

## WHAT IS TRUE POETRY?

"Never did poesy appear  
So full of heaven to me as when  
I saw how it would pierce through pride and fear,  
To the lives of honest men.

It may be glorious to write  
Thoughts that shall glad the two or three  
High souls, like those far stars that come in sight  
Once in a century :—

But better far it is to speak  
One simple word which now and then  
Shall waken their free nature in the weak  
And friendless sons of men ;

To write some earnest verse or line  
Which seeking not the praise of art,  
Shall make a clearer faith and manhood shine  
In the untutored heart.

He who doth this in verse or prose  
May be forgotten in his day,  
But surely shall be crowned at last with those  
Who live and speak for aye."

In these verses of James Russell Lowell, the distinguished American satirist and critic, we have a fair estimation of what constitutes true poetry. That kind of poetic composition which "seeks the praise of art" may, like all artistic works, present a showy appearance ; the language may be polished and graceful, the thoughts sublime, and the versification faultless ; but there is always something cold about it, something uncongenial to the true nature of poetry, which no amount of exterior ornamentation can supply.

Composing with no other intention than to gain reputation, the artificial poet is devoid of the native warmth of passion, which is the essential quality of true poetry. The words of the classic Horace may be applied to these cool composers, "*Poeta nascitur, non fit.*" Man is a poet by nature, and as such he must be true to nature's teaching.

"The simple bard, unbroke by rules of art,  
He pours the wild effusions of the heart :  
And, if inspired, 'tis nature's powers inspire—  
Her's all the melting thrill, and her's the kindling fire."

Prompted and inspired by scenes and objects which have a particular charm for

him, or fired by events which interest his country, and those most dear to him, the simple bard pours forth the spontaneous effusions of his heart, the ardent conceptions of admiration, joy, or compassion, in their true and natural colors. His language, it must be granted, is devoid of artistic decorations, but it is the language of passion, the outburst of his imaginative faculties fanned to poetic fire by the inspirations of the muse. Artificial ornamentation, such as magniloquent diction and gracefulness of style will certainly give a poem an embellished appearance, but these external beauties and excellences do not impart to it the power of moving the passions, which is the essentiality of true poetry. The Epic is unquestionably of all poetic compositions the most dignified in character, the most finished in style, the most sublime in sentiment and consequently the most difficult in execution. It cannot be inferred from that, however, that the epic has a better claim to poetic excellence than any other species of poetry. In fact, it does not deserve the name of poetry unless we discard altogether the unity which should naturally exist as the predominating quality in every work of art, and we consider it as a connected series of short poems. Poetry, as has been said, is the language of passion and of enlivened imagination. Its effect upon the mind should therefore be to produce fiery enthusiastic emotions, or to melt it into raptures by some soothing and pleasurable feeling. But excitement, whether caused by pleasure or pain, is necessarily transient.

Who can read Milton's "*Paradise Lost*" or Dante's "*Inferno*" at one sitting without experiencing periods of depression, amidst others of a highly emotional character. While the grandeur and sublimity of some passages excite the mind to extravagant flights, the platitude and insipidity of others cool our admiration. It is in the ode, or what may be called minor poems, that poetry retains its primal form. It is in this form alone that it