



ENCYCLOPEDIA OF FAMOUS WORLD LITERATURE



EDITED BY:

RICHARD GARNETT

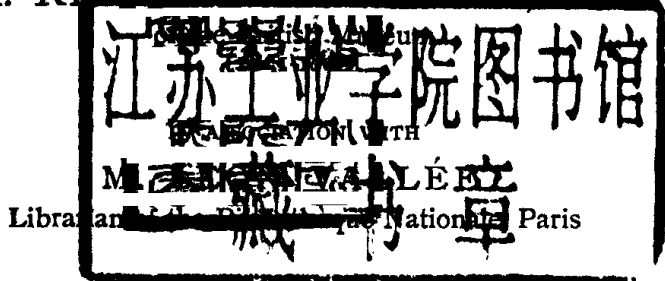
ENCYCLOPEDIA OF FAMOUS WORLD LITERATURE

SELECTIONS FROM THE WORLD'S GREAT WRITERS
ANCIENT, MEDIÆVAL, AND MODERN, WITH BIO-
GRAPHICAL AND EXPLANATORY NOTES
AND
CRITICAL ESSAYS

BY
MANY EMINENT WRITERS.

EDITED BY

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THE APPRECIATION OF POETRY

BY EDMUND GOSSE

THERE never was a time when it was more essential than it is to-day to keep clearly before us the sovereign value of the best poetry, and to comprehend what the basis of its supremacy is. We are invaded by an enormous flood of cheap and commonplace literature, prepared to attract, and, for a few moments, to amuse tens of thousands of undisciplined readers, who cultivate on such food an appetite for more and more entertainment of the same kind. The traditional barriers of good taste, which made the many who did not appreciate the best bow to the judgment of the few who did, are broken down. It is quite customary to find people of finer instincts so disheartened in the face of all the gaudy trash that is circulated by the million in cheap newspapers and cheaper magazines, that they are prepared to give up the struggle. The time, they say, in which really admirable literature was a power, is over. This is the age of charlatanry and shoddy, they tell us, and it is useless to kick against the pricks. The human race has decided that the noblest things offer too great a strain to its weariness, and for the future it means to be comfortable with what is base and common. The era of poetry, these melancholy people declare to us, is over for ever.

This pessimistic view I hold to be as false as it is cowardly. As long as two people could be brought together who would read Milton or Keats, in unison, with the old rapture, the era of poetry would not be over. Indeed, even these two might be submerged, and a materialistic vulgarity engulph the entire world for a genera-

tion, and yet the poetic instinct would revive, because it is based on an essential requirement of human nature. But this dismal conception of what we are drifting towards, with our growing disposition for the cheap and trumpery, contains one element of valuable truth. It emphasises the fact that the best poetry is absolutely out of sympathy with, is diametrically opposed to, what is common, false, and ignoble. The croakers are perfectly right so far, that if the entire world were brought down to the level of taste for which the threepenny-halfpenny magazine caters, there would there and then ensue, for the time being, an end of the influence of poetry, because poetry cannot breathe in the baser element. But, fortunately, vulgarity can never absolutely invade an entire race; there must always be some—even if only a few, yet a few,—who are striving after the higher truth and the higher seriousness which Aristotle names as the qualities that distinguish poetry.

Nearly twenty years ago, in a famous essay, Matthew Arnold endeavoured to define what were meant by “truth” and “seriousness” in this respect. Suggestive as his introduction to poetry was, it does not entirely meet the requirements of those who ask in what great poetry consists. Arnold deals too exclusively with ideas, and with brief arrangements of words judged in relation to the ideas they express. What he says, and what he quotes, in this connection are valuable, but he is found to be confining himself to the quality of poetry; it will also be found that there are but few of his remarks which might not be directly adapted to examples of the highest prose. In the course of this essay, Matthew Arnold appears unwilling to speak of the art of verse, and yet the almost plastic characteristics of execution which essentially distinguish verse from prose must be considered in any really useful attempt to define the nature of the pleasure which poetry gives us. Perhaps, like several great poets, and Tennyson in particular, Matthew Arnold thought this should be kept a mystery, and not discussed in any way with the world at large. But nowadays it is useless to try to exclude the curious from any of the habits of the man of genius.

The poet, then, is distinguished by writing in verse or metre.

This is his medium, as oil or water-colour is the medium of a painter, and clay or marble that of a sculptor. Even those who break up prosody, and desire to resist the rules of verse, like Walt Whitman or the latest French and Belgian experimentalists, produce something in its place which forms a medium of the same kind as verse. It would be convenient if the word "poet" had remained exclusively in use for the practice of the art of verse, as "painter" and "sculptor" for that of their respective arts; but it has come to take a sentimental as well as a technical sense, and to mean a man of exalted and imaginative ideas. So that even Sir Philip Sidney, encouraging this heresy three hundred years ago, says, "It is not rhyming and versing that maketh a poet." If he meant it in the sense in which he might have said, It is not brushes and a palette that make a painter, we can fully endorse his dictum, but if he meant that a man could be a poet and not write in verse, he uttered a dangerous although a common paradox.

The poet therefore writes in verse, and this is an artificial arrangement of words which must be taken into consideration first of all when we are discussing the magic of great poetry. Rhyme is an ornament suited to certain forms of song in certain languages, but it is far from being universal. Metre, on the other hand, is absolutely essential to our conception of civilised poetry, and even in races so far removed from our intellectual sympathy as the Japanese we find that from earliest times there have been obeyed rules of prosody which we can perfectly comprehend. The technical skill in verse which gives predominance in this department of poetry has been unequally distributed among the great poets. Milton, for instance, had a more delicate ear and a more far-spreading mastery over the instrument of verse than any other man who ever lived. Byron, on the other hand, was so weak in this respect that he has frequently been surpassed, as a metrical artist, by versifiers of the third or fourth rank. This does not settle the whole question of the relative value of poets, but it is an element in the final decision. Milton is such an adept in blank verse that he can bewitch us with a mere list of

proper names or a string of places. The pleasure which we receive from the melody of

From Auran eastward to the royal towers
Of great Seleucia, built by Grecian kings,
Or where the sons of Eden long before
Dwelt in Telassar,

is not a moral and is scarcely an intellectual one, but is sensuous, and founded on the exquisite art with which the greatest virtuoso in verse who has ever lived arranged the stops of his blank verse.

So, also, in the daintier parts of lyrical poetry, the senses are deliciously stirred by the alternations of rhyme in the songs of Shelley or Tennyson, or by the mellifluous assonances and alliterations of Poe. These are the legitimate and the necessary, although not the loftiest, concomitants of great poetry. The poets, with marked adroitness, introduce these appeals to the ear into some of their most abstruse meditations, as Mr. Swinburne relieves the dry thought of a very transcendental lyric with such pure melody as—

By rose-hung river and light-foot rill
There are who rest not ; who think long
Till they discern as from a hill,
At the sun's hour of morning song,
Known of souls only, and those souls free,
The sacred spaces of the sea.

To scorn those beauties which form the basis of poetic pleasure because of their limitations, is unphilosophic ; and those who under-rate metrical execution have a difficulty in explaining to us why it is that the great poets have, with very rare exceptions, been marvellous technical artists in verse. One very obvious advantage which Shakespeare possesses over all his contemporaries is the variety, melody, and richness of his verse-effects. In all the great writers—it would be difficult to say why—a thought is found to gain splendour and definition by the mere fact of its being set in a verse-arrangement of perfect beauty. That everything in the order of nature is subservient to the human race, for instance, is not a very rousing idea, until Dryden clothes it in his organ-melody—

From harmony, divinest harmony
This universal frame began :
From harmony to harmony
Through all the compass of the notes it ran,
The diapason closing full in Man,

and then we perceive and then we accept, with deep emotion, the majestic intelligence.

Wordsworth has observed that "the young, who in nothing can escape delusion, are especially subject to it in their intercourse with Poetry." That is to say, inexperienced persons are particularly liable to be deceived as to what is a good and what a bad poem. For this reason, I think the definite criterion of prosody a very valuable one in the training of the imagination. Before we attempt to deal with images and ideas, the ear of a child may be so delicately taught to respond to the intricacies and melodies of verse that it may start with a tendency in the right direction. If a young person is conscious of the enchantment of mere sound in "Lycidas" or in "The Lotus Eaters," there is already made a sensible advance towards his or her appreciation of the greatest poetry. The fact that really fine verse-writing rarely fails to distinguish the master-poets tends to give the tentative reader confidence. He finds a passage magnificently composed, and he is justified in expecting to find it not less splendidly supplied with thought and passion.

After metre, or its equivalents, the most radical part of poetry is the diction. Common speech transfers our meaning to our interlocutors with as little parade as possible; written prose has a more starched and self-conscious air, yet it aims at a straightforward statement of fact, without embroidery. But in poetry, the art of diction becomes essential. It is no longer purely what is said that is of moment, but how it is said is also of prime importance. The language of the poet is not that of ordinary life, and yet he is capable of error no less in boldly pushing too far beyond the common-place, than in timidly hugging the shore of it. In certain ages, as for instance in the eighteenth century, what the poets aimed at was a strenuous clearness and precision of diction;

their danger was to become prosaic in the effort of their reserve. Towards the middle of the seventeenth, as now at the close of the nineteenth century, the poets wished to dazzle us by the violent brilliance of their language; the snare of such an effort is that the poetry may become gaudy and unintelligible. Here, then, comes in the second requirement in one who studies verse,—he must learn to discriminate in questions of diction. He must be able to distinguish the virginal delicacy of an ode by Collins from the clay-cold dulness of one by Akenside; and he must be fired by the gorgeous parts of one of Crashaw's rhapsodies, without condoning the faults and ugliness of the merely grotesque passages.

One of the first lessons a reader will endeavour to learn with regard to poetry is the paramount value of a pure style. Purity may be allied to an extreme simplicity, to an intricate variety of thoughts and illustrations, or to a sublime magnificence of ornament. Hence in Chaucer, in Browning, in Milton alike we observe a genuine purity of style, yet expressed in forms so widely divergent that the beginner is apt to think them incompatible. Without this element, no expenditure of wit or intellect or learning or audacious force of literary character can ever suffice to keep a poet's writings vivid. The most extraordinary instance of this is John Donne, who probably brought to the service of poetry a greater array of qualities than any other man, outside the very highest class, has done in England. He was a complete heretic as to purity of style, and only began to reform when the briskness of his genius had evaporated. Consequently, when he writes such lines as—

O more than Moon,
Draw not up seas to drown me in thy sphere!

or

I long to talk with some old lover's ghost,
Who died before the god of love was born,

being driven by stress of poetical passion into the momentary adoption of a pure style, he is comparable in these with Shakespeare or Coleridge; but such passages are mere islands, now, in a sea made turbid with radical offences against taste and reasonableness.

It may be questioned whether, at the present moment, there are not one or two flagrant Donnes flourishing on the English Parnassus.

It is absolutely necessary for the reader of the great poetry of the world to realise the solemnity of the poet's mission. He bends to entertain and even to divert us, but this is only in his easier moments. In him some of the old prophetic spirit lingers; he does not approach the public cap in hand, but he pronounces august truths, involved in forms of perennial beauty, which are just as beautiful, and just as true, whether mankind appreciates them or not. The poet emphasises the charm and mystery of nature, but he himself is more than any scenery—

He murmurs near the running brooks
A music sweeter than their own;

he takes the elements of the material world, and acts with them, not as an analyser, but as a maker, since

Out of these, create he can
Forms more real than living man,
Nurselings of immortality.

The reader, therefore, sincerely desirous of being affected by the poets, submits his emotions and his intelligence to their prophetic teaching. He allows them to excite and uplift him; he does not resist the afflatus. Borne along upon the stream of melody, enraptured by the ceaseless pleasure produced by felicitous diction, the reader subjects his own spirit to that of the poet. Thus, not grudgingly, but eager to be pleased and blessed, he places himself in that passive and receptive condition which renders him open to the impressions of what Coleridge calls "the aggregative and associative power" of poetic fancy working in a perfectly favourable medium. It is because the maturity of youth is especially free from accidents which disturb this complete communion with the creative arts that young men and women, in their early prime, are particularly apt students of the best poetry. They are hindered neither by the ignorance of childhood nor the prejudice of age from submitting with an absolute suppleness of temperament to the

magic of the poet; and they arrive at the condition which Shakespeare describes in himself,

When in the chronicle of wasted time
I see description of the fairest wights,
And beauty making beautiful old rhyme
In praise of ladies dead and lovely knights,

becoming, in the trance of fancy, himself a portion of this enchanting and shadowy procession.

For this purpose, a study of the best models is notoriously efficacious. But how are the best models to be discovered? Here an essentially modern heresy is surely to be guarded against. The fashion of to-day is to take no standard of taste, but what is called "the personality" of the reader. That is to say, the latter is to choose his poets as he chooses his flowers, because their colours and their perfumes are agreeable to him, or his fruits, because his palate approves of their flavours. But this is to place far too much confidence in the rude and untaught instinct. The perfectly naïve and ignorant person will not choose poetry successfully. In the first place, until the movement of metre and the exactitude of rhyme are taught, these are not healthily perceived by the ear. In the second place, a jingle will be preferred to a harmony, and an ambling narrative in ballad-measure to a masterpiece of concentrated lyrical passion. The natural man in his savage state—and he is none the less savage because semi-educated at a board-school—cannot be trusted to form a single instinctive impression of poetry.

The beauty of poetry, and the criterion by which that beauty can be discerned and weighed, have to be learned; this art does not appeal by instinct to the average sensual person. It is an initiation; it is a religion; and its rites are to be mastered only by a humble subjection to authority. Authority tells the young man that certain ancient productions are of extraordinary beauty. He is to believe that in Chaucer, in Spenser, in Milton, in Burns, in Shelley, in Keats, are to be found the masses of poetic substance, differing in specific character, but all generically one in their absolute excellence. The reader must take this at first on faith.

He may, in his inmost heart, find *The Knight's Tale* dull, be unable to understand *Epipsyichidion*, be bewildered and affronted by the dry light of *Paradise Regained*. But he must understand that there are only two horns to his dilemma; it must either be that he has not a natural aptitude for appreciating poetry, or that sympathy and care are required to reveal to him the significance of these particular works. He must never suppose that a third horn exists, namely, that, because he does not find himself exhilarated by these particular poems, therefore they are not good. Meanwhile, if he is modest, tradition whispers to him that there are easier steps to an appreciation of Milton and Shelley and Chaucer than those upon which he has too ambitiously started.

The definition of poetry by Matthew Arnold, as "a criticism of life" has been widely objected to. It was, perhaps, not very happily expressed, but Arnold's meaning has been miscomprehended. He tried to condense in a neat formula an idea which cannot, it may be, find its adequate expression in so few words. Yet that idea is the basis of a just appreciation of what the best poetry is and should be to us. "Well may we mourn," says Arnold himself in another place—

when the head
Of a sacred poet lies low
In an age which can rear them no more!
The complaining millions of men
Darken in labour and pain;
But he was a priest to us all
Of the wonder and bloom of the world,
Which we saw with his eyes, and were glad,
He is dead, and the fruit-bearing day
Of his race is past on the earth;
And darkness returns to our eyes.

Shelley has left us a definition which is more precise, although more transcendental than Arnold's. He says, in that Platonic "Defence of Poetry" which is too seldom studied,—“A poem is the very image of life expressed in its external truth.” In other words, the great poet creates in his art a reflection of the forms of human nature, which remain there by a miracle after the actions which inspired them have passed away; as though the bosom of a little

lake in the mountains should preserve the reflected splendours of the sunrise untarnished through long hours of the common light of day. The principle of life is ceaseless procession, ceaseless revolution; the deeds and days of man hurry away, and are pushed into oblivion by their successors. But, since the beginning of civilisation, poetry has selected for preservation certain typical relations, combined shapes of beauty and pathos caught in the ever-revolving kaleidoscope. It is in this sense that poetry is, as Matthew Arnold felt it to be, a criticism of life itself.

The soul is kept alive by incessant reminders of the existence of its two great inspiring forces, the Heavenly and the Earthly Beauty. All that we call good and wise and desirable, moves under the sway of the imagination. Virtue itself is not passive, but active, and is the direct result of the identification of the soul with what is beautiful. No impulse of moral value can be followed, no work of passion or comprehension executed, without an appeal to the imaginative faculty. This faculty, however, would in many respects be vague in us, and would certainly be liable to heresies and vacillations to a much greater degree than happily it now is, were it not for Art, and particularly for Poetry, the divinest of the arts. The more intense is the impression of moral beauty, the more impassioned will be the appreciation of the purest and most perfect verse. Nor is this axiom belied by the accident that some of the most virtuous of men and women are congenitally deprived of appreciation of the plastic forms of poetry.

It is, however, to be sincerely regretted that there should be any, in whom the interior and spiritual light burns, who are deprived of the external and, as we may say, physical consolations of poetry. In all such cases, it is probable that the lack of enjoyment comes from a neglect of the best models and of guidance in taste at the early stages of mental development. There is less and less excuse for any one who endures the lack of these advantages. The best school, nay, the only wholesome school, for the appreciation of poetry is the reading of poetry. Let the student assure himself that he is provided with what the tradition of criticism has found to be the very noblest, and let him read that carefully and eagerly,

if possible aloud, to himself and then to others, with a humble enthusiasm; it is strange, indeed, if the mysterious sources of poetical pleasure are not opened to him. Read the best, will be our final charge,—only the best, but the best over and over and over again.

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