

PREFACE

All this, it will be said, amounts to an admission that, in childhood at least, poetry *is* after all a means. And so, in a sense, it is. For in childhood the capacity for rational enjoyment is still forming; and poetry, which will help to fill that capacity, must also help to form it. But even in childhood, we must maintain, poetry is an effective means only in so far as it is already an end. It promotes the moralist's business by minding its own, which is to delight. For Poesy, in Dryden's golden words, 'only instructs as it delights.'

For all readers, and for young readers most of all, the delight which poetry gives lies largely in the music of the verse. Cowley indeed puts another element forward. 'I was infinitely delighted,' he tells us, 'with the stories of the knights and giants, and monsters, and brave horses which I found everywhere there (though my understanding had little to do with all this); and by degrees with the tinkling of the rime and dance of the numbers.' But Cowley was twelve when he thus made acquaintance with the intricate harmonies of the *Faerie Queene*: to younger children, and with simpler measures, the rimes and numbers very likely count for more. Very young children indeed find pleasure in mere jingles, with no apparent sense at all.

The first thing, then, that poetry can do for children is to gratify and cultivate their feeling for verse. An ear for verse, however, is not quite the same thing as an ear for music. Many good poets, though perhaps none of the very greatest, have had little or no sense of tune.

But the delight which poetry gives is never, or never for long, merely sensuous. Verse itself is a special form of emotional speech. Strong emotion tends to vent itself in reiteration or recurrence. 'Oh Absalom! my son, my son Absalom!'—'But mine, and mine I loved, and mine I praised!'—the grief that speaks in these reiterations relieves the over-fraught heart like a rhythmic sob. And it is on the rhythm, in fact, more generally than on the words, that emotion produces this reiterative effect. On this the poets have seized, and