



THE PLEASANT PASTIME OF DEFINING POETRY.

THE perennial source of poetry is Thought fused in emotion. In fact, if I dare rush in where angels have feared to tread,—or at least have failed to tread with consummate effect,—I would hazard an attempt at a definition of poetry. It would, perhaps, be something after this fashion:—Poetry is a metrical expression of Thought fused in emotion. Then I would make haste to deprecate the rebukes that such an attempt would call down upon me, by protesting that my definition was not intended to define, but only to suggest limitations and scientific frontiers.

It is rather a fascinating enterprise, this one of definition; and as the shifting of the boundaries goes on continually, the fascination of it is not likely to be soon exhausted. But it is at the same time indubitably perilous; for every new definition must run the gauntlet of a host of critical half-bricks. Critics appear to be of one mind in the opinion that they who have attempted to define poetry have come to grief with a very fair degree of regularity. Too often it has been rashly expected that a definition should define. In other cases a mere designation of certain prominent, though not distinguishing characters, has been unjustly taken for an attempt at definition. When Aristotle said that poetry was "imitation by words," he may or may not have intended the phrase to be definitive; but when Arnold said that poetry was a "criticism of life," he was merely indicating what

should be a function of all high verse,—as, indeed, in a greater or less degree and in a more or less indirect manner, of all sound and earnest art. When a contemporary flouts the doctrine (held by Aristotle and his followers among the ancients, by Dryden and many more among the moderns,) that in poetry the chief element is "invention," he does so by enunciating that "metre is the first and only condition absolutely demanded by poetry." This may fairly be understood as an intentional and deliberate attempt to define; and it forms an agreeable target for the shafts of any one that likes an easy shot. So sweeping a universal needs but the establishment of a very small particular negative to overthrow it. When it is declared that "poetry is the beautiful representation of the beautiful, given in words," we feel justified in reminding the definer that his definition fails to exclude a vast deal of prose. But when Carrière says that "poetry speaks out the thought that lies in things," it is plain that nothing is further from his mind than to be guilty of a definition. It is another matter when Ruskin says that "poetry is the presentment, in musical form, to the imagination of noble grounds for the noble emotions," for here it is evidently intended to be both exclusive and final. This is a definition; and it is a legitimate object for attack, though it may be hard to come at its vulnerable heel. On the other hand, when Emerson says that "poetry is spirit, not a form," he is no more open to the accusation of attempting to define than if he had said that the Japanese were the ancient Hittites,—in which he might or might not be wrong. This applies to the somewhat more intensive dictum of Mr. Stedman, that "poetry is a