

CRITICISM

VOLUME

30

Poetry Criticism

*Excerpts from Criticism of the works
of the Most Significant and Widely
Studied Poets of World Literature*

Volume 30

*Ellen McGeagh and
Linda Pavlouski*
Editors

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Poetry Criticism

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Linden Peach, "Man, Nature and Wordsworth: American Versions," *British Influence on the Birth of American Literature*, (Macmillan Press Ltd., 1982), 29-57; reprinted in *Poetry Criticism*, vol. 20, ed. Carol T. Gaffke (Detroit: The Gale Group), 37-40.

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Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

1807-1882

American poet, novelist, translator, playwright, and travel writer.

INTRODUCTION

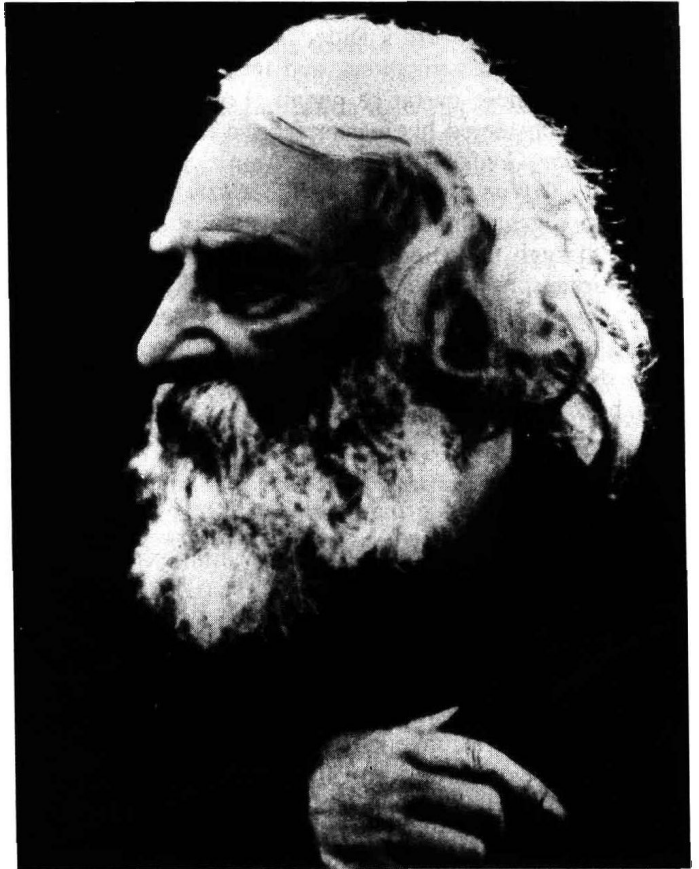
Widely admired by his contemporaries, Longfellow achieved a degree of popularity in his day that no other American poet before or since has matched. His nostalgic, inspirational verse was embraced by Americans and Europeans enduring an era of rapid social change. Shortly after his death, however, his reputation suffered a serious decline. Although the debate over his literary stature continues, Longfellow is widely credited with having been instrumental in introducing European culture to the American readers of his day. Moreover, he simultaneously popularized American folk themes abroad, where his works enjoyed an immense readership.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Longfellow was born February 27, 1807, in Portland, Maine, to Stephen Longfellow, a lawyer and member of the Eighteenth Congress of the United States, and Zilpah Wadsworth, whose ancestors had arrived on the *Mayflower*. In 1822 he enrolled in the newly formed Bowdoin College, of which his father was a trustee. Despite his father's wish that he study law, Longfellow preferred a literary career and began publishing poems in numerous newspapers and periodicals. Before graduation, he took an extended trip to Europe; this journey greatly influenced his future work, evidenced in a unique blend of both American and foreign elements in his later writings. After three years in Europe, he returned as a professor to Bowdoin and soon published *Outre-mer; a Pilgrimage Beyond the Sea*, a book of travel sketches modeled on Washington Irving's *Sketch Book*. Longfellow later accepted a position at Harvard as the Smith Professor of Modern Languages, a post he held for eighteen years. During this time he again traveled to Europe and discovered the works of the German Romantic poets. He subsequently incorporated much of their artistic philosophy into his work. After returning and settling in Cambridge, he developed lasting friendships with such American literary figures as Charles Sumner, Washington Allston, and Nathaniel Hawthorne. Devoting himself to scholarly pursuits as well as to poetry, Longfellow published textbooks, literary essays, and numerous translations of European poets. He died in 1882.

MAJOR WORKS

Voices of the Night illustrates his view that poetry should be "an instrument for improving the condition of society,



and advancing the great purpose of human happiness." *Voices* is distinguished by his "Psalm of Life" and "Light of the Stars," popular inspirational pieces characterized by simple truths and maxims. The poems in this and such subsequent early collections as *Ballads and Other Poems* and *The Seaside and the Fireside* generally conclude with didactic or romanticized expressions of the poet's religious faith, balancing or, according to many critics, at times awkwardly undermining the nostalgic melancholic reflections on life's transience that inform many of his finest poems.

The longer narrative works for which Longfellow is best remembered, *Evangeline: A Tale of Acadie*, *The Song of Hiawatha*, and *Tales of a Wayside Inn*, address American themes and subjects, often providing vivid descriptions of the American landscape that appealed greatly to readers worldwide. *Evangeline*, written in classical dactylic hexameter and praised for both its lyrical grace and poignant storyline, relates the tale of two lovers separated during the French and Indian War. After touring America fruitlessly in search of her exiled bridegroom, the eponymous hero-

ine is reunited with him momentarily at his hospital death-bed. *The Song of Hiawatha*, praised upon publication as the great American epic, grafts source material from Native American mythology onto the meter and plot structure of the Finnish folk epic *Kalevala*. *Tales of a Wayside Inn*, a series of narrative poems reminiscent of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, is perhaps the best example of Longfellow's versatility and mastery of the narrative form. The poems comprising this work, including one of Longfellow's most famous, "Paul Revere's Ride," are highly regarded for their plots, characterizations, and intimate atmosphere. In addition to these narrative poems, Longfellow published what he considered his masterpiece: a trilogy of dramatic poems, *The Golden Legend*, *The New England Tragedies*, and *The Divine Tragedy*, entitled *Christus: A Mystery*. This work treats the subject of Christianity from its beginnings through the Middle Ages to the time of the American Puritans. While acknowledging that these works contain some beautiful and effective writing, critics generally agree that Longfellow's creative gift was poetic rather than dramatic, and that the scope of this particular work was beyond his range.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

During his lifetime, Longfellow was immensely popular and widely admired. He was the first American poet to gain a favorable international reputation, and his poetry was praised abroad by such eminent authors as Charles Dickens, Victor Hugo, Alfred Tennyson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Walt Whitman. In 1884, two years after his death, his bust was unveiled in the Poets' Corner of Westminster Abbey, making him the first American to be so honored. In the decades that followed, however, the idealism and sentimentality that characterize much of his verse fell out of favor with younger poets and critics who were beginning to embrace realism and naturalism. Longfellow's literary reputation further declined in the twentieth century with the advent of Modernism. Reviled as superficial and didactic, his poetry was largely dismissed and received little further critical attention. Some recent commentators, however, have found much to admire in Longfellow. He is often praised for his technical skill, particularly as demonstrated in his short lyrics and sonnets. He also continues to be regarded as a pioneer in adapting European literary traditions to American themes and subjects.

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Poetry

Voices of the Night 1839

Ballads and Other Poems 1842

The Belfry of Bruges and Other Poems 1846

Evangeline: A Tale of Acadie (narrative poetry) 1847

The Seaside and the Fireside 1850

**The Golden Legend* (dramatic poetry) 1851

The Song of Hiawatha (narrative poetry) 1855

The Courtship of Miles Standish, and Other Poems 1858

Tales of a Wayside Inn (narrative poetry) 1863

**The New England Tragedies* (dramatic poetry) 1868

**The Divine Tragedy* (dramatic poetry) 1871

Kéramos and Other Poems 1878

Ultima Thule 1880

In the Harbor: Ultima Thule, Part II 1882

Michael Angelo (narrative poetry) 1883

The Works of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. 11 vols. (poetry, dramas, novels, travel sketches, and translations) 1886

Other Major Works

Outre-mer; a Pilgrimage Beyond the Sea. 2 vols. (travel sketches) 1833-34

Hyperion (novel) 1839

The Spanish Student (verse drama) 1843

Kavanagh (novel) 1849

The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri 3 vols. [translator] (poetry) 1865-67

*These were published together as *Christus: A Mystery* in 1872

AUTHOR COMMENTARY

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (essay date 1832)

SOURCE: "The Defence of Poetry," in *The Achievement of American Criticism*, edited by Clarence Arthur Brown, The Ronald Press Co., 1954, pp. 219-33.

[In the following essay, originally published as a review of Sir Philip Sidney's "The Defence of Poetry" in *North American Review*, Vol. XXXIV, in 1832, Longfellow discusses the role of poetry in America's national consciousness.]

. . . As no 'Apologie for Poetrie' has appeared among us, we hope that Sir Philip Sidney's Defence will be widely read and long remembered. O that in our country, it might be the harbinger of as bright an intellectual day as it was in his own!—With us, the spirit of the age is clamorous for utility—for visible, tangible utility,—for bare, brawny, muscular utility. We would be roused to action by the voice of the populace, and the sounds of the crowded mart, and not 'lulled asleep in shady idleness with poet's pastimes.' We are swallowed up in schemes for gain, and engrossed with contrivances for bodily enjoyments, as if this particle of dust were immortal,—as if the soul needed no aliment, and the mind no raiment. We glory in the ex-

tent of our territory, in our rapidly increasing population, in our agricultural privileges, and our commercial advantages. We boast of the magnificence and beauty of our natural scenery,—of the various climates of our sky,—the summers of our Northern regions,—the salubrious winters of the South, and of the various products of our soil, from the pines of our Northern highlands to the palm-tree and aloes of our Southern frontier. We boast of the increase and extent of our physical strength, the sound of populous cities, breaking the silence and solitude of our Western territories,—plantations conquered from the forest, and gardens springing up in the wilderness. Yet the true glory of a nation consists not in the extent of its territory, the pomp of its forests, the majesty of its rivers, the height of its mountains, and the beauty of its sky; but in the extent of its mental power,—the majesty of its intellect,—the height and depth and purity of its moral nature. It consists not in what nature has given to the body, but in what nature and education have given to the mind:—not in the world around us, but in the world within us:—not in the circumstances of fortune, but in the attributes of the soul:—not in the corruptible, transitory, and perishable forms of matter, but in the incorruptible, the permanent, the imperishable mind. True greatness is the greatness of the mind;—the true glory of a nation is moral and intellectual pre-eminence.

But still the main current of education runs in the wide and not well defined channel of immediate and practical utility. The main point is, how to make the greatest progress in worldly prosperity,—how to advance most rapidly in the career of gain. This, perhaps, is necessarily the case to a certain extent in a country, where every man is taught to rely upon his own exertions for a livelihood, and is the artificer of his own fortune and estate. But it ought not to be exclusively so. We ought not, in the pursuit of wealth and worldly honor, to forget those embellishments of the mind and the heart, which sweeten social intercourse and improve the condition of society. And yet, in the language of Dr. Paley,¹ ‘Many of us are brought up with this world set before us, and nothing else. Whatever promotes this world’s prosperity is praised; whatever hurts and obstructs this world’s prosperity is blamed; and there all praise and censure end. We see mankind about us in motion and action, but all these motions and actions directed to worldly objects. We hear their conversation, but it is all the same way. And this is what we see and hear from the first. The views, which are continually placed before our eyes, regard this life alone and its interests. Can it then be wondered at, that an early worldly-mindedness is bred in our hearts so strong, as to shut out heavenly-mindedness entirely!’—And this, though not in so many words, yet in fact and in its practical tendency, is the popular doctrine of utility.

Now, under correction be it said, we are much led astray by this word utility. There is hardly a word in our language whose meaning is so vague, and so often misunderstood and misapplied. We too often limit its application to those acquisitions and pursuits, which are of immediate

and visible profit to ourselves and the community; regarding as comparatively or utterly useless many others, which, though more remote in their effects and more imperceptible in their operation, are, notwithstanding, higher in their aim, wider in their influence, more certain in their results, and more intimately connected with the common weal. We are too apt to think that nothing can be useful, but what is done with a noise, at noon-day, and at the corners of the streets; as if action and utility were synonymous, and it were not as useless to act without thinking, as it is to think without acting. But the truth is, the word utility has a wider signification than this. It embraces in its proper definition whatever contributes to our happiness; and thus includes many of those arts and sciences, many of those secret studies and solitary avocations, which are generally regarded either as useless, or as absolutely injurious to society. Not he alone does service to the State, whose wisdom guides her councils at home, nor he whose voice asserts her dignity abroad. A thousand little rills, springing up in the retired walks of life, go to swell the rushing tide of national glory and prosperity; and whoever in the solitude of his chamber, and by even a single effort of his mind, has added to the intellectual pre-eminence of his country, has not lived in vain, nor to himself alone. Does not the pen of the historian perpetuate the fame of the hero and the statesman? Do not their names live in the song of the bard? Do not the pencil and the chisel touch the soul while they delight the eye? Does not the spirit of the patriot and the sage, looking from the painted canvass, or eloquent from the marble lip, fill our hearts with the veneration for all that is great in intellect, and godlike in virtue?

If this be true, then are the ornamental arts of life not merely ornamental, but at the same time highly useful; and Poetry and the Fine Arts become the instruction, as well as the amusement of mankind. They will not till our lands, nor freight our ships, nor fill our granaries and our coffers; but they will enrich the heart, freight the understanding, and make up the garnered fulness of the mind. And this we hold to be the true use of the subject.

Among the barbarous nations, which, in the early centuries of our era, overran the South of Europe, the most contumelious epithet which could be applied to a man, was to call him a Roman. All the corruption and degeneracy of the Western Empire were associated, in the minds of the Gothic tribes, with a love of letters and the fine arts. So far did this belief influence their practices, that they would not suffer their children to be instructed in the learning of the South. ‘Instruction in the sciences,’ said they, ‘tends to corrupt, enervate, and depress the mind; and he who has been accustomed to tremble under the rod of a pedagogue, will never look on a sword or a spear with an undaunted eye.’² We apprehend that there are some, and indeed not a few in our active community, who hold the appellation of scholar and man of letters in as little repute, as did our Gothic ancestors that of Roman; associating with it about the same ideas of effeminacy and inefficiency. They think, that the learning of books is not wisdom; that study unfits

a man for action; that poetry and nonsense are convertible terms; that literature begets an effeminate and craven spirit; in a word, that the dust and cobwebs of a library are a kind of armor, which will not stand long against the hard knocks of 'the bone and muscle of the State,' and the 'huge two-fisted sway' of the stump orator. Whenever intellect is called into action, they would have the mind display a rough and natural energy,—strength, straightforward strength, untutored in the rules of art, and unadorned by elegant and courtly erudition. They want the stirring voice of Demosthenes, accustomed to the roar of the tempest, and the dashing of the sea upon its hollow-sounding shore; rather than the winning eloquence of Phalereus, coming into the sun and dust of the battle, not from the martial tent of the soldier, but from the philosophic shades of Theophrastus.³

But against no branch of scholarship is the cry so loud as against poetry, 'the quintessence, or rather the luxury of all learning.' Its enemies pretend, that it is injurious both to the mind and the heart; that it incapacitates us for the severer discipline of professional study; and that, by exciting the feelings and misdirecting the imagination, it unfits us for the common duties of life, and the intercourse of this matter-of-fact world. And yet such men have lived, as Homer, and Dante, and Milton;—poets and scholars, whose minds were bathed in song, and yet not weakened; men who severally carried forward the spirit of their age, who soared upward on the wings of poetry, and yet were not unfitted to penetrate the deepest recesses of the human soul, and search out the hidden treasures of wisdom, and the secret springs of thought, feeling, and action. None fought more bravely at Marathon, Salamis, and Plataea, than did the poet Aeschylus.⁴ Richard Coeur-de-Lion was a poet; but his boast was in his very song:

'Bon guerrier à l'estendart
Trouvaretz le Roi Richard.'

Ercilla and Garcilasso were poets,⁵ but the great epic of Spain was written in the soldier's tent and on the field of battle, and the descendant of the Incas was slain in the assault of a castle in the South of France. Cervantes lost an arm at the battle of Lepanto, and Sir Philip Sidney was the breathing reality of the poet's dream, a living and glorious proof, that poetry neither enervates the mind nor unfits us for the practical duties of life.

Nor is it less true, that the legitimate tendency of poetry is to exalt, rather than to debase,—to purify, rather than to corrupt. Read the inspired pages of the Hebrew prophets; the eloquent aspirations of the Psalmist! Where did ever the spirit of devotion bear up the soul more steadily and loftily, than in the language of their poetry? And where has poetry been more exalted, more spirit-stirring, more admirable, or more beautiful, than when thus soaring upward on the wings of sublime devotion, the darkness and shadows of earth beneath it, and from above the brightness of an opened heaven pouring around it? It is true, the poetic talent may be, for it has been, most lamentably per-

verted. But when poetry is thus perverted,—when it thus forgets its native sky to grovel in what is base, sensual, and depraved,—though it may not have lost all its original brightness, nor appear less than 'the excess of glory obscured,' yet its birth-right has been sold, its strength has been blasted, and its spirit wears 'deep scars of thunder.'

It does not, then, appear to be the necessary nor the natural tendency of poetry to enervate the mind, corrupt the heart, or incapacitate us for performing the private and public duties of life. On the contrary, it may be made, and should be made, an instrument for improving the condition of society, and advancing the great purpose of human happiness. Man must have his hours of meditation as well as of action. The unities of time are not so well preserved in the great drama, but that moments will occur, when the stage must be left vacant, and even the busiest actors pass behind the scenes. There will be eddies in the stream of life, though the main current sweeps steadily onward, till 'it pours in full cataract over the grave.' There are times, when both mind and body are worn down by the severity of daily toil; when the grasshopper is a burden; and thirsty with the heat of labor, the spirit longs for the waters of Shiloah, that go softly. At such seasons, both mind and body should unbend themselves; they should be set free from the yoke of their customary service, and thought take some other direction, than that of the beaten, dusty thoroughfare of business. And there are times, too, when the divinity stirs within us; when the soul abstracts herself from the world, and the slow and regular motions of earthly business do not keep pace with the Heaven-directed mind. Then earth lets go her hold; the soul feels herself more akin to Heaven; and soaring upward, the denizen of her native sky, she 'begins to reason like herself, and to discourse in a strain above mortality.' Call, if you will, such thoughts and feelings the dreams of the imagination; yet they are no unprofitable dreams. Such moments of silence and meditation are often those of the greatest utility to ourselves and others. Yes, we would dream awhile, that the spirit is not always the bondman of the flesh; that there is something immortal in us, something, which amid the din of life, urges us to aspire after the attributes of a more spiritual nature. Let the cares and business of the world sometimes sleep, for this sleep is the awakening of the soul.

To fill up these interludes of life with a song, that shall soothe our worldly passions and inspire us with a love of Heaven and virtue, seems to be the peculiar province of poetry.

. . . In fine, we think that all the popular objections against poetry may be, not only satisfactorily, but triumphantly answered. They are all founded upon its abuse, and not upon its natural and legitimate tendencies. Indeed, popular judgment has seldom fallen into a greater error, than that of supposing that poetry must necessarily, and from its very nature, convey false and therefore injurious impressions. The error lies in not discriminating between what is true to nature, and what is true to fact. From the very nature of

things, neither poetry nor any one of the imitative arts, can in itself be false. They can be false no farther than, by the imperfection of human skill, they convey to our minds imperfect and garbled views of what they represent. Hence a painting, or poetical description, may be true to nature, and yet false in point of fact. The canvass before you may represent a scene, in which every individual feature of the landscape shall be true to nature;—the tree, the water-fall, the distant mountain,—every object there shall be an exact copy of an original, that has a real existence, and yet the scene itself may be absolutely false in point of fact. Such a scene, with the features of the landscape combined precisely in the way represented, may exist nowhere but in the imagination of the artist. The statue of the Venus de' Medici is the perfection of female beauty; and every individual feature had its living original. Still the statue itself had no living archetype. It is true to nature, but it is not true to fact. So with the stage. The scene represented, the characters introduced, the plot of the piece, and the action of the performers may all be conformable to nature, and yet not be conformable to any pre-existing reality. The characters there personified may never have existed; the events represented may never have transpired. And so, too, with poetry. The scenes and events it describes; the characters and passions it portrays, may all be natural though not real. Thus, in a certain sense, fiction itself may be true,—true to the nature of things, and consequently true in the impressions it conveys. And hence the reason, why fiction has always been made so subservient to the cause of truth.

Allowing, then, that poetry is nothing but fiction; that all it describes is false in point of fact; still its elements have a real existence, and the impressions we receive can be erroneous so far only, as the views presented to the mind are garbled and false to nature. And this is a fault incident to the artist, and not inherent in the art itself. So that we may fairly conclude, from these considerations, that the natural tendency of poetry is to give us correct moral impressions, and thereby advance the cause of truth and the improvement of society.

There is another very important view of the subject, arising out of the origin and nature of poetry, and its intimate connexion with individual character and the character of society.

The origin of poetry loses itself in the shades of a remote and fabulous age, of which we have only vague and uncertain traditions. Its fountain, like that of the river of the desert, springs up in a distant and unknown region, the theme of visionary story, and the subject of curious speculation. Doubtless, however, it originated amid the scenes of pastoral life, and in the quiet and repose of a golden age. There is something in the soft melancholy of the groves, which pervades the heart, and kindles the imagination. Their retirement is favorable to the musings of the poetic mind. The trees that waved their leafy branches to the summer wind, or heaved and groaned beneath the passing storm,—the shadow moving on the grass,—the bub-

bling brook,—the insect skimming on its surface,—the receding valley and the distant mountain,—these would be some of the elements of pastoral song. Its subject would naturally be the complaint of a shepherd and the charms of some gentle shepherdess,

'A happy soul, that all the way
To Heaven, hath a summer's day.'

It is natural, too, that the imagination, familiar with the outward world, and connecting the idea of the changing seasons and the spontaneous fruits of the earth with the agency of some unknown power, that regulated and produced them, should suggest the thought of presiding deities, propitious in the smiling sky, and adverse in the storm. The fountain that gushed up as if to meet the thirsty lip, was made the dwelling of a nymph; the grove that lent its shelter and repose from the heat of noon, became the abode of dryads; a god presided over shepherds and their flocks, and a goddess shook the yellow harvest from her lap. These deities were propitiated by songs and festive rites. And thus poetry added new charms to the simplicity and repose of bucolic life, and the poet mingled in his verse the delights of rural ease, and the praise of the rural deities which bestowed them.

Such was poetry in those happy ages, when, camps and courts unknown, life was itself an eclogue. But in later days it sang the achievements of Grecian and Roman heroes, and pealed in the war-song of the Gothic Scald. These early essays were rude and unpolished. As nations advanced in civilization and refinement, poetry advanced with them. In each successive age, it became the image of their thoughts and feelings, of their manners, customs, and characters; for poetry is but the warm expression of the thoughts and feelings of a people, and we speak of it as being national, when the character of a nation shines visibly and distinctly through it.

Thus, for example, Castilian poetry is characterized by sounding expressions, and that pomp and majesty, so peculiar to Spanish manners and character. On the other hand, English poetry possesses in a high degree the charms of rural and moral feeling; it flows onward like a woodland stream, in which we see the reflection of the sylvan landscape and of the heaven above us.

It is from this intimate connexion of poetry with the manners, customs, and characters of nations, that one of its highest uses is drawn. The impressions produced by poetry upon national character at any period, are again reproduced, and give a more pronounced and individual character to the poetry of a subsequent period. And hence it is, that the poetry of a nation sometimes throws so strong a light upon the page of its history, and renders luminous those obscure passages, which often baffle the long-searching eye of studious erudition. In this view, poetry assumes new importance with all who search for historic truth. Besides, the view of the various fluctuations of the human mind, as exhibited, not in history, but in the poetry

of successive epochs, is more interesting, and less liable to convey erroneous impressions, than any record of mere events. The great advantage drawn from the study of history is not to treasure up in the mind a multitude of disconnected facts, but from these facts to derive some conclusions, tending to illustrate the movements of the general mind, the progress of society, the manners, customs, and institutions, the moral and intellectual character of mankind in different nations, at different times, and under the operation of different circumstances. Historic facts are chiefly valuable, as exhibiting intellectual phenomena. And so far as poetry exhibits these phenomena more perfectly and distinctly than history does, so far is it superior to history. The history of a nation is the external symbol of its character; from it, we reason back to the spirit of the age that fashioned its shadowy outline. But poetry is the spirit of the age itself,—embodied in the forms of language, and speaking in a voice that is audible to the external as well as the internal sense. The one makes known the impulses of the popular mind, through certain events resulting from them; the other displays the more immediate presence of that mind, visible in its action, and presaging those events. The one is like the marks left by the thunder-storm,—the blasted tree,—the purified atmosphere; the other like the flash from the bosom of the cloud, or the voice of the tempest, announcing its approach. The one is the track of the ocean on its shore; the other the continual movement and murmur of the sea.

Besides, there are epochs, which have no contemporaneous history; but have left in their popular poetry pretty ample materials for estimating the character of the times. The events, indeed, therein recorded, may be exaggerated facts, or vague traditions, or inventions entirely apocryphal; yet they faithfully represent the spirit of the ages which produced them; they contain indirect allusions and incidental circumstances, too insignificant in themselves to have been fictitious, and yet on that very account the most important parts of the poem, in a historical point of view. Such, for example, are the *Nibelungen Lied* in Germany; the *Poema del Cid* in Spain; and the *Songs of the Troubadours* in France. Hence poetry comes in for a large share in that high eulogy, which, in the true spirit of the scholar, a celebrated German critic has bestowed upon letters: 'If we consider literature in its widest sense, as the voice which gives expression to human intellect,—as the aggregate mass of symbols, in which the spirit of an age or the character of a nation is shadowed forth, then indeed a great and various literature is, without doubt, the most valuable possession of which any nation can boast'.

From all these considerations, we are forced to the conclusion, that poetry is a subject of far greater importance in itself, and in its bearing upon the condition of society, than the majority of mankind would be willing to allow. We heartily regret, that this opinion is not a more prevailing one in our land. We give too little encouragement to works of imagination and taste. The vocation of the poet does not stand high enough in our esteem; we are too cold in admiration, too timid in praise. The poetic lute and the high-

sounding lyre are much too often and too generally looked upon as the baubles of effeminate minds, or bells and rattles to please the ears of children. The prospect, however, brightens. But a short time ago, not a poet 'moved the wing, or opened the mouth, or peeped;' and now we have a host of them,—three or four good ones, and three or four hundred poor ones. This, however, we will not stop to cavil about at present. To those of them, who may honor us by reading our article, we would whisper this request,—that they should be more original, and withal more national. It seems every way important, that now, whilst we are forming our literature, we should make it as original, characteristic, and national as possible. To effect this, it is not necessary that the war-whoop should ring in every line, and every page be rife with scalps, tomahawks and wampum. Shade of Tecumseh forbid!—The whole secret lies in Sidney's maxim,—'Look in thy heart and write.' For

'Cantars non pot gaire valer,
Si d'iniz del cor no mov lo chang'

Of this anon. We will first make a few remarks upon the word *national*, as applied to the literature of a country; for when we speak of a national poetry, we do not employ the term in that vague and indefinite way, in which many writers use it.

A national literature, then, in the widest signification of the words, embraces every mental effort made by the inhabitants of a country, through the medium of the press. Every book written by a citizen of a country belongs to its national literature. But the term has also a more peculiar and appropriate definition; for when we say that the literature of a country is *national*, we mean that it bears upon it the stamp of national character. We refer to those distinguishing features, which literature receives from the spirit of a nation,—from its scenery and climate, its historic recollections, its Government, its various institutions,—from all those national peculiarities, which are the result of no positive institutions, and, in a word, from the thousand external circumstances, which either directly or indirectly exert an influence upon the literature of a nation, and give it a marked and individual character, distinct from that of the literature of other nations.

In order to be more definite and more easily understood in these remarks, we will here offer a few illustrations of the influence of external causes upon the character of the mind, the peculiar habits of thought and feeling, and, consequently, the general complexion of literary performances. From the causes enumerated above, we select natural scenery and climate, as being among the most obvious, in their influence upon the prevailing tenor of poetic composition. Every one who is acquainted with the works of the English Poets, must have noted, that a moral feeling and a certain rural quiet and repose are among their most prominent characteristics. The features of their native landscape are transferred to the printed page, and as we read we hear the warble of the sky-lark,—the 'hollow murmuring wind,

or silver rain' The shadow of the woodland scene lends a pensive shadow to the ideal world of poetry.

Why lure me from these pale retreats?
 Why rob me of these pensive sweets?
 Can Music's voice, can Beauty's eye,
 Can Painting's glowing hand supply,
 A charm so suited to my mind,
 As blows this hollow gust of wind,
 As drops this little weeping rill
 Soft tinkling down the moss-grown hill,
 While through the west, where sinks the crimson day,
 Meek twilight slowly sails, and waves her banners
 grey?⁸

In the same richly poetic vein are the following lines from Collins's Ode to Evening.

'Or if chill blustering winds, or driving rain,
 Prevent my willing feet, be mine the hut,
 That from the mountain's side,
 Views wilds and swelling floods,
 'And hamlets brown, and dim-discover'd spires,
 And hears their simple bell, and marks o'er all
 Thy dewy fingers draw
 The gradual dusky veil'

In connexion with the concluding lines of these two extracts, and as an illustration of the influence of climate on the character of poetry, it is worthy of remark, that the English Poets excel those of the South of Europe in their descriptions of morning and evening. They dwell with long delight and frequent repetition upon the brightening glory of the hour, when 'the northern wagoner has set his seven-fold teme behind the stedfast starre;' and upon the milder beauty of departing day, when 'the bright-hair'd sun sits in yon western tent' What, for example, can be more descriptive of the vernal freshness of a morning in May, than the often quoted song in Cymbeline?

'Hark! hark! the lark at heaven's gate sings,
 And Phoebus 'gins arise
 His steeds to water at those springs
 On chalic'd flowers that lies:
 And winking Mary-buds begin
 To ope their golden eyes;
 With every thing that pretty bin;
 My lady sweet, arise;
 Arise, arise!'

How full of poetic feeling and imagery is the following description of the dawn of day, taken from Fletcher's Faithful Shepherdess!⁹

'See, the day begins to break,
 And the light shoots like a streak
 Of subtle fire, the wind blows cold,
 While the morning doth unfold;
 Now the birds begin to rouse,
 And the squirrel from the boughs
 Leaps, to get him nuts and fruit;
 The early lark, that erst was mute,
 Carols to the rising day
 Many a note and many a lay'

Still more remarkable than either of these extracts, as a graphic description of morning, is the following from Beattie's Minstrel.¹⁰

'But who the melodies of morn can tell?
 The wild brook babbling down the mountain's side;
 The lowing herd; the sheepfold's simple bell;
 The pipe of early shepherd dim descried
 In the lone valley; echoing far and wide
 The clamorous horn along the cliffs above;
 The hollow murmur of the ocean tide;
 The hum of bees, and linnet's lay of love,
 And the full choir that wakes the universal grove.

'The cottage curs at early pilgrim bark;
 Crown'd with her pail, the tripping milk-maid sings;
 The whistling ploughman stalks afield; and hark!
 Down the rough slope the ponderous wagon rings;
 Through rustling corn the hare astonish'd springs;
 Slow tolls the village clock the drowsy hour;
 The partridge bursts away on whirling wings;
 Deep mourns the turtle in sequester'd bower;
 And shrill lark carols clear from her aerial tower'

Extracts of this kind we might multiply almost without number. The same may be said of similar ones, descriptive of the gradual approach of evening and the close of day. But we have already quoted enough for our present purpose. Now, to what peculiarities of natural scenery and climate may we trace these manifold and beautiful descriptions, which in their truth, delicacy and poetic coloring, surpass all the pictures of the kind in Tasso, Guarini, Boscan,¹¹ Garcilasso, and, in a word, all the most celebrated poets of the South of Europe? Doubtless, to the rural beauty which pervades the English landscape, and to the long morning and evening twilight of a northern climate.

Still, with all this taste for the charms of rural description and sylvan song, pastoral poetry has never been much cultivated, nor much admired in England. The Arcadia of Sir Philip Sidney, it is true, enjoyed a temporary celebrity, but this was, doubtless, owing in a great measure to the rank of its author; and though the pastorals of Pope are still read and praised, their reputation belongs in part to their author's youth at the time of their composition. Nor is this remarkable. For though the love of rural ease is characteristic of the English, yet the rigors of their climate render their habits of pastoral life any thing but delightful. In the mind of an Englishman, the snowy fleece is more intimately associated with the weaver's shuttle, than with the shepherd's crook. Horace Walpole has a humorous passage in one of his letters, on the affectation of pastoral habits in England. 'In short,' says he, 'every summer one lives in a state of mutiny and murmur, and I have found the reason; it is because we will affect to have a summer, and we have no title to any such thing. Our poets learnt their trade of the Romans, and so adopted the terms of their masters. They talk of shady groves, purling streams, and cooling breezes, and we get sore throats and agues by attempting to realize these visions. Master Damon writes a song, and invites Miss Chole to enjoy the cool of the evening, and the deuce a bit have we of any such thing as