, where his manner is flawless, and a perfect poetic whole is the result,—in things like the address to the mouse whose home he had ruined, in things like *Duncan Gray*, *Tam Glen*, *O Whistle and I'll come to you, my Lad*, *Auld Lang Syne* (this list might be made much longer),—here we have the genuine Burns, of whom the real estimate must be high indeed. Not a classic, nor with the excellent *σπουδαίτης* of the great classics, nor with a verse rising to a criticism of life and a virtue like theirs; but a poet with thorough truth of substance and an answering truth of style, giving us a poetry sound to the core. We all of us have a leaning towards the pathetic, and may be inclined perhaps to prize Burns most for his touches of piercing, sometimes almost intolerable, pathos; for verse like—

'We twa hae paidl't i' the burn  
From mornin' sun till dine;

But seas between us braid hae roar'd  
Sin auld lang syne . . .'

where he is as lovely as he is sound. But perhaps it is by the perfection of soundness of his lighter and archer masterpieces that he is poetically most wholesome for us. For the votary misled by a personal estimate of Shelley, as so many of us have been, are, and will be,—of that beautiful spirit building his many-coloured haze of words and images

'Pinnacled dim in the intense inane'—

no contact can be wholesomer than the contact with Burns at his archest and soundest. Side by side with the

'On the brink of the night and the morning  
My coursers are wont to respire,  
But the Earth has just whispered a warning  
That their flight must be swifter than fire . . .'

of *Prometheus Unbound*, how salutary, how very salutary, to place this from *Tam Glen*—

'My minnie does constantly deave me  
And bids me beware o' young men;  
They flatter, she says, to deceive me;  
But wha can think sae o' Tam Glen?'

But we enter on burning ground as we approach the poetry of times so near to us—poetry like that of Byron, Shelley, and Wordsworth—of which the estimates are so often not only personal, but personal with passion. For my purpose, it is enough to have taken the single case of Burns, the first poet we come to of whose work the estimate formed is evidently apt to be personal, and to have suggested how we may proceed, using the poetry of the great classics as a sort of touchstone, to correct this estimate, as we had previously corrected by the same means the historic estimate where we met with it. A collection like the present, with its succession of celebrated names and cele-

brated poems, offers a good opportunity to us for resolutely endeavouring to make our estimates of poetry real. I have sought to point out a method which will help us in making them so, and to exhibit it in use so far as to put any one who likes in a way of applying it for himself.

At any rate the end to which the method and the estimate are designed to lead, and from leading to which, if they do lead to it, they get their whole value,—the benefit of being able clearly to feel and deeply to enjoy the best, the truly classic, in poetry,—is an end, let me say it once more at parting, of supreme importance. We are often told that an era is opening in which we are to see multitudes of a common sort of readers, and masses of a common sort of literature; that such readers do not want and could not relish anything better than such literature, and that to provide it is becoming a vast and profitable industry. Even if good literature entirely lost currency with the world, it would still be abundantly worth while to continue to enjoy it by oneself. But it never will lose currency with the world, in spite of momentary appearances; it never will lose supremacy. Currency and supremacy are insured to it, not indeed by the world's deliberate and conscious choice, but by something far deeper,—by the instinct of self-preservation in humanity.

## Thomas Gray<sup>1</sup>

James Brown, Master of Pembroke Hall at Cambridge, Gray's friend and executor, in a letter written a fortnight after Gray's death to another of his friends, Dr. Wharton of Old Park, Durham, has the following passage:—

'Everything is now dark and melancholy in Mr. Gray's room, not a trace of him remains there; it looks as if it had been for some time uninhabited, and the room bespoke for another inhabitant. The thoughts I have of him will last, and will be useful to me the few years I can expect to live. He never spoke out, but I believe from some little expressions I now remember to have dropped from him, that for some time past he thought himself nearer his end than those about him apprehended.'

*He never spoke out.* In these four words is contained the whole history of Gray, both as a man and as a poet. The words fell naturally, and as it were by chance, from their writer's pen; but let us dwell upon them, and press into their meaning, for in following it we shall come to understand Gray.

He was in his fifty-fifth year when he died, and he lived in ease and leisure, yet a few pages hold all his poetry; *he never spoke out* in poetry. Still, the reputation which he has achieved by his few pages is extremely high. True, Johnson speaks of him with coldness and disparagement. Gray disliked Johnson, and refused to make his acquaintance; one might fancy that Johnson wrote with some irritation from this cause. But Johnson was not by nature fitted to do justice to Gray and to his poetry; this by itself is a sufficient explanation of the deficiencies of his criticism of Gray. We may add a further explanation of them

<sup>1</sup> Prefixed to the Selection from Gray in Ward's *English Poets*, vol. iii. 1880.



ed. Lowry, p. 308. Gladstone's first Irish Land Act was passed in 1870.

159:27. The mythological Medusa turned to stone all who looked in her eyes, and therefore Perseus, in order to kill her, had to turn his head away and guide his sword by the reflection in the mirror of his polished shield.

160:7-8. Peter preached of "the times of restitution of all things," and Daniel foresaw that "the saints of the most High shall take the kingdom, and possess the kingdom for ever, even for ever and ever."—Acts 3:21, Daniel 7:18 (22, 27).

### [ THE STUDY OF POETRY ]

When T. Humphry Ward, the husband of Arnold's niece Mary, approached Arnold with proposals for his anthology of the English Poets in late October, 1878, Arnold expressed warm approval but declined to participate: "Plans in which I could join if I were a man of letters purely and simply, I cannot join in now that I am a school-inspector with a very limited time at my disposal for letters. I am obliged to keep, for work which has suggested itself to my own mind, the little time which I have free." And therefore he had declined John Morley's proposal to do a monograph on Shakespeare for the English Men of Letters series; his single recent commitment for work on commission, he said, was a two-page Introduction to the poets in Wood's *The Hundred Greatest Men*. Four days later, however, on October 26, Arnold held out the hope that he might write a general introduction for Ward after all. Ward, disappointed by the initial refusal, meanwhile proposed alternative authors; Arnold replied on the 30th: "Stopford Brooke would be more *acceptable* than Palgrave. I should not like you to have to drop your plan, and sooner than you should do this, would see whether I could possibly manage the introduction; the selecting part I could not undertake. Try the publishers first with Stopford Brooke or Palgrave, and if you cannot succeed, then write to me again. My notion is that the publishers would take your scheme gladly with such a list, in general, as you proposed, whether I were in it or not." Five months later, Arnold wrote again (March 10, 1879): "I will not go back from my promise to help you if my aid was seriously wanted, and I will write your Introduction. But do not count on me for anything more; for to accomplish even so much as that, I must give up something which I had planned to execute this year. You shall have the Introduction by the beginning of October; when you come to

us, you must tell me the sort of thing you wish it to be." A letter of August 8 carried a familiar request: "Don't forget to let me know what is the latest date you can give me for the Preface, the paging being in roman numerals. I have corrected the last revise of my Wordsworth, but have still got a thing to do for the Quarterly, and am feeling a little tired and good for nothing." A month later (September 11) he wrote: "Unless something unforeseen happens, I will be ready for you by the end of October. At the present moment I have no notion what I shall say, but Providence will, I hope, make my way plain before my face." In November he was still making preparation for the essay: "I have been reading Chaucer a great deal, the early French poets a great deal, and Burns a great deal. Burns is a beast, with splendid gleams, and the medium in which he lived, Scotch peasants, Scotch Presbyterianism, and Scotch drink, is repulsive. Chaucer, on the other hand, pleases me more and more, and his medium is infinitely superior. But I shall finish with Shakespeare's *King Lear* before I finally write my Introduction, in order to have a proper taste in my mind while I am at work."—*Letters*, ed. Russell, to his sister Frances (misdated 1880). Corrected proofs went back early in February, 1880. "I have put translations; perhaps it is best," he wrote to Ward. "I am very glad you are pleased with what I have done; I assure you I was very anxious to produce something that would serve your book, not disserve it; and on looking it carefully through, I think this Preface will be found interesting, although, as the Americans acutely observe, 'there is a set of critics in England who seem to be perpetually hostile to Mr. Arnold.' The type is very good—much better than I expected." By this time, he had already committed himself to doing the introductory notes to the poems of Gray and Keats for Ward. The first two volumes of *The English Poets* were published by Macmillan about the middle of May. On February 7, 1881, the publisher sent Arnold a copy of his contributions for revisions for a second edition, but no significant changes were made.—Buckler, *Matthew Arnold's Books*, p. 75.

From the very first Arnold's Introduction was regarded as the most important part of the anthology; it remains one of his best-known critical essays, one subsequent students have most liked to sharpen their claws on. It is admirably conceived for its purpose—to give some guidance to a middle-class public not sophisticated in the reading of poetry; to treat it as if it were addressed to an audience of scholars and professional critics is a mistake. An essay of this sort must not be "eccentric and startling. You do not want to startle," said Arnold. Nevertheless the discrimination of two common

grounds of misjudgment of poetry—personal and private associations on the one hand, the historical significance of the work on the other—is both perceptive and useful; many of Arnold's severest scholarly critics fall quite simply into the latter error. The touchstone method—which perhaps is faulty because it probably requires some sense of the context of the touchstone passages—was one Arnold evolved as early as his Oxford lectures *On Translating Homer* (1860–61). An interesting study of these passages for what they reveal of Arnold's taste is J. S. Eells, *The Touchstone of Matthew Arnold* (New York: Bookman Associates, 1955).

Arnold's conception of eighteenth-century poetry met with vocal opponents from the first. W. J. Courthope, one of the editors of Pope, wrote to demonstrate, in contradistinction to Arnold, that Dryden and Pope are classics of our poetry.—“The Liberal Movement in English Literature,” *National Review* III, 633–44 (July, 1884), and letter to *The Pall Mall Gazette*, July 4, 1884, p. 6. More recently, E. K. Brown assembled Arnold's comments on the prose-writers and poets of the century to demonstrate that “he spoke of the eighteenth century from the outside, with no faculty for identifying himself with its modes of thinking, feeling, living. . . . He was himself a Romantic; . . . he never lost his sense of intimacy with” figures like Wordsworth, Goethe, Emerson, and Newman.—“Arnold and the Eighteenth Century,” *University of Toronto Quarterly* IX, 202–13 (January, 1940). In a more precisely argued essay, Geoffrey Tillotson prefaces his remarks with the observation that while Arnold was well informed and intelligent when he dealt with his own age, “he tells us little that we cannot dispense with about earlier ages.” Certainly Arnold was a rapid, not a meticulous, reader of poetry: he “does not seem to have given Pope's poetry the attention necessary for experiencing it as it is.”—“Matthew Arnold and Eighteenth Century Poetry,” *Criticism and the Nineteenth Century* (London: Athlone Press, 1951), pp. 61–91.

Lovers of Chaucer have always been outraged by what they consider Arnold's undervaluing of him; the fault is not in what Arnold thought about Chaucer, but in any attempt at rank ordering of poets. Perhaps the most surprising omission in Arnold's essay, from the point of view of the twentieth century, is the name of Donne; but Ward's selections suggest the prevailing taste (with which Swinburne and his friends would have disagreed): his anthology prints only five of Donne's poems, preceded by a mere two pages of introduction.

161:1–11. The final paragraph of Arnold's Introduction on Poetry

in *The Hundred Greatest Men* (1879), revised; see p. 63:25–37. The thesis of *Literature and Dogma*, as indeed its title indicates, may be summed up in these words: “The language of the Bible . . . is literary, not scientific language; language *thrown out* at an object of consciousness not fully grasped, which inspired emotion. Evidently, if the object be one not fully to be grasped, and one to inspire emotion, the language of figure and feeling will satisfy us better about it, will cover more of what we seek to express, than the language of literal fact and science. The language of science about it will be *below* what we feel to be the truth.”—*Prose Works*, ed. Super, VI, 189.

162:3–7. Preface to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), nearly three-fifths through; jotted in Arnold's pocket diary for January 14, 1878, and December 14, 1879.—*Note-Books*, ed. Lowry, pp. 294, 329.

162:20–27. *Les Cahiers de Sainte-Beuve* (Paris, 1876), p. 51, jotted in Arnold's pocket diary at the beginning of 1879.—*Note-Books*, ed. Lowry, p. 313.

163:2–4. See Arnold's essays on “Wordsworth” (where he drew upon his own lectures *On Translating Homer*) and on “Joubert” (1863), where he says of the men of genius in literature and the men of ability in literature: “The work of the two orders of men is at bottom the same,—a *criticism of life*.”—*Prose Works*, ed. Super, IX, 44–46; III, 209.

163:37, 164:7. “To see the object as in itself it really is” is for Arnold the true function of criticism.—*On Translating Homer* (1860) and “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time” (1864); *Prose Works*, ed. Super, I, 140; III, 258.

164:29–165:10. For somewhat the same idea in quite different language, see Charles d'Héricault, ed., *Oeuvres de Clément Marot* (Paris, 1867), p. iii.

165:15–16. “Le mot *classique* . . . commence à paraître chez les Romains. Chez eux on appelait proprement *classici*, non tous les citoyens des diverses classes, mais ceux de la première seulement. . . . Tous [les autres] étaient désignés par la dénomination *infra classem*, au-dessous de la classe par excellence. Au figuré, le mot *classicus* se trouve employé dans Aulu-Gelle, et appliqué aux écrivains: un écrivain de valeur et de marque, *classicus assiduusque scriptor*, un écrivain qui compte, qui a du bien au soleil, et qui n'est pas confondu dans la foule des prolétaires.”—Sainte-Beuve, “Qu'est-ce qu'un classique?” *Causeries du lundi* (4th ed.; Paris, 1869), III, 38–39 (October 21, 1850).

166:30–31. *De imitatione Christi* III, xliii, 11–12, jotted in Ar-

nold's pocket diary for December 7, 1879, and five times during the following decade.—*Note-Books*, ed. Lowry, pp. 329, 402, 412, 421, 426, 435.

167:2-3. Since in "A Guide to English Literature" (1877) Arnold praised Stopford Brooke's handling of Caedmon's Old English versification of Genesis (c. 670 A.D.), he may only indirectly be glancing at such a statement as the following in Brooke's *English Literature*: "The most famous passage of the poem not only illustrates the dark sadness, the fierce love of freedom, and the power of painting distinct characters which has always marked our poetry, but it is also famous for its likeness to a parallel passage in Milton. It is when Caedmon describes the proud and angry cry of Satan against God from his bed of chains in hell."—(New York, 1879), p. 12.

167:7-16. The last line of the Oxford manuscript of the *Chanson de Roland* reads: "Ci falt la geste que Turolfus declinet," which may mean that Théroutde was author or merely scribe. The *jongleur* or *joculator* commonly recited the work of others, whereas the *trouvère* or troubadour was an original poet. The account of Taillefer's singing of Roland at the battle of Hastings comes from Wace, *Roman de Rou*, Part III, 8035-40. Arnold perhaps drew information from the Introduction to George Ellis, ed., *Specimens of Early English Metrical Romances* (new ed.; London, 1848), p. 9, and George Saintsbury, *A Short History of French Literature* (Oxford, 1882), p. 13. The former was on Arnold's reading list for 1880, and an earlier version of the latter book was quoted in his pocket diary for that year.—*Note-Books*, ed. Lowry, pp. 597, 344-45. But his immediate source was Vitet's essay (see note to p. 167:17-23).

167:17-23. Louis Vitet, "La Chanson de Roland," *Revue des Deux Mondes, nouv. pér.* XIV, 851, 860 (June 1, 1852); reprinted in his *Essais historiques et littéraires* (Paris, 1862), pp. 73-74.

167:31-34. Lines 2377-80.

168:4-5. Arnold cited these lines in his first lecture *On Translating Homer* (1860), in order to illustrate the romantic falsity of Ruskin's comment on them. Thereafter they became in the lectures one of the touchstones for testing a good translation; Arnold quoted as excellent the translation of them by E. C. Hawtrey, provost of Eton College, in the volume called *English Hexameter Translations* (London, 1847).—*Prose Works*, ed. Super, I, 101-2, 149, 164, 196, 203.

168:26-28, 169:2. Arnold used both passages as touchstones in his lectures *On Translating Homer* (1860-62); he gave his own hexam-

eter translation of the former, and of the latter he remarked: "In the original this line, for mingled pathos and dignity, is perhaps without a rival even in Homer." His prose translation there differs slightly from the present version: "in times past wert" for "in former days wast."—*Prose Works*, ed. Super, I, 100, 115, 129, 161, 177, 213-14; 212.

169:13. "In la sua" is the reading of several manuscripts and no doubt of the edition Arnold used. Other authoritative readings are "E la sua" and "E'n la sua."

169:16-18. 2 *Henry IV*, III, i, 18-20.

169:20-170:2. *Hamlet*, V, ii, 357-60.

170:4-14. *Paradise Lost*, I, 599-602, 108-9; IV, 271-72.

171:17-18. *Poetics* IX, 3 (1451 b 6).

171:19-37. In his final lecture *On Translating Homer* ("Last Words"), a rather similar discussion of the "grand style" laid down this definition: "The grand style arises in poetry, when a noble nature, poetically gifted, treats with simplicity or with severity a serious subject."—*Prose Works*, ed. Super, I, 188.

172:17-18. The terms *langue d'oc* and *langue d'oïl* discriminate between the words used to express "yes" in the tongues current south and north of the Loire, and hence denote the two dialects. The language of "oïl" ("oui") prevailed and is the modern French.

173:1-4. *Li Livres dou trésor*, ed. P. Chabaille (Paris, 1863), p. 3 (Book I, part I, chapt. i, end). Brunetto (c. 1220-94), a Florentine, is greeted warmly by Dante as his master in the *Inferno*, canto XV.

173:8-17. *Cligés*, lines 30-39. Chrétien de Troyes lived in the latter half of the twelfth century, about a hundred years before Brunetto.

173:31-34. The seven-line stanza, "rime royal" (ababbcc), which Chaucer used in *Troilus and Criseyde* and "The Prioress's Tale."

173:36. Wolfram von Eschenbach was author of the German romance *Parzeval* at the beginning of the thirteenth century.

174:19-21. "Preface to the *Fables*," ¶12, 10; *Essays*, ed. W. P. Ker (Oxford, 1900), II, 262, 257. Dryden's *Fables* included some versions of Chaucer.

174:29. John Lydgate, *The Life of Our Lady* (c. 1410), II, 1633. The passage was often printed as a separate poem in the early editions of Chaucer; see *Chaucerian and Other Pieces*, ed. W. W. Skeat (Oxford, 1897), p. 450.

174:29-33. In "The History of the English Language" prefixed to his *Dictionary* (1st ed.; London, 1755), I, 9.

174:37. Spenser, *Faerie Queene*, IV, ii, 287.

175:11, 20–26. “The Prioress’s Tale” (from *The Canterbury Tales*), lines 92, 162–68. Since no manuscript of the tale reads “in virginitee,” Arnold’s text has been corrected to “to virginitee.” Despite Arnold’s Preface, Ward did not include this tale in his selection from Chaucer for *The English Poets*.

175:27. Wordsworth modernized the tale in 1801 and published the version in 1820.

176:24–25. Dante died in 1321, Chaucer in 1400.

177:9–11. “Les regrets de la belle Heaulmière” is the title commonly given to the poem which makes up stanzas xlvii–lvi (lines 453–532) of Villon’s *Le Testament* (1461); Swinburne published a verse translation of it in the second series of *Poems and Ballads* (1878). François de Montcorbier (1431–63 or later) took the name of Villon from his guardian.

178:13–16. *Essay of Dramatic Poesy*, ¶10; *Essays*, ed. Ker, I, 35.

178:16–21. “Preface to the Fables,” ¶14, 11; *Essays*, ed. Ker, II, 264–65, 258–59. It is Dryden who reports that Cowley “declared he had no taste of” Chaucer.

178:30–31. Wordsworth said that, with two slight exceptions, “the poetry of the period intervening between the publication of the ‘Paradise Lost’ and the ‘Seasons’ does not contain a single new image of external nature; and scarcely presents a familiar one from which it can be inferred that the eye of the Poet had been steadily fixed upon his object, much less that his feelings had urged him to work upon it in the spirit of genuine imagination.”—“Essay, Supplementary to the Preface” (1815), half-way through. Coleridge’s estimate of Pope in the middle of chapt. i of *Biographia Literaria* is much like Arnold’s.

179:8–14. *The Iliads of Homer, Prince of Poets . . . Done According to the Greek by George Chapman*, ed. Richard Hooper (2nd ed.; London, 1865), I, 23 (Commentarius on Book I). Arnold quoted the passage in his first lecture *On Translating Homer* (1860), and there, as here, he made a difficult passage incomprehensible by omitting “her” after “confirm.”—See Textual Notes and *Prose Works*, ed. Super, I, 114.

179:15–18. *An Apology against a Pamphlet Call’d A Modest Confutation of the Animadversions upon the Remonstrant against Smectymnuus* (London, 1642), ¶6; *Works*, ed. H. M. Ayres et al. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1931), III (1), 303.

179:20–24. The opening words of the “Postscript to the Reader”

of Dryden’s translation of the *Aeneid* (1697); *Essays*, ed. Ker, II, 240. Though Dryden’s life overlapped Milton’s by 43 years and he was therefore indeed “Milton’s contemporary,” these two passages were separated by more than half a century.

180:18–19. *The Hind and the Panther* (1687), first two lines.

180:23–24. Imitation of *The Second Satire of the Second Book of Horace* (1734), lines 143–44.

181:32–182:2. “On the Death of the Late Lord President Dundas,” lines 25–30.

182:4–5. “Clarinda” was Agnes Craig M’Lehose, to whom Burns addressed such conventionally sentimental songs as “Clarinda, mistress of my soul.” Their correspondence, signed “Clarinda” and “Sylvander,” survives.

182:5–10. Letter to George Thomson, October 19, 1794; *Letters of Robert Burns*, ed. J. DeLancey Ferguson (Oxford: at the Clarendon Press, 1931), II, 268. Burns wrote “that command of” and “deplorably stupid.”

182:36–183:7. “The Holy Fair,” lines 163–71.

183:19–26. Lines 25–32.

183:30–184:2. “Epistle to a Young Friend,” lines 41–48.

184:4–11. “Address to the Unco Guid, or the Rigidly Righteous,” lines 57–64.

184:14–17. Epistle to Dr. Thomas Blacklock (“Wow, but your letter made me vauntie!”), lines 51–54.

184:21–22. Arnold seems to allude to Xenophon *Memorabilia* I, ii, 48, jotted in his pocket diaries for August 22, 1875, at the end of 1876, at the beginning of 1877, and in one of his “General Note-Books.”—*Note-Books*, ed. Lowry, pp. 233, 263, 270, 541, 544.

185:17–20. “Song” (“Ae fond kiss, and then we sever”), lines 13–16. The poem is sometimes called “Farewell to Nancy.”

185:28–31. “Winter, A Dirge,” lines 17–20.

186:17. In Part I.

186:24–25. “To a Mouse, On turning her up in her Nest, with the Plough, November, 1785.”

186:36–187:2. “Auld lang syne,” lines 17–20.

187:9, 12–15. *Prometheus Unbound*, III, iv, 204; II, v, 1–4.

187:18–21. “Tam Glen,” lines 13–16.

188:22–23. “Menander has perished, and Aristophanes has survived. And to what is this to be attributed? To the instinct of self-preservation in humanity. The human race has the strongest, the most invincible tendency to *live*, to *develop* itself. It retains, it

clings to what fosters its life, what favours its development, to the literature which exhibits it in its vigour; it rejects, it abandons what does not foster its development, the literature which exhibits it arrested and decayed."—"On the Modern Element in Literature" (1857/1869), *Prose Works*, ed. Super, I, 29–30.

[ THOMAS GRAY ]

The first book Arnold edited, apart from Isaiah, was the *Six Chief Lives from Johnson's Lives of the Poets*, no doubt a surprising choice for one who is generally held to have little sympathy with the eighteenth century. His interest in the period, difficult as was the critical task of explaining it in terms compatible with the romantic critical theories of the Victorians, was genuine. And therefore when Ward asked him to introduce selections from several authors for his anthology of *The English Poets*, Arnold opted for Gray as well as Keats. "That century is very interesting, though I should not like to have lived in it; but the people were just like ourselves, whilst the Elizabethans are not," he wrote to his wife on December 22, 1880.—*Letters*, ed. Russell. He had already stated briefly what he thought of Gray in "A Guide to English Literature" (1877).—*Prose Works*, ed. Super, VIII, 249–50. The new undertaking, however, was not easy: he worked at it from the latter part of March until May 8, 1880, when his diary records: "Work at Gray & send it." On May 1 he wrote to Ward: "I am well into my notice of Gray, but, 'more meo,' I have on this provocation been reading up my English 18th century again, and have spent much time over what is, after all, a depressing business. Gray is a very depressing man, himself, and it will be months before I recover from him." And on May 20 he wrote: "I have shortened Gray as much as I can, but I give you free leave to shorten it more, if you like, and are able." His selection from Gray's poems and from those of Keats went to the publisher about the same time. The essay is perhaps too dependent on Gray's letters, too biographical, too little substantial as a piece of criticism. But Arnold must have viewed his task in terms of his function—to give appropriate introductory matter to help the uninformed reader understand what sort of man wrote the poems; like Johnson's own *Lives*, this was a preface biographical and critical, not a critical essay. Even its length was obviously limited by its purpose. Two years later, after reading Edmund Gosse's little book on Gray in the English Men of Letters series, Arnold wrote to him: "I must [tell]

you what satisfaction your performance has given me. 'Simonidean' is the right word to express the note struck by Gray—you could not have taken a better. Collins, at his best, strikes the same note, and perhaps we must own that the diction of Collins in his Ode to Evening is more Simonidean, more pure, than Gray's diction—but then the Ode to Evening has not the evolution of Gray and of Simonides—like the rivers of central Asia, it loses itself in the sand. As to the Ode to Liberty, to speak of it as Swinburne does is really to talk nonsense. You are right in remarking that the secret of Gray's superiority lies in his having read, thought and felt so very much more than Collins. The bad side of Gray's reading,—that he used it as 'a narcotic,'—you have well seized at page 67. But perhaps he did all he could, and for him to do without an anodyne was impossible, and reading was the best anodyne at his command. He is one of the most interesting figures in our literary history. His scantiness of production was a misery to him, but has it hurt his fame? I sometimes think that if Tennyson had delivered himself of nothing Arthurian except the first fragment he gave us, the Morte d'Arthur, he himself would have lost much occupation, indeed, and the reading world a good deal of pleasure, but we should have had a grander sense of his possibilities in Arthurian story. You are not quite just to Bonstetten: have you read Ste. Beuve's delightful *causeries* about him?" (The allusion to Swinburne refers to his introduction to Collins for Ward's *English Poets*: "No cleverness can make up for such an outrage on all truth and proportion as Swinburne's over-praise of Collins. . . . Except a poetic diction comparatively pure (for that age), Collins has not, I think, much merit. The Ode to Evening leads nowhere, has no internal development; you finish it with a sense of flatness. The Ode to Liberty has positively no merit at all." When Swinburne reprinted his introduction to Collins in his *Miscellanies* [1886], he added a few sentences to regret Arnold's preference of Gray over Collins.)

The volume containing the Gray poems was published about December 11, 1880. Arnold received £50 for writing his prefaces to and making his selections from Keats and Gray.—Buckler, *Matthew Arnold's Books*, p. 74.

189:5–12. *Correspondence of Thomas Gray*, ed. Paget Toynbee and Leonard Whibley (Oxford: at the Clarendon Press, 1935), III, 1275 (August 17, 1771); *Works of Thomas Gray*, ed. J. Mitford (London, 1835–43), IV, 207. Gray died late on the night of July 30, at the age of fifty-four. Both James Brown and Thomas Wharton had been friends of his from his undergraduate days. Brown wrote