

Taking up the subject of early song nearly at the point where Signor Vignoli leaves it, Professor Posnet traces all literature back to choral songs of war and peace. "In this primitive song," he adds, "the words, the dance, the music (such as it is), and the gesticulations, contribute to make a unity, nameless in the languages of peoples far removed from the beginning of social life. These curious combinations of mimicry and music, dancing and words, vary in their purposes. Sometimes they are magic incantations, sometimes they are war-songs, sometimes they are songs of marriage, sometimes they are dirges of death. In some the gestures predominate, in others the rude music, in others the refrain of a few simple words. But the main points to be borne in mind are that these elements are confused together, and that the mere preservation of the words alone cannot enable us to imagine the true nature of primitive song. Hence the impossibility of applying our highly-developed modern ideas of prose or verse to such performances. For not only have dance and gesticulations among us ceased to convey any sacred meaning, not only have we long distinguished these from the mimetic action of the regular drama, but we have also separated words from any accompaniment of music or dance, poetry from recitation, as well as from these accompaniments, and prose from metrical forms, which, far from being joined to dance and melody, or sustaining the memory in an age when writing was unknown, simply appeal to the writer's sense of harmony through the medium of printed letters. Accustomed to artistic ideas, based upon distinctions impossible in early social life, it is not strange that we neither possess the words, nor, in many cases, the imaginative power, needful to carry us out of our own literary conditions into the primitive homes of literary development.¹" Dr. Posnet then goes on to show how, in the course of time, acting, dancing and music, became separated from the words of the song; how a greater change (including the study of metres) was introduced by the invention of writing, and how, subsequently, prose was differentiated from verse, and, ultimately, science from literature.

The survey of the aboriginal poetry of America will only carry us a part of the way thus indicated. The passage quoted is not only an accurate description of its general features, but also implies the difficulty of subjecting it to such criticism as would be suitable in the estimate of ordinary literary productions. The interest which it has for us is, indeed, rather scientific than literary, its value chiefly consisting in the analogies which it offers to the early intellectual expansion of the civilised nations of the Old World. Unhappily, however, it furnishes but scanty opportunity for the observation of communities undergoing development. The indigenous progress of the half-civilised nations of Central and South America was arrested by the Spanish conquerors. How they attained the status in which they were found by the European adventurers—whether from an inner impulse, or aided in some way from without—we can only conjecture from the meagre data at our disposal. As for the lower types of aborigines, they have not, on the whole, improved through intercourse with the foreigner. South of the Gulf of Mexico, where the natives have, to a great extent, intermarried with the new-comers, the honour for whatever advance has been made in the arts of life is, of course, divided, but in what proportion, it would not be easy to decide. To do so fairly would call for a great deal of information which we do not possess and cannot reasonably expect to obtain. In the first

¹ Comparative Literature, pp. 127, 128.