

POETRY AND INSPIRATION

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BEFORE I discuss the nature of poetry and the motive force behind it which we call 'inspiration', I beg you to enter with me the Poet's workshop where we can have a good look at his tools, which, when employed by him effectively in the odd moments of inspiration, create beauty of sound and feeling out of a fluid combination of verbal measures. The most important material on which the poet employs his sharpened tools is language, his own language that provides thousands of single words and word-combinations out of which he builds a significant poem for those that wish to escape from the drabness of daily life or enjoy vicariously thoughts and ideas that flashed through his mind but which they could not, and perhaps would not, express in appropriate language. Think of a few famous poems in English literature or in any other literature; try to recollect how the poems that are your favourites stand highest in your esteem precisely because, like amulets, they exercise a magical power on your imagination. Such are memorable poems that meet you half way by giving you the poet's own inspired power which awakens your own long pent-up emotions at the sight of something moving, exciting, something impressive, something the beauty of which lies far deeper down than the surface that carries the bare external lines of harmony, a young woman's face, for instance, joyous or mourning, a painted vase, sunset on your native hills, a blaze of morning fire spreading across the east or the west preceding sunrise or sunset with their manifold associations. Think of these poems and others nearer your heart and consider this: you have loved these poems because they met you half way. One day the sight of unexpected beauty in some form or other awoke emotions in your heart, set in motion disturbing associations, but when you attempted to translate such emotions into articulate language you felt helplessly inarticulate till you read your favourite poem that was a revelation of the inexpressible. Your favourite poems are your own soul's translations, your interpreters. Having made this wonderful discovery, you can now settle down comfortably in your armchair, read your favourite poem aloud to yourself and share the poet's vision to your heart's content. The poet has made you a present of a clear mirror to hold up to your own soul. He has helped you to discover your real self and to enjoy a language that is far beyond your verbal power of evocation.

Remember we are still in the Poet's workshop and that we are going to have a good look at his many tools. We are going to do so not out of idle curiosity, but to know more about the real nature of poetic inspiration and the Poet's craft. Sometimes we shall have to be analytical though this approach is in itself deadly to the soul that animates the body of Poetry. But it is the best method to form a clear idea of the relation between Form and Content, between Soul and Body. Language, as I have told you, is the foremost tool in the Poet's workshop. But language is a tool common to all writers, good, bad and indifferent who employ it for a variety of reasons, some literary and some non-literary. Naturally, the poet treats language according to the technique of his craft.

Yes, the poet has his own craft; his own method as how to fashion rhythms and verses acceptable to the trained ear. That craft has its own set of rules, once more or less hard and fast, now hardly so. I am speaking of the rules of Prosody. The etymology of this word from Greek *προσῳδία* indicates the function of its rules. In Greek *προσῳδία* means a song sung to an instrument. Hence prosody consists of a set of laws that govern verbal harmony of metres.

Every language being made up of words that are in their turn made up of musical units has its own metrical laws. Those familiar with the Latin prosody and the prosody of languages that are largely vocalic like Italian and Spanish or the prosody of largely consonantal languages like English and German and Arabic know what I mean. Every language has its own native verbal rhythms and this accounts for the variety of prosodies. But though the prosodies of the different languages may differ, as they do indeed in many respects, they have this in common: they all work out musical patterns which in combination create harmonious metres in tune with the genius of the language. The paths are different but they all lead to Music; and music is the meeting-place of all great poetry. The different paths by themselves hardly make a substantial difference, the ultimate destination being the same. For it is music, verbal music, that disciplines all poetry on a common scale of *rhythm* which is the common denominator of all prosodies. Rhythm, therefore, is the primary factor of verbal music which, by its very nature, is common to all poetry in any language. Being of primary value, it is therefore more important in verse composition than rhyme; and, as you know, many a great poet dispensed with it altogether. Now *Rhythm*, is 'metrical movement determined by various relations of long and short accented and unaccented syllables, measured flow of words and phrases in verse or prose'. In music it is the 'systematic grouping of notes according to duration and structure resulting from this'. This comprehensive definition which I have taken from the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*

includes all the elements that in combination produce *rhythm*. If you study carefully the reason why these formative elements produce 'verbal music', you will note that in the combination they produce a sequence of notes based on numbers. Number, as you know, was placed by Pythagoras at the very foundation of all harmony, physical and intellectual.

The Pythagorean school of thought which influenced that of Socrates and Plato, true to the principle of the Master, taught that the basis of geometry, astronomy, and music was harmony and proportion both reducible to number which for them assumed 'a mystical significance'. The right number of stresses and unstresses according to the numbers of places into which they fit naturally produce the 'verbal music', that makes poetry pleasant to the ears. The semantics of Latin *numerus* throws light on the classical concept of 'number' as an element of harmony in the sense I have been explaining. In Latin *numerus* indicated 'a musical measure, time, rhythm of motion or sound, harmony, numbers. Measures or metrical foot', and the adjective *numerosus* meant accordingly also 'measured, harmonious, melodious'. Cicero defined this adjective thus: *numerosum est id in omnibus sonis atque vocibus, quod habet quasdam impressiones et quod metiri possumus intervallis aequalibus* (Cicero de Or. 3. 48). Therefore prosody is a matter of counting syllables, and measuring scales of syllabic unities in such a way as to produce a total effect that is pleasant to the ear. In a sense, we may therefore speak of 'the Arithmetic of Verse'. Indeed, the very word arithmetic owes its origin to a similar association of ideas. It derives originally from Greek ἀριθμητική, the art of counting from ἀριθμέω, I count, ἀριθμός, number.

The definition says that rhythm is also the 'measured flow of words and phrases in verse or poetry'. In language, therefore, Rhythm, though essential to poetry, is not exclusive to this style of self-expression. Indeed, the quotation from Cicero referred to Prose in the first place and Cicero's own orations are classical examples of rhythmical prose. On account of its common nature, many a poet discards the devices of traditional verse in favour of the easier discipline of Poetic Prose. And I must say that as the two media are capable of achieving verbal beauty there are more ways than one to Poetry. Modern poets have indeed carried the experiment to its very extreme where, I fear, the result is very often self-defeating. But that is not my subject to-day and I must not digress. To see for yourselves how traditional verse achieves harmony and proportion because it obeys tested fundamental verse-structure of traditional prosody and how Poetic Prose may achieve similar verbal effects I invite you to read aloud some of the Books of the Old Testament, the *Book of Job*, for instance, and the New Testament, Nietzsche's *Das Sprach Zarathustra*, passages

from the *Hindu Bible* and some poems of Rabindrenath Tagore.

I give you a few examples. This is from the Bible: the *Book of Job*. Hear how effectively Job laments his unfortunate birth marked out for terrible trials by Satan himself with the consent of Jehovah:

Naked came I of my mother's womb,
and naked shall I return thither.
The Lord gave and the Lord hath taken away.
As it hath pleased the Lord so is it done.
Blessed be the name of the Lord.

Again from the *Book of Job*, and this time you hear the voice of God himself reproaching Job 'that wrappeth up sentences in unskilful words' for his impatience in the face of afflictions unexplainable to him but not to God that permits evil for a purpose that is good:

Gird up thy loins like a man. I will ask thee, and answer thou me. Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell me if thou hast understanding. Who hath laid the measures thereof, if thou knowest? Or who hath stretched the line upon it? Upon what are its bases ground? Or who laid the corner stone thereof, When the morning stars praised me together, and all the sons of God made a joyful melody? Who shut up the sea with doors, when it broke forth as issuing out of the womb: When I made a cloud the garment thereof, and wrapped it in a mist as in swaddling bands? I set my bounds around it, and made it bars and doors: And I said: Hitherto thou shalt come, and shalt go no further. And here thou shalt break thy swelling waves. Didst thou since thy birth command the morning, and shew the dawning of the day its place? And didst thou hold the extremities of the earth shaking them? And hast thou shaken the ungodly out of it? The seal shall be restored as clay, and shall stand as a garment. From the wicked their light shall be taken away: and the high arm shall be broken. Hast thou entered into the depths of the sea, and walked in the lowest parts of the deep? Have the gates of death been open to thee, and hast thou seen the darksome doors? Hast thou considered the breadth of the earth? Tell me, if thou knowest all things? Where is the way where light dwelleth; and where is the place of darkness? That thou mayst bring every thing to its own bounds, and understand the paths of the house thereof. Didst thou know then that thou shouldst be born? And didst thou know the number of thy days? Hast thou entered into the storehouses of the snow? Or hast thou beheld the treasures of the hail? (XXXVIII. 2-22)

The temptation to go on is irresistible for there are so many diamonds

that light up at every passage that you wish you could pick more and more to dazzle the curious eye and charm the musical ear. Note how rhythmical is the translation of the Hebrew book; how Oriental is its lavish imagery; how pleasant the effect.

To show how Poetic Prose achieves beauty of imagery (freed from the strait jacket of traditional metres), I now read to you a rhythmic translation of one of the Vedic hymns in *Hindu Scriptures* (Everyman's Library p. 21) dedicated to Dawn, the Goddess *Agni*, the goddess of Fire, (remember your Latin *ignis*). It shares with the biblical passages I have just read a lavishness of Oriental imagery and a pleasant flow of rhythms.

TO DAWN

She hath shone brightly like a youthful woman, stirring
to motion every living creature.
Agni hath come to feed on mortals' fuel. She
hath made light and chased away the darkness.

Turned to this all, far-spreading, she hath risen and
shone in brightness with white robes about her.
She hath beamed forth lovely with golden colours,
mother of kine, guide of the days she bringeth.

Bearing the gods' own eye, auspicious lady, leading
her courser white and fair to look on,
Distinguished by her beams, Dawn shines apparent, come
forth to all the world with wondrous treasure.

Draw nigh with wealth and dawn away the foeman; prepare
for us white pasture free from danger.
Drive away those who hate us, bring us riches: pour
bounty, opulent lady, on the singer.

Send thy most excellent beams to shine and light us,
giving us lengthened days, O Dawn, O Goddess;
Granting us food, thou who hast all things precious,
and bounty rich in chariots, kine and horses.

O Ushas, nobly born, daughter of heaven, whom the
Vashistas with their hymns make mighty,
Bestow thou on us vast and glorious riches, preserve
us evermore, ye gods, with blessings.

Again I am sure you admire the lavish imagery and the poetical vision

expressed through a medium completely different from that of traditional prosody, and in a heightened, colourful style completely alien to our mentality and intellectual sympathies.

The two passages I have given you are both from ancient Oriental religious literature. I must now give you two modern examples of rhythm at the service of a Poetic Idea.

Hear this brief passage from *Song of the Open Road* by Walt Whitman:

Afoot and light-hearted I take to the open road,
 Healthy, free, the world before me,
 The long brown path before me leading wherever I choose.

Henceforth I ask not good-fortune, I myself am good-fortune,
 Henceforth I whimper no more, postpone no more, need nothing,
 Done with indoor complaints, libraries, querulous criticisms,
 Strong and content I travel the open road.

The earth, that is sufficient,
 I do not want the constellations any nearer,
 I know they are very well where they are,
 I know they suffice for those who belong to them.

This passage has none of the scintillating jewels of Oriental imagery. It is American, down to 'the earth that is sufficient', evidently less profusely colourful because less inspired, but like the previous passage, it is no less dependent on the steady flow of rhythm for its existence as poetry. One last passage now from T.S. Eliot's *Ash Wednesday*:

Because I do not hope to turn again
 Because I do not hope
 Because I do not hope to turn
 Desiring this man's gift and that man's scope
 I no longer strive to strive towards such things
 (Why should the aged eagle stretch its wings?)
 Why should I mourn
 The vanished power of the usual reign?

The four passages I have read out to you share a common feature; their poetic effect is based primarily on *Rhythm*. But rhythm, as I told you, is shared also by Prose (whole passages of Hazlitt's essays, for instance, would yield excellent examples of such prose). What, therefore, gives to these passages their poetic stamp? For that they are poetic I feel we all agree; they share the word-rhythm tool common to prose and a height of

emotion common to inspired Poetry, Wherein, therefore lies the dividing line between rhythmical prose and poetic prose or poetic *vers libre*? What accounts for the difference? It is 'inspiration'. Genuine poetry, good poetry I mean, is inspired and inspiration creates its own peculiar language mirroring the poet's own soul in a state of exaltation or exultation and no less the poet's own times. Have you not noted the difference in the words and images used in the poetry of Walt Whitman and T.S. Eliot? Poetry therefore is an emotional expression that is independent of its medium, transcending the verbal technique of the chosen metre. All that is required to imprison poetic emotion within a recognisable pattern is to ensure the pleasant flow of a suitable rhythm, and a metre without which poetry evaporates. In the arresting passage from the *Book of Job* which I read out to you, we came across startling images expressing the sense of wonder at God's own creative purpose as in the birth of snow and hail. In the biblical passage the poetic impact of this idea is contextual, that is, it is expressed by felicitous imagery in a context of startling images lighting up other facets of the same idea. In Francis Thompson's poem *To A Snowflake* we have a similar idea compressed into a more disciplined medium of mixed traditional metre. Both media, I mean the Biblical and Francis Thompson's, achieve poetic beauty and a common purpose. Both are therefore poetically satisfying.

At this stage we can recapitulate what we have said: The poet has his own workshop and craft. Naturally, like every good craftsman, he has suitable tools with which to work. These tools are, a huge block of sounds, intelligible sounds which we call words out of which, like Michelangelo out of marble, he carves his own verses; words are cut up into bricks which we call feet (known by various names according to the number and places of stresses, i.e. made up of a metre, a number of feet forming a rhythmical group) and these 'sound-bricks' when put together according to plan, produce harmonious units. Together then they produce that pleasant flow of verbal music which we call *rhythm* very often stressed by rhyme-effects. Words and measures are the Poet's tools. In their combination lies the technique of his craft. But good craftsmanship alone does not create poetry. It may create well-tuned verse but not poetry. Indeed, I could mechanically cut up and move about a few of the scores of lines in one of the leaders of the *Sunday Times* in such a way as to make them not only look but also read like verse. The process being purely mechanical, an experiment in verbal ingenuity, it would be useless to look for 'poetry'. It would be no more than a 'leader' in verse! The reason is that inspiration alone moves words and ideas in their suitable order in proportion to the depth plumbed and reached by the emotion that creates it. Uninspired

verse is no more poetry than a corpse is a living human being. Where there is no breath there is neither heart-beat nor life; likewise, where there is no inspiration there is neither emotion nor poetry. We all know this. The difficulty is how to tell inspired verse from uninspired verse. The word 'inspiration' itself is an inadequate word. Its historical connotation takes us back to the time when the poet was considered a 'Vates', a Seer, prompted to speak and sing by some supernatural agency. In this sense it is appropriate to speak of the books of Scripture as inspired but its extended analogical sense as applied to Poetry means something altogether different. It means 'prompted by the stress of the poet's own irrepressible emotion'. In this sense inspiration has a primarily physical basis though by the very nature of the intellectual relationship between the objects that provoke it and the mind that works on them, it has its roots no less in the human psyche.

The Latin *vates* was 'a soothsayer, foreteller, prophet; an oracle, that is a teacher, master, authority in any art or profession'. Shelley in his *Defence of Poetry* proudly accepts the prophet's mantle for himself and for all true poets. Let us hear him speak about the subject: 'Poets according to the circumstances of the age and nation in which they appeared, were called, in the earlier epochs of the world, legislators, or prophets: a poet essentially comprises and unites both characters. For he not only beholds intensely the present as it is and discovers those laws according to which present things ought to be ordered, but he beholds the future in the present, and his thoughts are the germs of the flower and the fruit of latest time.' As you see, Shelley favoured the classical concept of the poet as the inspired prophet and legislator. Let us now see how in his opinion the poet writes inspired poetry. In the same *Defence of Poetry* he writes that 'Man is an instrument over which a series of external and internal impressions are driven like the alternations of an ever-changing wind over and Aeolion lyre, which move it by their notion to ever-changing melody'. A similar idea is expressed also in his *Ode to the West Wind*. But all this is very vague; it tells us what inspiration does or is like by means of a figure. The reason is that inspiration is not easy to define; and I think the best thing is to explain it in terms of the Latin two words that make it up, namely *in* and *spirare* 'to breathe into' considering the poet's craft as the body and inspiration as the soul that moves it. Hence we may say that uninspired poetry is soul-less verse. It is all body but no soul.

Let us now try the analytical method on an example. In the process, it may kill out some of the poetry, but it may also tell us where and how to find inspired poetry. The method is based on (1) the relationship of words to emotion; and (2) the variable degree of such relationship. Let us see

inspiration at work in poems that are evidently so, poems that have stood the test of time because they have some imperishable quality in them that only genuine inspiration can give. Remember the passage from *Job*; if not the actual words you may recall the impression it creates. Let us analyse it. (i) The language is highly emotional; (ii) It abounds in telling figures of speech; (iii) It is simple – the apparent complexity is not linguistic but emotional; (iv) Vivid; (v) Effectively rhythmical; (vi) Pictorial; (vii) Poetically associative; and (viii) The metre is free. Similar qualities may be noted also in the translation of the *Vedic* hymn, the difference being one not so much of quality as of intensity which is greater in the *Book of Job*. The style is purely temperamental, Oriental love of colour and sensation, but by no means unrelated to the intensity of the emotions provoked by the context. In ordinary prose the whole passage might be expressed more economically thus: Job, you are complaining for no good reason. You should know that you cannot understand the ways of God for you know very little about Him and His ultimate designs. How can you understand His work if you were not with Him when he was creating the world and distributing its various parts? . . . That indeed is the essence of the biblical passage and a prose writer would not think of splitting up the component facets of a basic idea to enlarge thereon at such length, though for a rhetorical purpose many a prose-writer has done so on a smaller scale. These writers, however, have often been poets writing prose as they would have written poetry; a sufficient reason why, as Hazlitt says in one of his essays, poets are accounted bad prose-writers.

In the literary quotation I have given you from Walt Whitman the language is also emotional but it is much less so than in the Bible; it is also less figurative and less rich in pictorial effects. But the general effect is pleasant; and one can say it is good poetry though certainly inferior to the Biblical and Vedic passages. I must say that the passage I have quoted from T.S. Eliot hardly does justice to the poet (it was quoted for a different purpose). But I could easily quote longer passages from *The Waste Land*, and *The Four Quartets* which would satisfy the conditions of inspired poetry. Now in T.S. Eliot's poetry there is another ingredient that is more conspicuous than in traditional poetry; and that is the large 'associative element' and verbal undertone that express thoughts and emotions obscurely as in a penumbra. This is indeed characteristic of modern poetry but very few poets indeed have refrained from straining the new technique. Many a modern poet is obscure because he is uninspired; because he is more of a craftsman than a 'Vates'.

There are 'degrees' in inspiration as in fever. Also inspiration has its own temperature which may be high or low. The uninspired poet has hardly

any temperature; not even a low one. He may be physically and psychologically normal but insipid and unpoetic. After all, most normal men and women are unpoetic; they have no temperature. Their heart-beats do not beat fast enough to catch a spark from the flame that is inside them. It beats quietly, unemotionally, just physiologically. These men and women do not write poetry and they should be wise not to attempt it. When they do, they produce metrical exercises for their fun not poetry. That is why in an uninspired age the emphasis is on craftsmanship and technique. Inspiration must be spontaneous; working either on the spur of the moment or, as in the case of Wordsworth, in moments of quiet recollection. Because inspiration is spontaneous it brooks no compulsion. That explains why most poetry written by the Laureates to satisfy one of the conditions of the honour conferred upon them, is generally poor stuff. Spontaneous inspiration creates its own language; and such poetic language is unconsciously inspired. It is as if all the words, phrases and images used and the rhythm that carries them on its pleasant flow sprung up out of nothing together, forming an integral, unsubstitutable part of a whole poetic product. Hence the inevitable word that cannot be removed from its context even by a perfect synonym, if such exists, without damaging the general effect. Try an experiment yourself; replace any of the words that the Muses' charm has hallowed and see the difference. You would note no difference if all words fitted equally well into the same context and atmosphere as you would not notice the impact of spontaneity if the writing of poetry were no better than filigree work, a stringing of beautiful images and sweet-sounding words. That would indeed be Artifice not true Art which like true Poetry is Nature's mirror, reflecting genuine emotion which produces its own adjectives, phrases and rhythms as by a magic wand.

Speaking of the inevitable word, I am again reminded of what Shelley says in his *Defence of Poetry*. He says that poets are also makers of language, that every poet has his own language and that is the language in which inspiration clothes the words and the sequences of images. The uninspired word, therefore, cannot do the work of the inspired word even if more or less it means the same thing. Such replacements would kill poetry even if they did not touch the sense. To show you what I mean, I read to you the first quatrain of the famous sonnet *On First Looking into Chapman's Homer* as Keats wrote it:

Much have I travell'd in the realms of gold,
 And many goodly states and kingdoms seen;
 Round many western islands have I been
 Which bards in fealty to Apollo hold.

As I replace a few words by their less poetic synonyms, see for yourselves the terrible difference:

Long have I journeyed in the lands of gold,
And many lovely realms and regions seen;
Round many distant islands have I been
Which bards in fealty to Apollo hold.

The last line is so unchangeable in its fixed beauty that I could not possibly desecrate it as I have desecrated the first three lines. The difference stares us in the face. The quatrain apart from the last line has been compelled to surrender its beauty even as a crushed flower is compelled to surrender its perfume. Similar experiments could be tried on other famous poems in any language. Inspired language is immutable and when poetry begins to be written not from the heart but by the help of a rhyming dictionary and Roget's *Thesaurus*, the angry muse will beat a retreat. Poetry can become a cerebral exercise, an artificial flower that yields no perfume of its own, a pale imitation that can only deceive the uninitiated.

Inspiration is obviously a quality that one experiences in reading a good poem and that the genuine poet experiences in *feeling* when writing his poem. It is something we feel, see at work but cannot easily confine within the bounds of a definition or refer to one or two standard examples, for like the wind that bloweth where it listeth it blows in different directions and in different ways. Though it is in a sense like temperature to which I have already compared it, it is not so easy to take a poet's temperature. As the Muses' fever burns at different degrees, it is only by comparison of one degree of inspiration as 'felt' in one work of art with another as felt in another work of art that one can place the different poems in their order of inspiration. Hence the classification of minor and major poets, poets with a limited message and poets with a universal message; poets that compel an audience to listen and poets that have difficulty in compelling the attention of an audience. Here again the degree of inspiration cannot be safely estimated from the degree of the attraction it exercises on the general public. Kipling may be more popular than Browning, whose reading public has always been limited, but Browning is certainly the greatest poet. Though we cannot imprison inspiration within hard and fast rules, we can feel it provided our ears are well tuned and our emotions are responsive. Keats wrote that 'it is easier to think what poetry should be than to write it'.

I have given you examples of inspired poetry whose compelling force it is not easy to ignore. I give you now a poem which, in my opinion, satisfies the traditional verse-technique of a good sonnet but is otherwise no

more poetry than prose. Here is a sonnet by William Blathwayt. The title is *Celestial Photography* and it is all about William Cranch Bond, born at Portland, Maine, in 1789, the scientist that began celestial-Photography.

A hundred years have passed and passed away
 Since first professor Bond turned on the sky
 The new invention of photography
 Which helped to chart the night's superb display;
 For now no star sends out the feeblest ray
 Wholly unnoticed, though the human eye
 Might very easily just pass it by
 Amidst the host of stars we would betray.

Thus too we learn that in the depths of Space
 Shine galaxies which we should never know
 Through any mortal sight however keen;
 Yet in our star maps these now take their place.
 The photography plate does clearly show
 That which no human eye has never seen.

Except from the formal rhyme's scheme there is nothing in the sonnet that might not have been said much better in prose. This is the negative method, I know; but it sets off the character of inspired poetry. It is a method which you might try for yourselves with great profit. It helps to train the imagination and the right taste, developing the critical sense that will not let itself be deceived by the outside form or the trite hackneyed phrase out of which all poetry has been emptied.

Before I finish this talk, I want to tell you something first about the physical nature of Poetry, then about its decline in our times. Is it as we are often told the flower of neurosis, *un fleur du mal*? Is poetic genius a disease? If in the affirmative, we would have to say that what we call 'inspiration' is, after all, a very dubious gift. We all know examples of the infirmities of genius — Tasso in a madhouse; Verlaine behaving irresponsibly; Rimbaud shocking prude society ladies with obscene language; Baudelaire struggling unsuccessfully against his own evil demon. These are only a few of the poets whose pen moved instinctively to the compelling rhythm of great poetry. Were they mad? Was the inspiration that drove their pens through sheets of writing paper producing immortal verse nothing but the compulsion of a psychic disturbances? Ben Jonson in his *Discoveries upon Men and Matter* first published in 1641 writes: First we require in our Poet or maker (for that Title our language affords him elegantly with the Greek) a goodness of natural wit. For whereas all other

arts consist of doctrine and precepts, the Poet must be able by nature and instinct to pour out the Treasure of his mind, and as Seneca saith *Aliquando secundum Anacreontem insanire jucundum esse*, by which he understands the Poetical Rapture. And according to that of Plato, *Exustra Poeticas fores sui compos pulsavit*. And of Aristotle, *Nullum magnum ingenium sine mixtura dementiae fuit. Nec potest grande aliquid, et supra caeteros loqui, nisi mota mens*. Then it riseth higher, as by a divine instinct, when it contemns common and known conceptions. It utters somewhat above a mortal mouth. Then it gets aloft and flies away with his Rider, whether, before, it was doubtful to ascend. This the Poets understood by their Helicon, Pegasus, or Parnassus; and this made Ovid to boast:

Est, Deus in nobis, agitante calescimus ille;
Sodibus aethereis spiritus ille venit.

In this passage we have not only Ben Jonson's own opinion of the nature of Inspiration (he calls it *ingenium*) but the old prejudice that poetry is, in a sense, a mental infirmity. Strangely enough, in the history of our groping civilization insanity was often reputed to be a manifestation of divine pleasure or displeasure. If poetry were nothing better than this it could not be 'a thing of beauty, a joy for ever'; and the neglect with which it has met in our times would be justified. But real, genuine poetry is independent of the behaviour of the poet who may indeed be partly abnormal in his private life. Whatever infirmity we may notice in some poets, it does not affect the nature of poetry. Emotion habitually cultivated for poetic purpose may produce mental disturbances; and not a few poets are neurotics, but this does not affect the integrity of genuine poetry.

Another question: Why has poetry declined to the extent it has in our times? Is it because inspiration is lacking or because Poetry has nothing to give us to-day? My answer to this question is that Poetry has declined for the same reason that Religion and the humanities have declined. The impact of this pretentious Age of Science, the uncertainty of life overshadowed by sinister threats of destruction without notice, wars without an ultimatum, have damaged or destroyed the sense of poetry of most men and women. There is also less leisure in a word of increasing economic stress, and, alas, Rationalism has weakened in many countries the Faith that inspired Milton and Dante; a Faith that, unfortunately, has not lost all her believers everywhere for it still makes its voice heard amidst so much desolation in the poetry of T.S. Eliot and others. But the Christian poets are fewer and the younger poets that have tried the Gospel of a new negative Religion whose ingredients are neither charity nor love but class

hatred and destruction have been unable to replace the Old religion adequately. They have produced a New Verse that is lifeless and insufferably pretentious divorced from the general feeling of the common man.

Contemporary poetry has a very small market and very few shrines. It is predominantly cliquy, propagandist and ideological. The general reader has found nothing strong enough in it to attract him. No poetry that lacks a compelling force can endure. And what is there strong enough in modern belief to be poetically compelling? Expression of physical and ideological violence may exercise a certain amount of morbid fascination especially on the younger generation but its spell is soon broken. There can be no compelling force in mere technique which, as the body is more important than its raiment, cannot be more important than the subject-matter and its emotional content. The muse for the time being has returned to Olympus waiting for better times, times that will be glorified as in the times of great creative Art by the compelling force of the Ideals that feed the sacred fire of Inspired Poetry.